

FROM SURVIVAL TO GROWTH: TRACING THE RESILIENCE OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

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DECLARATION

I, **EISHA HARRIS** do hereby declare that the Dissertation Titled **FROM SURVIVAL TO GROWTH: TRACING THE RESILIENCE OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC** is based on the original work carried out by me and submitted to the Department of Sociology, Loyola College of Social Sciences (Autonomous), University of Kerala during the year 2024-2026 towards partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree Examination in Sociology. It has not been submitted for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or other similar title of recognition before any University or anywhere else.

Thiruvananthapuram

10/07/2026

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled **FROM SURVIVAL TO GROWTH: TRACING THE RESILIENCE OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC** is a record of genuine work done by **EISHA HARRIS** fourth semester Master of Sociology student of this college under my supervision and guidance and that it is hereby approved for submission.

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant economic and social changes that influenced many women to enter entrepreneurship and reshape their livelihoods. This study explores the experiences of women entrepreneurs in Thiruvananthapuram who established their enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully sustained them in the post-pandemic period. While existing research has explored women's entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic, limited attention has been given to how women sustained and developed their enterprises in the post-pandemic period. The study examines the push factors that made women to start their enterprises, the challenges they encountered, the strategies and support systems that enabled them to sustain their ventures, the changes in their approaches over time and the ways in which entrepreneurship shaped their self-perception and social perception. The study is particularly relevant in the context of post-pandemic recovery, where women-led enterprises continue to contribute to sustainable and economic development. The study adopts a qualitative approach using a case study design. The findings show that the women demonstrated resilience throughout both the pandemic and post-pandemic periods by adapting to changing market conditions, drawing upon skills, resources, digital platforms and informal networks to sustain and grow their enterprises. Over time, many moved beyond immediate survival strategies towards long-term business development. The entrepreneurial journey also brought significant changes in their self-perception and social identity. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of women's entrepreneurial resilience in the post-pandemic period and offers insights for strengthening policies and support systems that encourage sustainable women-led entrepreneurship.

Keywords: *Women entrepreneurs, COVID-19, Post-pandemic, Sustainability, Resilience, Identity transformation*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter serves as an introduction to the study and lays the foundation for the discussion that follows. It consists of the background of the study, the statement of the research problem and the significance of the study. The chapter first situates women's entrepreneurship within the broader global and national context by highlighting the persistent structural challenges women face while starting business ventures. It then places COVID-19 pandemic as a significant socio-economic disruption that influenced women's entrepreneurial engagement. From there, the discussion narrows to the specific experiences of women entrepreneurs in Trivandrum district, Kerala.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Women's entrepreneurship occupies a crucial position at the intersection of economic development, gender equality, and social empowerment. Across different societies and historical periods, women have participated in trade, production and business activities in diverse ways. However, their entrepreneurial journeys have often unfolded within conditions marked by inequality (Kumar & Singh, 2021). Limited access to credit, the burden of unpaid caregiving, patriarchal norms and institutional systems that have not always been designed with women's needs in mind have shaped the nature of women's participation in enterprise. Even within these constraints, women were able to expand their businesses, often while facing challenges that differ and exceed from those encountered by men.

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor's 2022/2023 Women's Entrepreneurship Report, women represent two out of every five early-stage entrepreneurs globally (Elam et al., 2023). Yet the gender gap in entrepreneurship persists at every level. On average, for every four men working on a start-up or managing a new business, only three women are doing the same in OECD countries (OECD, 2025). Women entrepreneurs also tend to be concentrated in smaller businesses with lower profit margins and greater competition. In addition, they continue to experience unequal access to finance, mentorship, markets and institutional

support. These patterns are not isolated or accidental. Rather, they reflect deeper social arrangements that continue to distribute entrepreneurial opportunity unevenly along gender lines.

Women's entrepreneurship has long occupied a complex and evolving place within scholarly research. Early research tended to treat women entrepreneurs as a deviant case relative to the male norm and examined them primarily through the lens of what they lacked rather than what they brought to the field (Shamieh & Bastian, 2025). Over time, this perspective began to change. More recent scholarship has recognised women's entrepreneurship as a distinct social practice shaped by gendered social realities, relational resources and structural constraints that arise from women's position within society. This shift in perspective reframed the central question from 'Why do women underperform in entrepreneurship?' to 'What conditions enable or constrain women's entrepreneurial activity and how do women navigate those conditions?'

Historically, women in India engaged in trade and enterprise long before formal markets were established. Even before the emergence of modern markets, women were involved in retail activity, handloom production and local exchange systems and often worked through domestic spaces and community-based networks. The economic reforms of the 1990s, particularly liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation, created new opportunities for women's participation in business. During this period, policy measures such as the Mahila Udyam Nidhi also contributed to encouraging more women to enter formal entrepreneurial spaces (Lubna, 2024). Yet these developments did not remove the structural barriers that women continued to face. Women-owned enterprises still account for only 20.37 per cent of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises in India, while men own nearly 80 per cent of such enterprises (Patel & Rewadikar, 2024). At the same time, India is home to an estimated 13.5 to 15.7 million women-owned enterprises, which provide direct employment to around 22 to 27 million people (Chawla et al., 2020). These figures show that women's entrepreneurship has grown in visibility and importance. But they also reveal that the gender gap remains deeply rooted. In India and many other contexts, this gap reflects not a lack of aspiration or ability among women, but an unequal distribution of the social, economic, and institutional conditions that make entrepreneurship possible.

Three persistent structural barriers have shaped women's entrepreneurial experience across different historical periods and geographical settings. The first is financial exclusion. Women entrepreneurs have consistently reported greater difficulty in accessing formal credit than men,

and even when credit is available, it is often offered on less favourable terms and in smaller amounts (OECD, 2025). Studies on women entrepreneurs in India show that this problem is further intensified by strict collateral requirements, irregular documentation practices and gendered biases within lending systems. Younger women, women at the early stages of their ventures, and those living in rural areas tend to face the greatest exclusion (Gupta, 2025). As a result, many women are forced to begin their enterprises using personal savings or family support, which limits the scale of their businesses and makes them more vulnerable during times of economic uncertainty.

The second major barrier is the unequal burden of unpaid domestic labour. Across the world, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of caregiving, household work, and family responsibilities. This pattern has remained largely unchanged despite broader social and economic shifts. Uneven distribution of domestic labour directly affects the time, energy and emotional capacity that women can devote to entrepreneurial work. It also influences the type of entrepreneurship that is most accessible to them. Often women are restricted to home-based businesses, part-time ventures or activities that are considered socially appropriate extensions of domestic roles such as food preparation, childcare, and textile work (Elam et al., 2023). While these forms of enterprise are valuable in their own right, the fact that women are often channelled into them reflects the continuing gendered organisation of economic life. These challenges continue to reinforce their secondary position in the entrepreneurial landscape.

The third barrier is socio-cultural in nature and lies in the persistence of patriarchal norms that continue to shape expectations around women's roles in both private and public life. These norms influence what kinds of activities are considered appropriate for women, who is viewed as having the authority to make economic decisions within the household and which women are regarded as legitimate participants in public economic spaces. Such expectations operate at several levels at once. They affect whether a husband supports or resists his wife's business idea. They shape how customers perceive a woman-owned enterprise. They also influence the way institutional actors such as bank officials and government representatives respond to women entrepreneurs and assess their credibility. Research by Shamieh and Bastian (2025) in the *Journal of Small Business Strategy* shows that women entrepreneurs' resilience is deeply shaped by these socio-cultural role expectations. These expectations often encourage cautious and gradual adjustments rather than bold business transformations. These barriers are especially difficult to address because they are not always visible in formal systems. At times,

they are so deeply embedded in everyday life that they become normalised and may even be internalised by women themselves.

Against this backdrop, resilience has become a central concept for understanding how women entrepreneurs navigate the structural conditions in which they operate. In this study, resilience is not treated as a fixed personal trait but as a dynamic social process through which women draw on available resources, build relationships, adapt their strategies, and reshape their sense of self in response to adversity. Women entrepreneurs often depend on family ties, social networks and community support to strengthen their businesses and maintain continuity. In collectivist settings, individual resilience is closely linked to community resilience as mutual support networks provide emotional encouragement, practical assistance and access to information. (Shamieh & Bastian, 2025). Although these relational resources are often overlooked in conventional entrepreneurship literature, they function as vital supports, particularly during periods of crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought these long-standing dynamics into sharper focus. Beginning in early 2020, it disrupted livelihoods, supply chains, and everyday social life across the world. Women were among the most affected, particularly those working in small-scale and informal sectors (Chawla et al., 2020). The closure of workplaces, the increased burden of caregiving during lockdowns and the collapse of informal income sources placed severe pressure on women's economic positions. In India, women-led micro-enterprises were especially vulnerable because they generally had smaller capital reserves, weaker access to formal support systems and greater exposure to sectors directly affected by mobility restrictions.

At the same time, the pandemic also created conditions that encouraged some women to enter entrepreneurship for the first time. In many households, when income collapsed because a spouse lost employment or returned from abroad, the financial pressure that had previously been absorbed within family arrangements became too great to manage in the same way. This situation pushed some women into forms of economic initiative that they may not have previously imagined for themselves. The lockdown period also created time, space and a disruption of normal routines which allowed skills that had long remained within the household to become economically valuable. (Manolova et al., 2020). Women who had spent years baking, tailoring, cultivating plants or preparing preserved foods suddenly found themselves in a context where these skills could be transformed into marketable products through digital platforms. This was because customers increasingly turned to home-based alternatives when

shops closed. Across India, women in urban and semi-urban areas used resilience, adaptability and digital tools to create new businesses by converting their skills into income-generating ventures (Jain & Sharma, 2023).

The emergence of women's entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic in India was shaped not only by the crisis itself, but also by the institutional and socio-economic foundations that had developed over time. Kerala, which forms the setting of this study has long built a relatively strong foundation for women's economic participation through sustained public investment in literacy, health, and women-focused development initiatives. Among the most important of these is the Kudumbashree Mission, Kerala's flagship poverty eradication and women's empowerment programme. Over the years, it has become one of the largest women's collectives in the world and has supported millions of women through financial inclusion, skill development and enterprise promotion (Kerala state planning board, 2025). During the pandemic, Kudumbashree units responded quickly by shifting to the production of masks and sanitizers, contributing to food distribution and creating channels through which women entrepreneurs could access institutional support and wider market visibility (Pandala, Janardhanan & Kinslin, 2023).

Kerala's broader development model has also played an important role in shaping women's economic participation. The state has historically been distinguished by high literacy, relatively better health outcomes and a more progressive social policy environment. All of these have created more favourable conditions for women's engagement in economic activity than in many other parts of India. Recent figures suggest a positive shift in women's workforce participation in the post-pandemic period. Female workforce participation in Kerala increased from 32.3 per cent in 2020-21 to 36.4 per cent in 2023-24, while the national figure rose from 29.5 per cent to 34.2 per cent over the same period (New Indian Express, 2025). At the same time, women's unemployment in Kerala declined from 27.9 per cent in 2020-21 to 20.4 per cent in 2023-24 (New Indian Express, 2025). This indicates an improvement in employment conditions after the crisis. In addition, under the 'Year of Enterprises 2.0' initiative, the state recorded 1, 39,837 new MSMEs by March 2023 which generated 3, 00,020 jobs. Many of these were linked to women's participation through training, microfinance and the grassroots support offered by Kudumbashree (Kerala state planning board, 2025).

Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala, reflects these wider trends within a distinct urban and semi-urban setting. It is a city marked by a relatively educated female population,

expanding digital access and a strong presence of Kudumbashree and other women's networks in everyday community life. At the same time, it remains a social space where patriarchal norms continue to influence decision-making at the household level. Here, women's entrepreneurship is encouraged in some areas but quietly constrained in others. The gap between aspiration and opportunity is shaped by the same gendered structures found across much of India. It is this combination of opportunity and constraint that makes Thiruvananthapuram a particularly relevant site for examining women's entrepreneurial resilience.

Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on women entrepreneurs in Thiruvananthapuram who initiated their business ventures during the COVID-19 pandemic and have continued them beyond the pandemic period. The study seeks to understand not only how these women established and sustained their enterprises during a period of uncertainty, but also how the entrepreneurial journey has shaped their lives, identities and aspirations.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to a wave of women-led enterprises in various parts of India. Many women entered entrepreneurship because of financial stress, loss of household income and the uncertainty created by the crisis. They showed resilience by diversifying their products, using digital platforms and depending on family and community support to keep their ventures alive (Manolova et al., 2020; Priya & Bose, 2021). In Kerala, this trend was especially visible because of the state's relatively strong support system for women's economic participation and the active role played by Kudumbashree networks during the pandemic period (Pandala, Janardhanan & Kinslin, 2023).

At the same time, the context has changed considerably since the lockdowns ended. The pandemic is no longer the immediate setting in which these businesses operate and women entrepreneurs who began their ventures during the crisis are now facing a more competitive post-pandemic market. The conditions that once supported their entry into entrepreneurship have weakened. Physical shops and markets have reopened, digital spaces have become more crowded and the informal financial arrangements and small-scale adjustments that worked during lockdown may no longer be enough to ensure long-term survival. This creates an important need to understand whether the resilience strategies that helped these women begin

their enterprises during the pandemic are still useful in the post-pandemic period and how they have adapted when those early strategies are no longer sufficient.

Another important issue concerns identity. Much of the existing research has treated women's pandemic entrepreneurship mainly as an economic response to crisis. It has focused on why women started businesses, how they used digital tools, and what structural barriers they encountered. Less attention has been given to the personal and social changes that came with this experience. In particular, there is limited understanding of how entrepreneurship affected women's sense of self, their confidence, their place within the family and their role in public life. Some studies have shown that the pandemic challenged the usual stereotype of women engaging only in defensive and survival-based entrepreneurship. This is because many women have displayed creativity and innovation across different sectors during the pandemic period. Even so, they continue to face barriers such as limited access to credit, patriarchal expectations, and uneven policy support (Jain & Sharma, 2023). The way entrepreneurship shapes identity and how that identity influences the continued sustainability of the business remains an area that has not been studied in sufficient depth.

Although existing studies have documented how women entrepreneurs adapted during the crisis, very few have followed them into the post-pandemic period to examine what happened afterward. National and international research has highlighted the immediate effects of COVID-19 on women's entrepreneurship. However, the specific experience of women in Kerala, a state known for its distinct women's support structures remains underexplored. Without grounded, qualitative insights, policy responses may fail to reflect women's lived realities and the deeper forms of resilience that supported the enterprise beyond the crisis phase. Questions such as how entrepreneurial identity has changed over time, which innovations have remained useful, how family and community support have shifted during recovery and how women themselves define resilience remain largely unanswered. These unanswered questions form the basis of this study. Hence, the study is grounded in the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in Trivandrum district of Kerala and seeks to address these gaps in understanding.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is academically significant because it addresses important gaps in the existing literature on women's entrepreneurship, especially in the post-COVID period. Most of the earlier research, including studies by Manolova et al. (2020) and Jain and Sharma (2023), has mainly examined the immediate responses to the crisis. There is a lack of qualitative research that explores how women entrepreneurs sustained their businesses over the long term after the initial shock of the pandemic. By focusing on women entrepreneurs in Thiruvananthapuram who started their ventures during COVID-19, this study seeks to contribute rich, context-based insights into their lived experiences. It examines how social networks, self-efficacy, and community support have helped them build resilience and continue their enterprises. By doing so, the study connects international perspectives, such as those from Zimbabwe (Mashingaidze & Bomani, 2022) and Indonesia (Abidin et al., 2025), with a local Indian context. It also contributes to theoretical discussions in gender studies and entrepreneurship by challenging the common assumption that women entrepreneurs adopt only defensive, survival-oriented strategies during crises.

This study is also important because it offers evidence from Kerala, a region that is still underrepresented in entrepreneurship research. By examining the experiences of women entrepreneurs in Thiruvananthapuram, the study can help assess how far the state aligns with broader global development goals like SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). Research by Pandala, Janardhanan, and Kinslin (2023) has shown that Kudumbashree units have played a major role in improving women's financial independence and skill development in Kerala. This highlights the value of studying women's entrepreneurship at the local level, since it can reveal wider socio-economic benefits that are often missed in broader national and international studies.

On a practical level, the findings of this study can offer useful insights for women entrepreneurs, policymakers, and support institutions working in the post-COVID period. Strengthening women's entrepreneurial capacity can contribute to employment generation and economic growth, as noted by Jain and Sharma (2023). At the same time, a gender-sensitive framework for understanding entrepreneurial resilience, as suggested by Shamieh and Bastian (2025), shows the need to recognise the relational, social, and community-based resources that help women sustain their ventures. This means that business success should not be measured only through narrow growth-oriented and traditionally male-centered indicators, but also through the ability to sustain livelihoods, adapt to change, and create value within social and family contexts.

Beyond academia and practice, the results of this study can influence policy formulation and bring about societal transformation at both state and national levels. Even though there has been an increase in women-led businesses from 18 per cent in 2017 to 22 per cent in 2022 as per the WISER report, gender equity in entrepreneurship remains an unresolved challenge. This research may therefore help inform more gender-sensitive policies by drawing attention to the conditions that shape women's entrepreneurial success, including family support, institutional recognition, and digital access. Hence, by studying how women entrepreneurs in Trivandrum district of Kerala sustain and grow their ventures, this study aims to shed light on equitable recovery strategies and inspire similar studies in other developing regions.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the literature on women's entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic, with special attention to how women started, sustained, and grew their ventures during the crisis and in the post-crisis period. The review is thematically organised into six areas that structure the existing evidence and identify patterns relevant to the present study: Resilience and adaptation strategies, Challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, Government and policy support, Motivating factors, Digital entrepreneurship and the socio-economic impacts made by women entrepreneurs. Together, these themes create a framework for assessing women entrepreneurs' post-COVID journey.

2.2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.2.1 Adaptation

Several studies mention how women entrepreneurs demonstrated adaptability during the COVID-19 crisis. Manolova et al. (2020) reveal that despite severe supply-demand shocks, women-owned firms pivoted their models through online services, digital marketing, and innovative products, thus challenging traditional gendered perceptions of defensive entrepreneurship. Jain and Sharma (2023) noted a surge in women's entrepreneurship in India during the pandemic, with women tapping out new opportunities and realigning models to meet local and global needs which sped up the already existing trend. Similarly, Kumar and Singh (2021) explains that women in Delhi adapted to the pandemic by shifting to mask production and online platforms, even though their recovery lagged due to systemic barriers. Umamaheswari and Vasumathi (2022) whose study was based in Cuddalore observed that lockdowns and social distancing prompted women to seek recovery through subsidies due to supply chain disruptions and reduced demand. In Zimbabwe, Mashingaidze and Bomani (2022) highlight that women entrepreneurs remained in business due to internal resilience, social contributions, and existing resources, despite overwhelming financial and operational difficulties. Priya and Bose (2021) in Tamil Nadu documented women shifting to digital businesses like telemedicine and tutoring taking advantage of the increased digital access

during lockdowns. Abidin et al. (2025) in Surakarta described women responded with product diversification and digital marketing when desperate times called for new measures. Hazel (2024) did a study based on women entrepreneurs in Africa to understand the HRM competencies that they must adopt post-COVID 19 in order to remain competitive and resilient and found that the current competencies they possess must be up skilled as there was a change in the workplace culture in terms of communication, digitalisation and work from home. The study recommends that women entrepreneur businesses must adopt strategies like functional and numerical flexibility, training and development, outsourcing and flexible working arrangements to mitigate the HRM competences inadequacies so that their business could sustain. These works illustrate how resilience and adaptation became central survival strategies during the pandemic.

2.2.2 Challenges faced by women entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs encountered significant obstacles during and after the pandemic, which shaped their entrepreneurial journey. Manolova et al. (2020) identified unpreparedness, revenue loss, and gender-linked caregiving roles as major challenges. Jain and Sharma (2023) pointed to unrealized employment potential and financial marginalization as barriers. Ingalagi et al. (2021) noted limited financial access, low scheme awareness, and resource constraints like skilled labour shortages.

Kumar and Singh (2021) highlighted patriarchal constraints, lack of financial access, and bureaucratic hurdles that prevented women from fully benefiting from government schemes. Dahiya (2022) pointed out that lack of scheme awareness and insufficient training as obstacles. Shete (2024) mentioned limited finance access and traditional roles as a hindrance. Umamaheswari and Vasumathi (2022) reported supply chain disruptions and reduced demand affecting turnover intent in Cuddalore district. Priya and Bose (2021) identified reduced revenue, workforce shortages, and technology adaptation difficulties in Tamil Nadu. Mashingaidze and Bomani (2022) noted lockdowns, loan denials, and liquidity crisis in Zimbabwe. Abidin et al. (2025) listed limited capital, rising costs, low digital literacy, and domestic responsibilities in Surakarta as the challenges. These challenges reveal a complex interplay of economic, social, and gender-specific barriers that restrict women's entrepreneurial progress during crisis.

2.2.3 Government and policy support

Several works evaluate the role of state initiatives and policy frameworks in supporting women entrepreneurs. Manolova et al. (2020) called for supportive policies to enhance women's resilience and crisis entrepreneurship. Jain and Sharma (2023) notes the surge in women's entrepreneurship during COVID-19 and emphasize the need for a transformational approach to counter challenges. They also advocates for combined efforts from government and institutions for gender-specific support in India. Aggarwal (2025) critically assesses government investments, finding that although collateral-free loans and credit schemes expanded opportunities, low awareness and patriarchal barriers limited their impact. Shete (2024) noted that AtmaNirbhar Bharat's schemes supported women's economic empowerment. Kumar and Singh (2021) argued for gender-sensitive interventions to address structural constraints in Delhi. Dahiya (2022) suggested awareness and training programs to realize intentions of women entrepreneurs. Umamaheswari and Vasumathi (2022) highlighted the need for government subsidies in Cuddalore. Priya and Bose (2021) stressed the need for technology adaptation in Tamil Nadu. Bedaduri and Pradhan (2023) identified an example, which was women from Self-Help Groups in India starting eco-friendly ventures with microfinance support. Mashingaidze and Bomani (2022) proposed simplified grants, training, and emergency support in their study based in Zimbabwe. Ge et al. (2022) suggested anti-discrimination regulations and training in Pakistan. Abidin et al. (2025) urged inclusive financing, digital training, and network strengthening in Surakarta. Hazel (2024) recommended that the Ministry of Small to Medium Enterprises and the Ministry of Women's Affairs must develop policies and provide platforms that capacitate women business owners with people management skills to help them manage their businesses post-crisis periods. Hence, the following literatures project the need for targeted, gender-sensitive policies to overcome barriers and sustain women's entrepreneurial ventures.

2.2.4 Motivating factors

The motivation of women entrepreneurs to start and sustain businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic is driven by a combination of personal aspirations, social responsibilities, and economic opportunities. Ingalagi et al. (2021) highlights how social support, psychological

traits, financial access, and resource availability affect both the satisfaction and performance of women entrepreneurs and thus plays a crucial role in sustaining and growing their ventures. Dahiya (2022) examines the entrepreneurial intentions of Indian women, revealing strong motivations including financial independence, social recognition, work-life balance, and the desire to prove their capabilities. The study notes a shift from traditional businesses like tailoring to newer areas such as tuition and consultancy. Ge et al. (2022) in Pakistan highlighted that education, time allocated to entrepreneurial activities, and strategic firm location positively influenced women's income contributions. Similarly, Mashingaidze and Bomani (2022) in Zimbabwe identified internal motivations such as resilience, passion for entrepreneurship, and self-efficacy as core drivers for women in the retail sector to remain in business despite devastating pandemic effects like reduced customer traffic and liquidity issues. Jain and Sharma (2023) note that the surge in women's entrepreneurship in India during the pandemic was motivated by the potential for self-sustainability, greater flexibility, and control, which also led to employment and capital formation, which played a role in increasing GDP. Manolova et al. (2020) finds that despite significant revenue loss and unpreparedness, women entrepreneurs were motivated by new opportunities created by the pandemic, adopting 'discovery-driven models' with online services and digital marketing and challenging the gendered dichotomy of defensive versus opportunity-seeking entrepreneurship. Kumar and Singh (2021) in Delhi highlighted family support, particularly from female relatives, as a motivating factor that enabled women to initiate and sustain small enterprises. Aggarwal (2025) suggests that government investment, such as collateral-free loans, motivated women to grow their enterprises, though uneven access limited this drive. Hence, these studies emphasize that women's entrepreneurship is shaped by a dynamic balance of internal motivation, family support, education, and access to resources.

2.2.5 Digital entrepreneurship

Digital entrepreneurship emerged as a critical strategy for women entrepreneurs to start and sustain businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by the need to adapt to lockdowns, social restrictions, and shifting market demands. Manolova et al. (2020) highlight that women entrepreneurs pivoted to online services and digital marketing in response to supply-demand shocks, adopting 'discovery-driven models' to seize new opportunities despite significant revenue loss and unpreparedness. This shift challenged traditional gendered views of

entrepreneurship, and showcased digital platforms as a tool for resilience. Priya and Bose (2021) in Tamil Nadu provide a detailed examination of women entrepreneurs who transitioned to digital businesses during lockdowns, creating opportunities in telemedicine and online tutoring through increased digital access, better coordination, and higher productivity. Despite challenges like reduced revenue and technology adaptation difficulties, ICT usage boosted their self-efficacy and social networking, highlighting digital entrepreneurship's role in survival and growth. Rahayu, Masduki, and Ellyanawati (2023) examined the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic and explored how they used social media to sustain their businesses. The study found that women entrepreneurs encountered significant difficulties such as declining sales, market disruptions, and operational constraints. To overcome these challenges, many relied on social media platforms for marketing, customer engagement, and business continuity. The study highlights the importance of digital adaptation and innovation in enhancing business resilience during crises.

Abidin et al. (2025) further showed how Indonesian women-led MSMEs embraced digital transformation for product diversification, market expansion, and consumer engagement, significantly contributing to post-pandemic recovery. Jain and Sharma (2023) note that many women in India accelerated their entrepreneurial journey during the pandemic by shifting to digital business models, realigning operations to cater to new consumer behaviour and global needs thereby strengthening their adaptability. Kumar and Singh (2021) in Delhi observed that women adapted by moving to online platforms, mainly for mask production. Shete (2024) notes that the AtmaNirbhar Bharat mission facilitated women's shift to online sales through e-market linkages, turning pandemic challenges into growth opportunities and motivated self-financed ventures. Overall, digital entrepreneurship has been a transformative force for women entrepreneurs, enabling them to start businesses during the pandemic by leveraging online platforms, digital marketing, and innovative technologies.

2.2.6 Socio-economic impact made by women entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs significantly contributed to economic and social resilience which extends beyond their own personal success. Manolova et al. (2020) showed that women's resilience challenged gendered dichotomies thereby contributing to crisis entrepreneurship. Jain and Sharma (2023) noted that women's ventures boosted employment, capital formation, and GDP growth in India. Ingalagi et al. (2021) found that women drove economic growth

through resilience and performance linked to social support. Kumar and Singh (2021) observed that women empowered themselves and strengthened national growth despite facing structural barriers in Delhi. Dahiya (2022) suggested that women's aspirations contributed to economic diversification. Shete (2024) highlighted that women's MSMEs contributed to India's global economic hub status under AtmaNirbhar Bharat initiative. Umamaheswari and Vasumathi (2022) found that women aided economic recovery through adaptive strategies in Cuddalore. Priya and Bose (2021) noted that women enhanced self-efficacy and social networking via digital platforms in Tamil Nadu. Bedaduri and Pradhan (2023) demonstrated that women achieved Sustainable Development Goals through economic, environmental, and political impacts. Mashingaidze and Bomani (2022) highlighted that women supported families and communities thereby providing employment in Zimbabwe. Ge et al. (2022) showed that women promoted gender equality and household welfare in Pakistan, thereby aligning with SDGs. Abidin et al. (2025) reported that women created jobs, optimized resources, and strengthened microeconomic structures in Surakarta. These literature highlights women's pivotal role in fostering resilience at individual, community, and national levels.

2.3 RESEARCH GAP

Although existing studies have explored how women entrepreneurs responded to the COVID-19 crisis, they remain focused on their immediate and short-term responses. As a result, there is limited understanding about how women who started their ventures during the pandemic were able to sustain and grow their businesses in the post-pandemic period

Another limitation is that a significant portion of the existing literature is quantitative in nature, which often overlooked the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs. There is a need for more qualitative insights that capture their everyday struggles, decision-making processes, and the realities of sustaining a business over time. Most research on women entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic were international in nature. Although limited number of studies have focused on India, none specifically investigated the context of Kerala.

In this context, there is a clear need for a more grounded and context-specific understanding of women's entrepreneurial journeys beyond the pandemic. By focusing on women entrepreneurs in Thiruvananthapuram district of Kerala, this study aims to offer a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of how resilience is built and sustained over time.

2.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has laid the conceptual and contextual foundation for the present study by critically reviewing relevant literature and identifying significant gaps in the existing body of research. It provided a comprehensive review of studies on women's entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter began by examining the concepts of resilience and adaptation, highlighting how women entrepreneurs coped with the crisis by diversifying their businesses, adopting digital tools, and relying on family and community support systems.

It then discussed the major challenges faced by women entrepreneurs which includes financial constraints, lack of awareness of government schemes, increased household responsibilities, and lack of digital literacy. The review further looked into the role of government policies and programmes, along with the key motivating factors that drove women towards entrepreneurship during the pandemic period.

Additionally, the chapter explored the growing significance of digital entrepreneurship and the socio-economic contributions of women-led enterprises. The final section clearly identified the research gap that the present study seeks to address.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the methodological choices adopted for the study. It presents the research approach, research design, theoretical framework, research questions, and area of study, sample size, sampling technique, and tools of data collection, sources of data and the definition of concepts. The purpose of this chapter is to explain how the study was planned and how the data important to the study were collected and analysed in a systematic manner.

3.2 TITLE OF THE STUDY

From Survival to Growth: Tracing the resilience of Women entrepreneurs beyond the pandemic

3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

A qualitative research approach is adopted for the study. Qualitative research refers to a research approach that focuses on understanding and interpreting human experiences, meanings and social realities through non-numerical forms of data such as interviews, observations and lived experiences. It aims to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences within particular social and cultural contexts. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate for the present study because it helps the researcher understand the lived experiences, push factors, struggles, coping strategies and identity transformations of women entrepreneurs who started businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic and sustained them beyond the pandemic period.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design refers to the overall plan, structure and strategy adopted for conducting a study and analyse the collected data in a systematic manner. It provides a framework for the researcher to address the research questions and achieve the objectives of the study in an organised way. This study adopts a qualitative multiple case study design. A multiple case

study design is appropriate when the researcher intends to examine and compare the experiences of different participants within a particular social context. In this study, women entrepreneurs who entered entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic and continued the same in the post-pandemic period were selected as individual cases. This allows the researcher to explore similarities and differences across cases while understanding the broader social realities that shaped women's entrepreneurship during and after the pandemic.

3.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.5.1 GENERAL RESEARCH QUESTION

How did women entrepreneurs establish and sustain their enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic period?

3.5.2 SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What were the various push factors that led women to establish their enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What were the various challenges that the women entrepreneurs faced while establishing their businesses during the pandemic?
3. What were the operational strategies, resources and support systems utilized by the women entrepreneurs to maintain their business operations across both the pandemic and post-pandemic phases?
4. How did the women entrepreneurs' strategic approaches and future aspirations evolve as they transitioned from pandemic to post pandemic era?
5. How does entrepreneurship shape the identity of women?

3.6 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

The various concepts described here have been identified while analysing literature related to the topic.

1. Women entrepreneur

Theoretical Definition

According to Frederick Harbison (1956), “Any woman or group of women who innovates, initiates, or adopts an economic activity.”

Operational Definition

In this study, women entrepreneur refers to the women who have established enterprise during the COVID-19 pandemic and sustained it beyond the pandemic.

2. Resilience

Theoretical Definition

According to Masten (2001), resilience is the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances.

Operational Definition

In this study, resilience refers to the ability of women entrepreneurs to adapt and sustain their businesses during financial, social, and market challenges in the post-pandemic period.

3. Reactive resilience

Theoretical Definition

According to Jackson and Ferris (2015), reactive resilience refers to the capacity to respond, adapt, and recover after a disruption or adverse event has occurred. It focuses on recovery and adjustment in the aftermath of challenges.

Operational Definition

In the present study, reactive resilience refers to the immediate adaptive responses undertaken by women entrepreneurs to cope with the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Proactive resilience

Theoretical Definition

According to Jackson and Ferris (2015), proactive resilience refers to resilience that involves anticipating, planning, and preparing for potential disruptions before they occur. It emphasizes actions taken in advance to reduce vulnerability and enhance the capacity to withstand future challenges.

Operational Definition

In the present study, proactive resilience refers to the anticipatory measures adopted by women entrepreneurs to prepare for future uncertainties and strengthen the sustainability of their businesses. This includes planning, diversification, skill acquisition, and other preventive strategies.

5. Agency

Theoretical Definition

Giddens (1984) defines agency as the capability of individuals to intervene in the ongoing flow of events such that they could have acted otherwise at any phase of their conduct, thereby exerting causal power to make a difference in the social world.

Operational Definition

In this study, agency refers to the ability of women entrepreneurs to exercise choice and take intentional actions that led them to start the businesses during COVID-19 pandemic despite the socio-economic constraints.

3.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

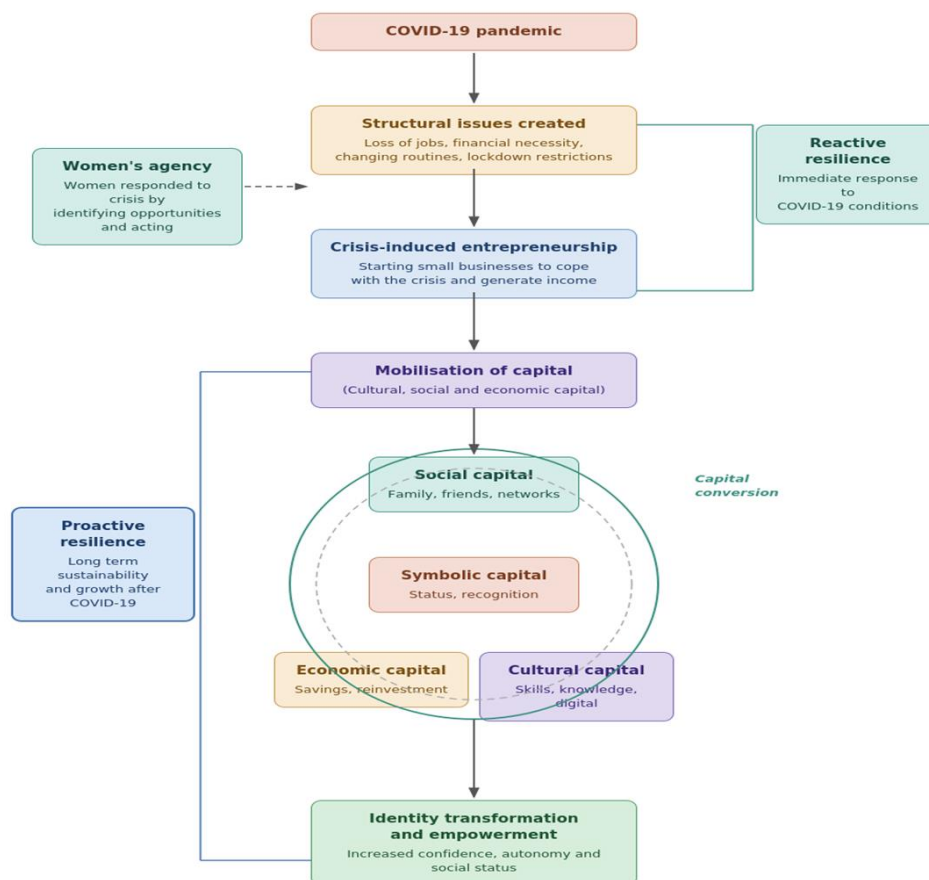


Figure 1: Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study combines Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Capital, Giddens' Structuration Theory and the concepts of reactive and proactive resilience to understand how women entrepreneurs navigated systemic disruptions and structural crises during COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these theories help explain how human agency, capital

mobilisation, strategies and support systems worked together in the long run to help women achieve success when they once faced severe challenges and decided to launch enterprises. The framework describes COVID-19 Pandemic as a major structural disruption that acted as an initial catalyst for women to step into entrepreneurship. Following this shock, several major structural issues emerged such as economic uncertainty, financial stress, everyday boredom, psychological anxiety and isolation caused by strict lockdowns. These issues broke down the predictable patterns of daily life and forced women to deal with a highly unstable environment. This made them to change their daily routines and find new ventures for economic survival.

To explain how women responded to these sudden challenges and transitioned into business owners, this study uses the Giddens' Structuration Theory. Giddens had introduced the idea of 'duality of structure,' which argues that social structures both shape human behaviour and are shaped by it. While structures impose limitations on humans, human actions can also change and rebuild those structures. Within this framework, women are not explained as helpless victims of the pandemic's restrictions. Instead, they have demonstrated their 'agency' when they chose to respond to the crisis by locating new opportunities in the market, rethink their situations and take decisive action to start their own businesses. It is only because of their decision to utilise their agency, they have stood out from others and succeeded. By using this agency, they were successful in the restructuring the existing social structures. By starting an independent business during the lockdown, women have found out a practical way to bypass and challenge the heavy restrictions caused by lockdowns and changing family responsibilities. Hence, they made use of crisis as a stepping stone to their entrepreneurial journey.

Once this action is taken, the survival and success of these women-led micro-businesses depend on how well they have mobilised and utilised various capitals. This process is analysed using Bourdieu's Theory of Capital. Bourdieu explained that power and survival in society depend on more than just money. They also depend on various other forms of interconnected capital. To get through the crisis, women entrepreneurs actively participated in the mobilisation of different forms of capital within their communities to launch and sustain their ventures. These include cultural capital, social capital and economic capital. They made use of cultural capital like personal skills, specialized knowledge and talents. They used social capital by leaning on family networks, friends and community connections. Finally, they made use of economic capital by spending small savings and buying raw materials to start their businesses. Bourdieu has noted that these forms of capital are not fixed. They are interchangeable and can be used to build and acquire another form of capital. By using these concepts, it was understood that

women entrepreneurs converted various forms of capital to gain success. They turned their cultural and social skills into economic capital which was ultimately used to achieve Symbolic Capital. This has brought these women entrepreneurs public recognition, enhanced social status and better visibility both at home and in their wider communities. This conversion played a big role in bringing identity transformation and empowerment in these women.

While looking into the experiences of these women, it could be understood that they have demonstrated incredible resilience throughout their journey. Resilience can be treated as a dynamic process and not as an inherited trait. While analysing data, a two-stage process of social resilience consisting of reactive and proactive resilience was seen. The first stage is called ‘Reactive Resilience’, which refers to short-term survival tactics and immediate coping mechanisms adopted by the women during crisis. This includes how they responded to crisis conditions by quickly finding ways to make money, starting temporary businesses and using local resources to get through the worst part of the COVID-19 pandemic. This stage leads to the second stage called ‘Proactive Resilience’, which refers to the long-term, lasting structural change that they adopted which helped in sustaining business beyond the pandemic period. As these women-owned businesses gain respect and symbolic capital, they started focusing on growing their enterprises. The final result of this process is ‘Identity Transformation and Empowerment’. The steady cycle of taking action, converting resources and building long-term resilience permanently changed the woman’s position in both her family and public life. This leads to an increase in self-confidence, financial independence and decision-making power among women and ultimately establishes them as permanent, independent entrepreneurs.

3.8 SOURCES OF DATA

The study draws upon both primary and secondary sources of data to examine the entrepreneurial journey of women entrepreneurs in Trivandrum. The integration of these sources has given a deeper understanding of subjective experiences centered on broader social structures.

Primary data: Primary data were directly collected from the women entrepreneurs who were selected as cases.

Secondary data: Secondary data consists of information from relevant literature and articles related to the women entrepreneurship, resilience and crisis entrepreneurship

3.9 PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted before the main study to assess the feasibility of the research.

3.10 PRETEST

A pretest was conducted before the main data collection to check whether the interview guide was clear, relevant, and easy to understand. The pretest helped identify questions that needed modification in terms of wording, sequence or clarity. It also helped the researcher understand whether the questions were suitable for drawing detailed responses from the participants

3.11 SAMPLE SIZE

A total of seven participants who satisfied exclusion and inclusion criteria were chosen for this study. The sample size is kept small because the study aims for depth rather than breadth.

3.12 SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

This study employs purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are selected deliberately because they have relevant experience and knowledge related to the topic under study. This method is suitable here because the study specifically requires women who began businesses during the COVID-19 period and continued them successfully afterward. This technique was chosen because the aim of the study was not to generalize findings to a larger population, but to gain in-depth insights into the experiences of women entrepreneurs who sustained their Covid started enterprise.

3.13 TOOLS FOR DATA COLLECTION

An interview guide was used as the primary tool for data collection. The interview guide consisted of approximately 35 to 40 semi-structured in-depth interview questions prepared based on the research questions and objectives of the study. The questions included sections such as the general profile of the participants, which covered both personal profile and business profile, push factors behind starting the business, challenges faced during the pandemic and post-pandemic period, operational strategies and support systems, future aspirations and identity transformation and empowerment.

The semi-structured nature of the interview guide provided flexibility during the interview process. Certain modifications were made to the questions based on the responses and experiences shared by the participants. In some situations, additional probing questions were asked to obtain deeper insights, while in other cases minor changes in the order and framing of questions were made according to the flow of the interaction. This flexibility helped the researcher gather rich and detailed narratives from the participants.

3.14 DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected through in-depth interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify repeating themes and patterns from the narratives of women entrepreneurs. After the completion of data collection, the interviews were carefully reviewed and organised systematically. Manual coding was carried out by identifying repeated ideas and experiences related to resilience, challenges, coping strategies, support systems and identity transformation. The codes generated from the data were then grouped into broader themes and sub-themes based on similarities and repeating patterns in the participants' experiences. This process helped the researcher to interpret how women entrepreneurs navigated crisis conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic and sustained their enterprises in the post-pandemic period. Thematic analysis was considered suitable because it enabled an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences and social realities of the participants.

CHAPTER 4: CASE DESCRIPTIONS

This chapter includes the case descriptions of 7 participants who were selected for the study

4.1 PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

The study consists of seven women entrepreneurs residing in Thiruvananthapuram who initiated their business ventures during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants range in age from 29 to 60 years. Their educational backgrounds are varied, ranging from professional qualifications such as LLB and MBA to vocational and diploma credentials. Prior to starting their businesses, the participants held diverse roles like corporate professionals, nurses, school principals, homemakers, and students. The businesses span multiple sectors including food, fashion, baking, and e-commerce retail. This diversity makes the thematic patterns more meaningful because the same core experiences appear across different ages, family situations and business sectors. Despite differences in the type of enterprise owned, the respondents shared the common experience of initiating and sustaining their ventures during and after the pandemic period. The following table summarises the personal and business profiles of all seven participants.

Table 1: Profile of respondents

CASE	AGE	GENDER	PRIOR OCCUPATION	VENTURE NAME	BUSINESS TYPE	MARITAL STATUS	FAMILY TYPE
A	55	FEMALE	HOMEMAKER	CM NATURAL BIO PRODUCTS	ORGANIC BIO FERTILIZER AND GARDEN PRODUCTS	MARRIED	NUCLEAR
B	40	FEMALE	LAWYER	FRESH EATS FOODS	FISH,PICKLES AND FROZEN PRODUCTS	MARRIED	NUCLEAR
C	34	FEMALE	HOMEMAKER	SPATULA SONGS	CUSTOM CAKES AND CHEESECAKES	MARRIED	JOINT
D	29	FEMALE	COLLEGE STUDENT	TASSEL AND TWIST	ONLINE SARI RETAIL	MARRIED	NUCLEAR
E	36	FEMALE	HOMEMAKER	ROLLS AND BAKES	CAKES,SNACKS AND HOMEMADE DELICACIES	MARRIED	JOINT
F	30	FEMALE	HOMEMAKER	JO FASHION DESIGNING	CUSTOMIZED BOUTIQUE AND TAILORING	MARRIED	NUCLEAR
G	58	FEMALE	KINDERGARDEN HEAD	AYAT PICKLES	HOMEMADE PICKLES	MARRIED	NUCLEAR

CASE A

‘A’ is a 55 year old woman entrepreneur from Thiruvananthapuram who runs a venture known as ‘CM Natural Bio Products’. She belongs to a nuclear family and lives with her husband, who is a plumber by profession. Her two sons are settled in the gulf. Before starting her business, she was a homemaker and never thought of becoming an entrepreneur. She also had no previous experience of managing a business and had no training in management of enterprises. She started the business during the COVID 19 period.

Its origins are in the pandemic setting. Life during COVID 19 was mostly confined to the home and the daily routines were becoming repetitive and boring. During this time, her friend Nasira saw something that many would have turned a blind eye to. She observed that a vegetable shop nearby was generating a lot of waste every day. Some of the waste was used to feed some bulls, but there was still quite a lot left over. Her friend suggested turning such waste into some sort of natural fertiliser. She also pointed out that there were many YouTube tutorials available and that with a little experimentation, something useful might emerge from the waste. This suggestion stayed in the mind of ‘A’. She had a spare water tank at home and she decided to use it for this purpose. She put the vegetable waste into the tank and left it there. She had completely forgotten about the tank and vegetable wastes inside it. Several months later she observed that the tank had begun to emit a strange smell. When she went back to check, she remembered what had been stored inside. Her husband then noticed that a liquid was leaking from the tank. Instead of discarding it, he collected the liquid and poured it onto the plants in their home. This was a meaningful moment because she had always had an interest in plants and had grown many ornamentals as well as vegetable plants at home. Within two weeks, she observed that the plants had started growing more healthily and looked much lusher than before. She said *"I had always loved plants and enjoyed experimenting at home. When I saw that the liquid from the waste was actually making the plants healthier, something in me felt that this was not just an accident. It was something I wanted to pursue."*

This observation marked the moment ‘A’ started to think like an entrepreneur. During the lockdown, she used to walk in the neighbourhood and collect empty bottles from the road. She removed the labels and filled those bottles with the liquid produced from the vegetable waste. Initially, she distributed them among relatives and neighbours. The response was mixed. Some were curious while others openly mocked her idea. They did not understand what she was

trying to do and questioned whether she was simply selling some herb juices in a bottle and trying to cheat the customers. Such reactions could have discouraged someone who lacked confidence, but she explained they instead pushed her to think more seriously about branding and presentation. She realised that if the product was to be accepted as valuable, it needed a proper identity. So she approached a printing centre and created a label. Then, she named the brand 'CM Natural Bio Products.' The name was not chosen randomly. It carried religious and emotional significance for her. She was a devotee of a Sayyid who was widely known as CM and had his shrine at Kozhikode.

As the venture slowly developed, 'A' faced her first major challenge when she approached Krishi Bhavan for support and recognition. She explained the product, showed it to the officials, and described its usefulness for plant growth. But the officers were sceptical about it. They asked what ingredients had been used and when she said it was made only from vegetable waste, they found it difficult to believe. They also refused to allow the product to be sold or displayed there because she did not have a licence yet. She visited them three times, but each time the response remained the same. This was a deeply discouraging experience as she was trying to move from informal production to formal recognition. Yet, she did not withdraw. She kept selling the product independently and allowed the results to speak for themselves. The product gradually gained credibility through the wide use of the products by a large network of satisfied customers. People who tried it began to notice that it worked. The business was not sustained through aggressive marketing in the beginning, but through the visible effectiveness of the product itself. Later, the same Krishi Bhavan officials who had earlier denied recognition tested it and found it useful. Eventually, they accepted it and even asked her to display it there.

She explains that the support she received from her family from the start to the present situation was central to the survival of the business. Her husband was not simply present in the background. He helped collect the organic liquid, supported the experimentation, accompanied her in several business related activities and stood with her when others were sceptical. Her son also contributed when she needed money for marketing and expansion. At the same time, she was very aware that not all women receive such support. She spoke about her friend Nasira, whose idea had inspired the business in the first place. Nasira's husband did not allow her to pursue the venture, and because of that, she could not continue with it. That contrast is sociologically important. The same idea, the same context, and the same opportunity can lead to two very different outcomes depending on the support a woman receives at home. While 'A's husband support enabled her business growth, the lack of support from her husband

became a barrier for Naseera. This difference highlights how women's entrepreneurship is often shaped by household power relations as much as by individual talent.

'A's relationship with digital technology also evolved through the business. At the beginning, she had limited technical knowledge. She said *"In the beginning, I did not know how to use UPI or any of these online tools. It was my son who sat with me and helped me learn"*. She eventually became more comfortable with online payments, and social media promotion. In her case, entrepreneurship had become a site of learning. She moved from being a person dependent on others for digital tasks to someone who could participate in them herself. Household responsibilities was something she needed to take care of, but they were manageable because of the family support she had. Since her children were already settled abroad, the daily domestic burden was less intense than for many younger women entrepreneurs. Her husband also helped with domestic tasks. So, the business and the household did not stand in complete opposition to each other and were intertwined. She could manage the business from home, and the home itself became the centre of production, packaging, and planning. This made it possible for her to remain rooted in family life while also engaging in market activity.

She explains that the business grew significantly over time. After covid 19, 'A' took license and registered the product with Kudumbashree which helped her in gaining wider market access. Instead of going around and selling the product personally as she had done in the pandemic era, she began receiving customers directly at home during the post pandemic era. She also created an Instagram page and a website, which helped her products to circulate through online channels. Some shops in her area also stock her products. She also established two physical shops which had its own courier and delivery services. She now has a small manufacturing unit attached to the house where several people are working under her. Machines were brought for processing, labelling, and packaging, which helped the business become more efficient and professional.

The product line also expanded during post pandemic era. The main product was the CM bio fertiliser, which is still the best-selling item. But the brand now includes several related products such as organic manure, organic soil mix, pot mix, seeds, vegetable plants, home garden kits, and garden tools and accessories. This diversification shows that she did not remain confined to a single idea. She noticed demand, expanded into related areas and had gradually built a wider ecological product line. Her products are now sold across Kerala and have also

reached Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana. She mentions that delivery is available across India and one of her future goals is to expand to GCC countries and Europe. Her business thus moved from local waste management to broader market ambition. She explained that the initial phase was relatively low cost because the raw materials were available at home and the process began on a small scale. But, when the business expanded, she needed capital for infrastructure. During the post pandemic phase, she had taken a loan of 20 lakh rupees to build a small manufacturing unit attached to her house. This helped her move from a basic home-based initiative to a more organised production process. Despite her achievements, she mentioned that she has not received any government grant so far. She has participated in exhibitions and has been recognised by various government departments, but direct financial support has not yet come through. Still, she continued building the business from within her own resources, credit, combining personal savings and family support.

One of the most striking changes in 'A' was her identity transformation. She described herself as a timid person before this journey. She was someone who did not know how to speak in front of people and did not feel comfortable taking the microphone and standing before a crowd. Through the business, that changed dramatically. She now speaks at exhibitions, explains her products publicly, interacts with officials and presents herself with confidence. She has won around 50 medals and awards, including recognition at the state and national levels. In 2025, her product entered the India Book of Records. She is now a recognised entrepreneur, a business owner and someone whose work creates employment for others.

The lessons 'A' carried from this journey are important. During COVID 19, her aim was not to expand business and become rich. The immediate aim was to dispose the waste. The post-pandemic period changed her approach further. She began thinking more deeply about marketing, finance, customer relations, product diversification, and long-term planning. She learned many things like innovation can emerge from daily life observations and that courage can turn an accidental observation into a sustainable enterprise. As a message to other women, 'A' said that, *"Do not ignore small ideas that arise from ordinary life. A household observation can become a business if it is nurtured with courage and imagination."*

CASE B

‘B’ is a 40 year old woman entrepreneur from Thiruvananthapuram who started a food venture during the COVID 19 pandemic. The brand name of her products is ‘Fresh Eats Foods’, which is operated through her company Farmour Ventures Private Limited. She studied LLB and currently lives with her family which consists of herself, her husband, two children, and her father-in-law. Her entrepreneurial journey is particularly significant because it reflects a transition across multiple life roles. Before coming into business, she had lived abroad with her husband, where she was a homemaker. After returning, she entered the legal profession and began practising as a lawyer at Vanchiyoore Court. She said, *“Due to Covid 19, my regular legal work slowed. My husband also came back from abroad during the pandemic. Due to financial needs, I thought of starting a business and discussed ideas with her husband.”*

‘B’ mentions that the business began as a retail venture focused on selling fresh cut pieces of chicken and fish. During the first phase, the business was based on direct customer demand and online orders were frequent because people were unable to move around freely. The initial business model was therefore small, local, and retail-based. She personally believed that the food she sold should be of good quality, prepared as per quality assurance and should be delivered within the stipulated time. ‘B’ says, “Business is not only about profit, but also about serving customers properly.” She mentions that deciding on a company name which is ‘Farmour Ventures Private Limited’ and a brand name which is ‘Fresh Eats Foods’ gave the business a professional identity. By December 2020, she had formally established the company. This was her first time running a business venture. Her entry into this sector is remarkable especially when she had no previous link with the food or hotel industry.

One of the most important phases in her journey was the changing market behaviour during the post pandemic period. She observed that during COVID 19, online orders for fresh cut chicken and fish were high. But after the pandemic, demand for such products reduced due to the prevalence of physical shops. She thought like an entrepreneur and did not ignore this shift. She diversified her product line and expanded into pickle production and transformed the earlier retail model into a wholesale structure.

The present business structure is much larger than the initial one. She registered her unit with Kudumbashree to take it to the next level. Today, she has around 12 staff members working under her and the business operates through a production unit and office in Anayara. The production process, including procurement of fish, preparation of raw materials and processing is managed through these units. Her products are now available in Lulu Hypermarkets all across

India and the business has also expanded into online delivery systems like Blinkit in Chennai, Hyderabad, and Bangalore. She is currently working toward bringing the products into Blinkit in Kerala as well and is also planning to move into Instamart.

‘B’ also mentions that she had begun the venture without taking any kind of loan. She used her own money in the early stages and continued to do so for a considerable period. Even now, she has not borrowed money for the current scale of operations. She believes that once the business grows to a larger scale, she would consider taking appropriate loan support.

She also mentions the influence her support system had on her business. Her husband played a major role in managing household responsibilities which gave her the space to focus on business. Her children also adjusted to her new routine and did many things on their own. The presence of staff who helped with production and operations allowed the unit to function in a more organised way. She also gained valuable support from friends. They helped her with gaining new customers through their networks and also helped in testing products by giving valuable feedback. Hence, her friends became the first evaluators of the product which helped her in refining taste and quality.

She mentions that her earlier profession as a lawyer also became a major asset in her entrepreneurial life. She also believed that entrepreneurship gave her a broader role and space than law alone could offer. She says, “I am not just advising people on issues from outside, but also building something that directly changes peoples’ lives.” Her business has also received great recognition. One of the important achievements she mentioned was that her unit won the Best Venture award from Thiruvananthapuram last year. She was also selected for the Kudumbashree-IIMK Live incubation and mentorship programme where she has been receiving training for the past year. She described this training as extremely valuable because the advice and guidance from experienced mentors helped her improve her business strategy. She considered being selected for this programme itself to be an achievement because it meant that her work was recognised as promising. ‘B’s business today includes fish pickles, dry fish products and related items which are produced in bulk. She prefers to keep the product line manageable for now because she is still expanding.

Her future goal is to diversify the product line further and expand the unit to a larger scale. She plans on taking some kind of loan for that purpose. She also wants to collaborate with other Kudumbashree women entrepreneurs who produce good products so that they can work together and widen their market reach. This shows that her vision is not only personal, but also

collaborative. The changes brought by entrepreneurship in her own life are also important. Before starting the business, she already had professional confidence from her work as a lawyer. But entrepreneurship gave her a different kind of freedom. It allowed her to move from a role based on individual legal service to a role that creates value, jobs, and practical solutions for a wider group of people.

She has a clear advice to other women. 'B' says that, *"Every woman should have at least one skill, because skill opens the door to opportunity."* She also feels that women should not remain trapped by social expectations. She argues that even women with limited education can build meaningful futures if they learn a practical skill and make use of available opportunities. One of the most powerful aspects of her story is the way she understands challenge itself. 'B' says that, *"An entrepreneur should not see challenge as an obstacle, but as an opportunity to improve and advance."* This mind set helped her move from a small retail model to a wholesale business with wider visibility. Hence, Fresh Eats Foods is the story of a woman who used crisis as a starting point, learned through experience and built a venture which is living proof of resilience and discipline.

CASE C

'C' is a 34 year old woman entrepreneur from Thiruvananthapuram who runs a home based baking venture called Spatula Songs. She holds an MBA degree and had previously worked as an HR professional at Mercedes Benz Research and Development Limited, Bangalore. She said that before starting her business, she had professional work experience outside Kerala. But after marriage and childbirth, she stopped working and later became a homemaker. She currently lives in a nuclear family consisting of four members which includes herself, her husband, her mother-in-law and 2 year old child. Her husband also works as an HR professional. Her entry into entrepreneurship came during the COVID 19 period, when she was living as a homemaker and spending more time at home.

She said that baking had always been a familiar activity in her family. She learned baking informally at home by observing her mother and grandmother who frequently prepared cakes. She did not professionally learn baking. Her interest and talent in baking became more visible when she made a chocolate cake for her son's second birthday. Many friends and relatives appreciated the cake and encouraged her to take baking more seriously. At that point, baking

was still something she did occasionally for family celebrations. The real beginning of her venture came during the pandemic. During the lockdown period, a close friend needed a cake to celebrate her wedding anniversary but since many bakeries were closed during that time, she asked for 'C's help in preparing cakes and cupcakes. The products received a very positive response from the people who tasted them. This experience gave her confidence and encouraged her to think about baking as something that could become a business. She started 'Spatula Songs' in 2020 as a home-based business. The business began on a small scale from her own kitchen. Since baking was already one of her personal interest, she was able to turn her passion into a source of income. Over time, the venture grew gradually and she began handling more orders. The business was mainly focuses on cakes, cupcakes, and cheesecakes. She said that among these products, she was specialized in cheesecakes and soon it became one of her most popular items. She also mentioned that she prepared customised cakes for different occasions as per request.

'C' explained that her main customers were families, teenagers and students. She said that due to her extensive social media marketing, she received many orders through various social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp. She promoted her cakes through posts, status updates, photographs and customer feedback. Word of mouth publicity also helped the business grow, as satisfied customers became repeat customers and also recommended the business to others. Her family support played an important role in the growth of the business. Her parents helped by purchasing baking equipment. Her husband supported her with delivery and packaging, while her mother-in-law helped manage the household and child care responsibilities. She said that this support made it easier for her to continue working from home while taking care of family life. She said *"Without my family handling things at home, I could not have managed the orders and the kitchen at the same time. Their support was what made the business practically possible."*

She also explained that she did not look for any financial or institutional assistance and that the business was built mainly with personal effort and family support. She did not describe using digital platforms as a challenge. Instead, she used them actively at a large level to connect and build a wide customer network. She mentioned that online visibility was an important part of her business. She was comfortable using Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to connect with customers and promote her work. She also took part in exhibitions and promotional activities whenever possible to increase the visibility of the business. During the COVID 19 period, she faced many practical challenges while running the business. One major difficulty was the

delivery of cakes during lockdown time. Because of lockdown restrictions and transport problems, sending products to customers on time was stressful. She also experienced problems in getting ingredients and raw materials within the stipulated time. She explained that there were some instances when ingredients did not arrive on time and she was forced to cancel the orders and refund the amount to the customers. Another main difficulty she experienced was the occasional electricity shortage, which affected her baking schedules and created pressure when orders had to be completed within deadlines.

As the business developed, she started making more strategic changes during the post pandemic period. She understood that the market had become more competitive and saturated after many home bakers entered the field during and after the pandemic. Also, physical shops were becoming more prevalent. So she decided she will stand out from others and started planning necessary changes. To respond to this situation, she introduced flash sales, dessert hampers, cake slices and cake jars to her product line. She also gave advertisements and participated in events organised by communities like 'Eat Trivandrum'. She explained that not every customer wanted to buy a large cake and that some preferred smaller portions or items for immediate consumption. She adapted her products to suit customer preferences and to keep the business attractive in a changing market. She also said that customer satisfaction was a very important factor she considered while working. She tried to think from the customer's point of view while making decisions. She says, *"I always considered how I would have reacted if I were the customer in that situation."* This helped her pay attention to quality, packaging, punctual delivery and communication with buyers. She also mentioned that she did not face any additional difficulty in running the business just because she was a woman. She also reflected that in a stereotypical sense. She says, *"Society often associates such kitchen based work with women."* This was one of the observations she made while talking about her experience. Her mother-in-law was friendly and supportive and her family environment allowed her to manage the business more comfortably.

Through the business, she began to see herself differently. She gained confidence through handling online orders, communicating with customers, managing production and making business decisions. As orders increased, she also invested in more advanced and fancy baking equipment to improve her work. At present, she is thinking about expanding the business further. She says *"I do not want Spatula Songs to remain a home kitchen forever. My dream is to open a proper store, have a team working with me and build it into a brand that people truly recognise."* Hence, C's life experience shows how a woman who had earlier worked in the

corporate sector turned a domestic skill into a home-based business during the COVID 19 period.

CASE D

‘D’ is a 29 year old woman entrepreneur from Thiruvananthapuram who runs an online sari business called “Tassel and Twist.” She is part of a 2 membered nuclear family consisting of herself and her husband. Her husband works as an IT professional. She mentioned that she was a college student before starting her business. After completing her college, she got married which was followed by the COVID 19 period. This was her first business venture and she started it without having any background in trade or textile retail. She established this business in 2020 as a partnership venture with her sister who was a strong pillar in growing the business. Although her sister does not live with her, she is very actively involved in the business.

The venture began when movement was restricted and regular routines were disrupted. During this period, she had a lot of time to spare and developed an interest in starting something of her own. Hence, what began largely out of boredom and personal interest gradually became a meaningful source of income. She said, *“I always had a personal love for saris. I am a person who regularly wears sarees. Initially, I started the business out of boredom but when I saw it’s potential later on, I decided to invest myself more”*.

In the early stage, she invested her own money to purchase stock, take product photographs and set up the business online. She did not seek any external financial assistance. To reduce any kind of financial risk later, she adopted a more flexible model in which she began using catalogue photos shared by suppliers. In this arrangement, she does not always purchase stock in advance. Now, only when a customer places an order, she purchases the product and make arrangements for delivery. She sourced her products from places such as Surat, Jaipur, Delhi, Gujarat and Chennai which allowed her to offer a wide variety of authentic and handpicked saris.

During the pandemic, she faced several operational challenges related to supply delays, courier disruption, mobility restrictions and difficulties in obtaining products on time. Since the business depended entirely on digital communication and delivery systems, any delay in supply or transport had a direct effect on customer satisfaction. Therefore, packaging and timely communication were therefore important parts of her work. Another challenge she faced was

gaining trust of customers. 'D' says, *"Many customers were hesitant to buy sarees online because they could not touch or see the fabric directly. So gaining their trust was one of the most important things for me."*

However, using digital platforms were not a challenge for her. Her familiarity with smartphones, internet use and social media became an advantage during this period. Due to the presence of a Jio Fibre connection at home, she was able to maintain constant communication with customers and suppliers. She also said that watching YouTube videos and online pages of similar businesses helped her in understanding more about product selection, customer preferences, presentation and online selling methods. Since the pandemic restricted people from going outside, people were spending more time on social media platforms such as WhatsApp. She made use of this opportunity and started using these spaces for her business. 'D' started sharing product images and updates regularly through WhatsApp channels. She said that online mode helped the customers to view different collections comfortably from their homes and communicate with her regarding price, material, colour and availability.

'D' said she was able to manage the business alongside household responsibilities by planning her day carefully. Since she and her husband were the only members in the household, she did not have the responsibility of caring for a large family. Her husband supported her throughout the journey and her sister also played a significant role in the venture. Also, her loyal customers helped her in sustaining the business by placing repeat orders and recommending it to others.

Over time, the business brought several important changes in her life. One of the major achievements she mentioned is the development of a regular and expanding customer base which includes customers from outside Kerala and even abroad. She also feels that her Instagram presence has improved her visibility and strengthened her confidence as an entrepreneur. She said starting a business during a difficult time like COVID 19 pandemic taught her the importance of risk taking. She also added that maintaining trust with customers and ensuring consistency in service are the other key values she learned from the pandemic period. Customer feedback played an important role in improving the business, as their suggestions helped her in choosing the right products.

Her approach to business has also changed after the pandemic era. During lockdown, her business was small and informal as it was mainly dependent on family, friends, relatives and other acquaintances. She communicated and ran the business using a WhatsApp channel. After the pandemic, she became more professional in her presentation as she had started an Instagram

page to promote the business further. This was a right decision as many people visited and purchased her products. This led to expansion of her customer network beyond Kerala. She also understood that customer preferences varied according to age, occasion and changing fashion trends. She also noticed that festival seasons and wedding periods brought more enquiries and sales during the post pandemic period. The business was home based throughout the journey and continues to operate fully online. Her decision is to continue the business as an online venture rather than opening a physical shop. She said she is currently planning on expanding her product line by introducing more products such as nightwear and Kurtis.

The business has also greatly influenced how she viewed herself as a person. She shared that the business gave her a sense of purpose and productivity during the uncertain lockdown period. Before starting the venture, she considered herself as a person who had weak communication skills. Over time, she became more confident in speaking which was due to her regular communication with wholesalers for negotiating product prices. She said that dealing regularly with customers, making decisions and managing financial matters has boosted her confidence and practical skills. The business also made her financially independent and this led to changes in how her family and relatives viewed her. Her business began as a small home based sari venture and gradually developed into a stable online enterprise due to the support of digital tools, family encouragement and customer trust.

CASE E

‘E’ is a 35 year old woman entrepreneur from Thiruvananthapuram who runs a home-based cake shop called ‘Rolls n Bakes.’ She lives in a four member family consisting of herself, her husband, their child and her mother-in-law. She completed her B.Com and later pursued an MBA. Before becoming an entrepreneur, she worked as an HR professional in a builder’s construction company. Her husband is currently working as an HR professional. Although she had a stable professional career, her life changed significantly after marriage. She quit her job and decided to be a homemaker. This was followed by her pregnancy during which COVID pandemic came as an unexpected turning point that slowly led her towards entrepreneurship.

She described that managing motherhood during a global health crisis was emotionally overwhelming. She started spending long periods inside the home during lockdown like many others. She described this phase as boring and isolating. It was during this period that she thought about baking, which was something familiar and comforting to her. She said “*Baking*

was never just a skill for me. It was something that felt natural and comforting. When I started getting bored during the lockdown, I realised that this was only a way to spend time”.

During the lockdown, she began experimenting more seriously with cakes, desserts, processed foods and homemade delicacies. What she started as a way to spend time meaningfully at home gradually became something much bigger. Many family members, relatives and friends appreciated her products and encouraged her to continue. This made her realise that her passion could also become a business opportunity. She started ‘Rolls n Bakes’ in 2020 as a home based venture. The business initially focused on cakes but later expanded into homemade squashes such as lemon, orange, ginger, and mango along with snacks like cutlets, rolls and samosas. She also started preparing customised cakes and homemade delicacies according to customer’s demand. Even after the pandemic, she chose to continue the business from home rather than shift to a commercial bakery setup. According to her, the home based model gave her flexibility and allowed her to manage both family responsibilities and business together. Over time, her home slowly became a workspace where baking and family life existed together.

‘E’ started the business using her own personal savings. Since home baking required only a low initial investment, she was able to start her work on a small scale without much financial pressure. Family support played a very important role throughout her journey. She mentions that her husband supported her with packaging and deliveries goods whenever it was possible. Her mother-in-law also became an important support system by helping with childcare and household responsibilities. She mentions that she was grateful to get a mother-in-law who is supportive of her decisions and helping her in achieving it. Online platforms played a major role in the growth of her business from the beginning itself. Since she was already familiar with using social media and digital tools, she handled customer communication, online orders, digital payments and promotion by herself. Instagram became one of the main platforms through which customers discovered her products. She also promoted her work through WhatsApp status updates and online customer interactions. Photographs of cakes and customer reviews gradually helped the business to grow. Many customers became repeat buyers and recommended her products to others. Her regular customers included families ordering cakes for celebrations, birthday parties, family gatherings and hospital related orders.

She said that although the business started due to her passion, running it during the pandemic was not very easy. One of the biggest difficulties was delivering cakes to customers during lockdown restrictions. Since cakes and food items needed timely delivery and freshness,

transport delays caused her much stress and anxiety. She remembered situations where reaching customers on time was difficult because of movement restrictions. Sourcing certain raw materials from suppliers was another challenge she encountered. During certain times, baking supplies were not easily available and she often had to search extensively for ingredients. But she said these lessons helped her to plan better, maintain stock in advance, and organise orders more carefully. As time went by, the business gradually became much more than just a source of income.

During the post pandemic phase, 'E' realised that competition in the baking field had increased considerably. Many home bakers had emerged during the lockdown period and commercial bakeries also resumed normal functioning. She announced dessert hampers, promotional offers, flash sales and cake jars. Through customer interactions and online engagements, she developed stronger communication skills and greater confidence in herself. She felt that the business gave her a sense of independence and emotional satisfaction.

According to her, women often underestimate the value of their everyday skills even though such skills can become opportunities that could change their lives. At present, she hopes to continue improving her business while maintaining the flexibility of the home based model. She wants to strengthen her online presence and expand her customer network further. Her story reflects how skills and determination can gradually grow into a stable enterprise.

CASE F

'F' is a 30 year old woman entrepreneur from Thiruvananthapuram who runs a customised boutique and fashion business known as 'Jo Fashion Designing.' She is part of a three membered nuclear family consisting of herself, her husband and their son. She holds a DAMS qualification and had worked as a nurse in a hospital before starting the business. After becoming pregnant, she quit her job for childbirth and this was followed by the COVID 19 pandemic. Her husband who was working abroad also lost his job. She was already skilled and interested in tailoring. She used to occasionally make clothes for herself and for people around her as a hobby. She said, *"My husband returned from abroad due to the pandemic. I already knew how to do tailoring and used to make clothes for me and family. When my husband came back from abroad, I decided to turn tailoring to an income generating business"*.

The business was established in 2019 and was initially operated from home. In the early stage, 'F' mainly handled customised stitching works and took orders using online platforms. She said customers mainly approached her for bridal wear, customised dresses, altered garments and stitching works for weddings and family functions. All sort of discussions regarding measurements, designs and delivery details were managed through social media platforms. She mainly used Instagram for promoting the business. Over time, the page gained visibility and helped her attract more customers.

In the beginning, one of the major challenges she faced was gaining customer trust. During the pandemic period, many customers were cautious about online businesses because fake advertisements and unreliable sellers were common. She had to convince customers that her work was genuine and dependable. Delivering items on time and maintaining accurate measurements were very important factors in the case of bridal wear and customised garments. 'F' said, *"Even a small delay could create dissatisfaction among customers, so she I to manage time carefully and complete the work properly."* Another difficulty she faced during the lockdown period was sourcing materials. Travel restrictions and supply disruptions affected the availability of garments, accessories, threads and other tailoring materials. There were also financial concerns in the beginning because she started the business using her own money and did not seek any financial assistance. Even so, she continued the venture slowly with careful planning.

However, using digital platforms were not a challenge for her. She was comfortable using Instagram for promotion, communication and receiving customer enquiries. Over time, the platform became one of the most important reasons for the growth of the business. Customers often approached her after viewing her previous works online and their repeated orders gradually helped in expanding her customer network further. She mentioned that being a woman did not create any additional challenges for her in running the business. She was also able to manage household responsibilities alongside business activities due to the strong support of her husband. According to 'F', her husband's support helped her in moving forward.

However, the response from the rest of the family was not supportive and they remained uncertain about whether the venture would succeed at a time of many other business failures. Over time, when her business started to generate a steady income, her family began to recognise her effort and commitment. *She said "You are not only trying to run a business, you are also trying to prove that your decision was not wrong"*.

During the pandemic period, one of the most important strategies that 'F' adopted was to focus on customised orders rather than depending on regular sales. Since many customers were actively looking for trustworthy online services during lockdown, she concentrated on handling stitching and design work that could be managed from home. She gave more attention to individual customer preferences and used online communication to discuss measurements, delivery schedules and design details. Instead of trying to follow a large-scale business model in the beginning, she relied on a more practical approach that suited the restrictions of the pandemic period.

One of 'F's biggest achievement was the opening of her physical store after the pandemic. This was due to the expansion of her business. As the business expanded, she employed five workers. She employed one tailor, two female staff and two RE (rework) workers. Managing employees for the first time made her more responsible and helped her become more confident in handling business matters. Her earlier experience as a nurse also helped her in dealing with pressure and communicating patiently with customers and staff. At present, the business operates through two separate units. One unit focuses on readymade clothes while the other deals with customised garments and tailoring work. This helped her serve different categories of customers according to their needs. This led to expansion of customer base and creation of employment opportunities for others. She said her major customers are brides and people looking for customised work for weddings and special occasions.

'F' says that her business mind set has changed significantly after the pandemic. During the pandemic, the venture was survival oriented as her main goal was to generate some income and manage the household during a financially difficult period. But after the pandemic, she became more growth-oriented. She now wants to strengthen the brand, expand her customer base and improve the shop's presence. At present, her future plan is to expand the business further by hiring more staff and strengthening the existing setup. Overall, 'F' is a woman who transformed a personal skill into a stable source of livelihood during a difficult period.

CASE G

'G' is a 58 year old woman entrepreneur from Thiruvananthapuram who entered the food business industry during the COVID 19 period. Hers is a nuclear family which consists of her husband who is a retired central government employee and son who is a football coach. She

had studied TTC and was earlier running a kindergarten and nursery school named ‘Priyadarshini Nursery and Day care School in Peroorkada’. She had experience in managing children and the daily responsibilities of an educational institution. However, when COVID 19 struck, the kindergarten could no longer continue functioning. She said *“When lockdown occurred due to the pandemic, I had to close my kindergarten. My son also lost his job as a football coach. Since both of us lost our job, I started making pickles out of financial necessity”*.

She observed that many new home based food businesses were emerging during the lockdown period and suggested that the family could also make use of the resources they already had at home. This idea was strengthened by a small but important incident. Some of her son’s friends came to dine at their home and she packed some pickles for them. They liked it so much that the ‘G’ felt they might be able to turn this domestic skill into a small business. That moment became the starting point of the pickle venture.

The business started at home with the family working together in clearly divided roles. ‘G’ handled the cooking and preparation. Her son supported her in packing and organising the product. Her husband, a retired central government employee, took responsibility for delivery. A family friend also helped with marketing and social media handling. This division of labour was extremely important because the venture could not have been sustained if one person had to manage everything alone. At the time, the family was under pressure to replace lost income and the business became a shared response to that pressure. According to her, it was not only her business but a family survival effort. The home became both the site of production and the space from which the family collectively rebuilt its financial stability. At the beginning, the business was started with a small investment. The necessary ingredients like mangoes and other raw materials were already available so she did not have to spend money on that. She mainly needed to purchase bottles, labels and packaging materials. Since no large scale capital was required initially, she started the business cautiously and at a manageable level. She did not take loans in the beginning and relied on their own money. Before selling the product publicly, she first distributed small samples to families and students connected to nearby educational institutions. Feedback from these trial tastings helped ‘G’ in understanding what needed to be adjusted. This shows that the business did not only rely on blind optimism. She learned in the early stage itself that taste, texture, packaging and shelf life would become central to the future of the business.

The presence and absence of support system in maintaining business could be understood from her case. On one hand, her son became one of the strongest sources of motivation. He had the mind-set of a sports coach and often reminded her that failure is not the end but a step towards success. On the other hand, relatives did not support the business at the beginning. In fact, many mocked the idea of a pickle business during a time when established businesses were struggling. They questioned the wisdom of starting something new in the middle of a crisis. She said this was one of the most disappointing parts of her journey. But instead of internalising that negativity, she moved forward with the support of her son and husband. The family's ability to work as a unit was crucial in the early years. A family friend named Sujisha played a very important role in strengthening the business network by helping them build a network of customers and gain more visibility in the food industry. Another friend, Dr. Shahila, not only helped in the early stages but also suggested the name for the business and assisted with marketing and social media handling. Their support helped the business move beyond the home kitchen and into a larger customer network. 'G' says *"My business did not succeed because of one person alone. It grew because several people contributed at different stages. If they were not present, it would have been difficult for me to continue the venture."*

The business was also influenced by the practical realities of making pickle during the pandemic. She said *"At the beginning, I had difficulty in deciding how much product must be produced. I often miscalculated and ended up producing more than what was needed. Since the product had a short shelf life because I had not used any preservatives, I faced some initial losses"*. There was also the issue of leakage of pickles during transportation which was a big change to address in the initial phase. She had to ensure the bottles were packed tightly and sealed properly, otherwise a small packaging error could have led her business to loss.

'G' also made changes to the business in response to customer behaviour. During the COVID 19 period, most sales were local and delivery based. The family used to deliver to nearby customers as most people depended on home delivery due to movement being restricted due to lockdown. However, after the pandemic, the pattern changed. Customers began coming directly to their home to pick up the product. This shift made the business more visible and gave it a more established local presence. Over time, they also began sending bulk orders to the Gulf, which marked a major expansion from local scale. The product found a market among workers, hostellers, and families who preferred quality homemade pickles without chemical preservatives. She realised that customers value taste, consistency, and trust. According to her observation, once a customer notices even a slight change in taste or quality, they will not

return for the product. That is a risk she could not take. This understanding became one of the important lessons of the business. The business gradually began to succeed not only because of the product itself, but because of the disciplined way the family adapted to its demands. Her son took responsibility for social media and customer networking. Her husband managed deliveries. A family friend managed part of the online promotion. She explained that if she had to manage deliveries and social media on her own, the situation would have been very difficult.

One of her proudest moments was when the venture received recognition at the ‘Trivandrum Eat Awards 2025’, a food industry award event. ‘G’ says, *“It was not just an award, it was a validation of years of hard work and consistency.”* The business itself has continued to grow beyond its early expectations. It now reaches customers in different parts of India, including North Indian states and bulk orders are also sent to the Gulf. She is planning to introduce new varieties, including pickles with barbecue spices and other diversified flavours. They are also thinking about how to target specific customer groups such as working people and hostellers, who might prefer convenient, ready to use food items.

‘G’ now feels that she has made herself visible, both within the household and in the wider community. Her message to other women entrepreneurs is grounded in hard earned experience. She says, *“Other people can only offer opinions, but they do not know the depth of one’s difficulties and sorrows. Resilience means continuing even when there is mockery, making mistakes and learning from them and improving through experience.”* This line itself captures the essence of her journey very well.

CHAPTER 5: DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with seven women entrepreneurs from Thiruvananthapuram who started their businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic and sustained them beyond the pandemic period. The analytical process involved carefully reviewing each case narrative, identifying repeating patterns and organising the data into themes and sub-themes. The thematic analysis is conducted in alignment with the five specific research questions of the study. Each theme is further divided into sub-themes that capture the nuances within each area of analysis. The analysis draws upon the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's Theory of Capital, Giddens' Structuration Theory and the concept of reactive and proactive resilience to situate individual experiences within broader sociological structures.

The themes identified in this chapter are:

- 1) Antecedents of crisis induced entrepreneurship
- 2) Challenges in entrepreneurship
- 3) Mobilisation of various forms of capital
- 4) Changes in approach and future aspirations
- 5) Identity Transformation and Empowerment.

5.2 DISCUSSION

Theme 1: ANTECEDENTS OF CRISIS INDUCED ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Research Question 1: What were the various push factors that led women to establish their enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In this theme, the researcher attempts to understand how COVID-19 created the conditions for women to start a business during a crisis period. Although the pandemic was a difficult situation for many, the experiences of Cases A, B, C, D, E, F, and G made the researcher realise

that they saw something beyond threat. They started business within these disruptions and transformed these circumstances into opportunities. This theme focuses on how the respondents' turned disruption, financial insecurity, skills and everyday observations into entrepreneurial possibilities. This will be analysing using two distinct sub-themes which have emerged from across the cases - 'Necessity driven entrepreneurship and 'Opportunity driven entrepreneurship.'

Sub-theme 1.1: Necessity driven entrepreneurship

This sub-theme examines how sudden financial necessity pushed women into entrepreneurship during the pandemic. It looks into to the economic disruptions and household financial pressures that made business a necessity.

Case G used to run a kindergarten. Case G said, *"When lockdown occurred due to the pandemic, I had to close my kindergarten. My son also lost his job as a football coach. Since both of us lost our job, I started making pickles out of financial necessity"*. She entered the food business to support household economy. Her journey shows that pickle-making was not born out of ambition, but out of economic necessity. Hence, her home became the site of both production and survival. This situation perfectly demonstrates the reactive resilience (the immediate, survival-oriented response to crisis conditions) of women during the pandemic.

Case B explained that she started her venture due to changed circumstances that Covid 19 pandemic presented her with. She was a lawyer by profession till the pandemic occurred. Case B said, *"Due to Covid 19, my regular legal work slowed. My husband also came back from abroad during the pandemic. Due to financial needs, I thought of starting a business and discussed ideas with her husband."* This newly emerged financial disruption finally paved way for her dream to become a reality. She saw that the disruption could also be used as a period of rethinking work and income.

Case F also experienced a similar push. She had quit her nursing job due to pregnancy .When her husband also lost his job abroad during the pandemic, the household faced a severe financial gap. Case F said, *"I had quit my job as a nurse due to pregnancy. My husband returned from abroad due to the pandemic. Since I already knew how to do tailoring, I decided to turn that to a job. It would have been difficult for my husband to find a job quickly due to mobility*

issues.” Her entry into tailoring and fashion designing was due to the economic situation of family.

One important pattern observed across certain cases is that entrepreneurship emerged in response to necessity driven factors like loss of livelihood and unstable household income. They ‘pushed’ the women to start a business. The pandemic interrupted older routines in a way that made new forms of work a necessity. All the participants possessed skills that they never utilised before. They started dispatching it as a practical response to a changing world in which regular jobs, movement and income flows had become uncertain. The most striking fact is that the respondents did not remain passive in the face of this uncertainty. They responded to it by creating work for themselves and in some cases, even for their families. The emergence of a crisis-driven agency could be observed in these cases. This could be explained using Giddens’ idea of ‘agency’. This refers to individuals actively responding to changing social structures and creating new possibilities through their actions... In these cases, when the pandemic created instability, women used their agency to react to the situation. This is reflecting their ‘reactive resilience.’ Hence, their businesses became one way of regaining purpose during a period marked by uncertainty.

Sub-theme 1.2: Opportunity driven entrepreneurship

This sub-theme reveals how opportunity based factors operated alongside necessity based factors in initiating entrepreneurship. Opportunity driven entrepreneurship refers to the identification of opportunities that arose out of personal interests, everyday observations and individual motivations.

Case C had not considered starting a baking business until a particular incident has occurred. Case C said, *“My friend needed a cake for her anniversary and approached me as all bakeries were closed. People appreciated it and asked me why I wasn’t selling cakes. It was then I realised my passion could be something more.”* The positive response and encouragement from those who tasted the cake gave her the confidence to formalise her interest

Case D had started her enterprise due to the opportunity that the lockdown had presented. She already had a personal love for saris. She decided to turn this passion into a source of income after observing the growing tendency of people to shop online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Case D said, *“I always had a personal love for saris. I am a person who regularly wears sarees.*

Initially, I started the business out of market trend and boredom, but when I saw its potential later on, I decided to invest myself more". The absence of financial pressure made her entry into business less urgent and more choice-driven than other cases.

Case A is an excellent example of this transformation. Her venture began with an everyday observation of her friend finding it difficult to dispose vegetable waste from her shop. Case A said, *"During my daily walk, I noticed vegetable waste piling up in my friend's shop. My friend suggested to turn these into some kind of bio fertiliser. Since I had always loved experimenting on plants, I made a compost out of the vegetable waste after letting it ferment for 2-3 months. When the plants started getting healthier after applying the product, I understood the effectiveness of the product."* Hence, what she started as a household experiment eventually became an enterprise. Case A's story shows how a woman can convert ordinary household life into entrepreneurship due to her simple observation.

For Case E, the pandemic coincided with her pregnancy and she started feeling bored during this period. The confinement of lockdown gave her both the time and the push factor to experiment with baking, which she had learned from her mother and grandmother. Case E said, *"Baking was never just a skill for me. It was something that felt natural and comforting. When I started getting bored during the lockdown, I realised that this was a way to spend time"*. So, a form of emotional comfort gradually transitioned into an income generating business. Hence, she started using domestic spaces for entrepreneurial activity.

From the above cases, it could be understood that the crisis did not affect all the respondents in the same way. For some, the crisis created financial instability. For others, it created time, space and a break from ordinary routine that made business thinkable. This is the second major pattern which has emerged. It can be understood from these cases that each woman chose a specific business because of the skills she already carried. In every case, the interest or skill existed before the pandemic. Before the pandemic, most of these women had no structural need to monetise what they knew. The household was stable, roles were settled and domestic skills remained domestic. The pandemic disrupted that stability and made the personal pull which had always present. Using Giddens' concept of agency, it can be explained that these women did not simply discover new interests during the pandemic. They brought existing interests and capabilities to a changed situation and made active choices about how to use them. They acted on small signs, adjusted their ideas and allowed ordinary experience to become a source of

work. The domestic sphere which was considered separate from market became a space for them to start their venture.

THEME SUMMARY

This theme reveals that entrepreneurship during the pandemic was not due to a single factor. Neither the structural disruptions of the pandemic nor the personal interests of the women alone are sufficient to account for why these ventures began when they did and took the forms they did. It was the interaction between the two that created the conditions for entrepreneurship.

A deeper question runs beneath this theme: Why these women and why now? The answer points to the gendered structure of the household. In each case, the household had operated on a division in which the husband's income sustained the family and the woman's skills remained in the domestic sphere. That division was stable and unchallenged. However, the pandemic broke it. When the husband's employment was disrupted and primary income from was cut off, the household required a reorganisation. The woman's skills were the only option that could be immediately dispatched. It can be operated from home, convertible into income without significant investment and suited to the restrictions of lockdown. The family's support seen in the cases like the husbands taking over domestic tasks, mothers-in-law managing childcare and sons helping with packaging and delivery were not due to a sudden transformation of their attitude. It was a practical response to a changed household situation that required everyone to adjust. Giddens' concept of agency is central to understanding what happened next. These women did not passively absorb the disruption. They interpreted it through their own circumstances, identified what was within their reach and acted deliberately. That act of deciding to use their agency transformed financial necessity and observations into livelihood. In both cases, crisis became a turning point that encouraged action. If crisis had not occurred, the chances of these women entrepreneurs starting a business were limited. Hence, crisis served as an initial catalyst for them to start the business.

Theme 2: CHALLENGES IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Research Question 2: What were the various challenges that the women entrepreneurs faced while establishing their enterprise during the pandemic?

The second theme examines the various challenges women encountered while establishing their enterprise during COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges were not simply practical inconveniences. They were due to the structural limitations imposed by lockdown the social norms that shaped how women's work was perceived and validated. Two sub-themes emerged from the data- 'Operational and Logistical challenges', and 'Social, Gendered and Institutional barriers'.

Sub-theme 2.1: Operational and Logistical challenges

The early phase of entrepreneurship was marked by a set of practical difficulties that made establishing a business uncertain and demanding during the pandemic time.

Case C faced some of the most direct operational consequences of these disruptions. Case C said, *"Since I am running a cake business, my products are perishable and needs to be delivered quickly. There were some instances when ingredients did not arrive on time and I was forced to cancel the orders and refund the amount to the customers."* Electricity shortages further complicated her baking schedule. Each such instance risked losing the customer trust she was building. Her ability to maintain relationships despite these disruptions reflects an early form of reactive resilience.

Case E faced similar challenges with delivery during the lockdown period. She said, *"There were situations where reaching customers on time was difficult due to movement restrictions. As cakes were perishable, they could not be delayed as it ruins the customer experience."* Her response was to plan more carefully, maintain stocks of commonly used ingredients and communicate proactively with customers. These adaptations represent the early application of resilient problem-solving within conditions of structural constraint.

Case G encountered a specific set of challenges related to the nature of the product she was selling. Case G said, *"At the beginning, I had difficulty in deciding how much product must be produced. I often miscalculated and ended up producing more than what was needed. There was also leakage during transportation. Since the product had a short shelf life due to the absence of preservatives, I faced some initial losses"* These were lessons learned through trial and error rather than formal business training. This learning process showcases how women adapted extreme uncertain conditions through practical experience.

Case F faced challenges related to supply disruption and delivery. She had problems sourcing garments, accessories, threads and other tailoring materials because of travel restrictions and supply delays. Also, finishing and delivering the products in time was another issue she faced.

Case D faced challenges related to delayed couriers, supplier disruptions and the difficulty of maintaining delivery timelines when the supply chain was unreliable. Case D said, *“Everything depended on suppliers and couriers being on time. Since I had suppliers from Surat, Chennai, sometimes delivery was an issue due to lockdown. These delays in supply directly affected my customers.”* Since her business operated through digital platforms, any disruption in either domain had a direct impact on her business.

A striking common pattern across these cases was the difficulty in managing supply chains, gaining customer trust, procuring raw materials, delivering products and managing unstable market conditions under lockdown conditions. These operational and logistical challenges were not minor isolated inconveniences. They were structural difficulties that threatened the continuity of the businesses they had established during an unstable period. The respondents repeatedly had to prove that their products were reliable and worth trusting in markets that were adjusting to crisis conditions. Navigating these difficulties in the earlier stage laid foundations for their sustainable ventures later on.

Sub-theme 2.2: Social, Gendered and Institutional barriers

Beyond operational difficulties, the women in this study also encountered social and institutional barriers that reflected broader gendered norms and structural inequalities. Even though these barriers were not always visible, they were deeply felt through the social relationships interactions that shaped their early business experiences.

Gaining customer trust was a central challenge for several participants. In a period when online businesses proliferated rapidly, customers were cautious about relying on these business. Case D said, *“Many customers were hesitant to buy sarees online because they could not touch or see the fabric directly. So gaining their trust was one of the most important things for me.”* She responded by maintaining consistent communication, offering accurate product descriptions and building a reputation for timely delivery. This challenge of building trust through digital interactions was a unique experience of pandemic entrepreneurship.

Case F faced a similar challenge. SO, she had to manage measurements, delivery schedules and communication with great care. Case F said, *“Many customers were cautious about online businesses during the pandemic due to fake advertisements and unreliable sellers. She had to convince customers that her work was genuine and dependable. As many of my orders were bridal or customised pieces, even a small delay could lead to customer dissatisfaction.”*

Beyond customer scepticism, several women also faced resistance from their own families and communities. Case F’s husband was supportive, but her husband’s family remained uncertain about whether the venture would succeed. This scepticism created an additional emotional burden during an already difficult period. Case F said, *“When I told my parents I was going to start a business, my parents were against it. They questioned my abilities and told me all other business were failing. But my husband stood with me. I was not only trying to run a business, but also trying to prove that my decision was not wrong”.*

Case G faced even more severe backlash. She said, *“I faced severe backlash. Many relatives openly mocked the idea of starting a pickle business at my age and this time. This was one of the most disappointing parts of my journey. I did not listen to them and drew strength from my son’s encouragement”.* The experience of being humiliated followed by eventual recognition was one of the most powerful expressions of resilience.

The case of Nasira, Case A’s friend, further illustrates how family resistance could entirely prevent a woman from entering entrepreneurship. Case A said, *“While my husband’s support enabled my business growth, the lack of support from her husband became a barrier for Naseera.”* When she accompanied her friend to exhibitions and events, the husband would come there, make issues and leave with her. This made her quit from the business in the initial stage itself.

At the institutional level, Case A’s experience with the Krishi Bhavan reflects how women entrepreneurs from non-elite backgrounds face structural disadvantages even when their products are genuinely innovative *“When I approached Krishi Bhavan with my product, they did not believe that it was made entirely from vegetable waste. They questioned my claims and told me that I could not sell or display it. I visited their office three times, but I did not receive any support. So I continued selling it on my own and let the product’s results speak for themselves”.*

Case E’s experience revealed a subtler form of gender coding. Case E said, *“Society often associates such kitchen-based work (baking) with women.”* Even though she did not describe

gender as a direct obstacle in her own case, the statement itself shows how baking is socially imagined as an extension of women's domestic role. This matters because it shows how some forms of women's entrepreneurship are welcomed only because they appear to fit existing gender expectations.

These social, gendered and institutional barriers reveal that the challenges of pandemic entrepreneurship were not gender-neutral. Women who built enterprises in domestic spaces without any formal business backgrounds faced additional layers of credibility. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital is relevant here. These women initially lacked any kind of symbolic capital like such as institutional affiliation, prior business credentials and official recognition that would have made their ventures credible to external observers. Their resilience lay in their ability to build this symbolic capital from scratch. What these cases collectively show is that social, gendered and institutional barriers were not occasional setbacks. They were embedded conditions that these women had to navigate alongside their day-to-day business operations. Sceptical customers, doubting relatives, mocking communities and unresponsive institutions were barriers that demanded an additional layer of effort from women entrepreneurs. The fact that they persisted despite these pressures is itself a significant expression of resilience.

THEME SUMMARY

The two sub-themes reveal that the challenges faced by these women entrepreneurs during the pandemic operated on multiple levels at the same time. At the practical level, disrupted supply chains, unreliable deliveries and unstable market conditions made the basic functioning of business extremely difficult. At the social level, sceptical customers, doubting families, mocking communities and unresponsive institutions created additional pressures that went beyond ordinary business risk. What is significant is that these two layers of challenge were not experienced separately. They were reinforcing each other. This compounding nature of challenges makes their persistence significant. Their ability to continue despite these conditions is what gives the concept of resilience its full meaning in this study.

Theme 3: MOBILISATION OF VARIOUS FORMS OF CAPITAL

Research Question 3: What were the operational strategies, resources, and support systems utilized by the women entrepreneurs to maintain their business operations across both the pandemic and post-pandemic phases?

The researcher attempts to understand the mobilisation of various forms of capital by the respondents to maintain business operations during and after the pandemic. This theme is central to the study because the resilience of women only became operational due to the mobilisation of capital. Bourdieu's Theory of Capital which talks about utilisation of economic, social, and cultural capital was used as the theoretical lens for this analysis. Three sub-themes emerged from the analysis which are 'mobilisation of social capital through family and community networks', 'mobilisation of cultural capital through skills and digital competency' and 'mobilisation of economic capital through savings, family financial support and reinvestment decisions.

Sub-theme 3.1: Mobilisation of Social capital

This sub-theme examines the role of social networks including family members, friends, and institutional connections in enabling women entrepreneurs to start and sustain their ventures during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The role of the family was visible but varied. Case A's husband was not a passive bystander, and actively helped her in the business. He helped collect the organic fertilizer, accompanied her to exhibitions and stood by her when she doubted her business. Her son helped her finance the business initially and helped her to learn using social media platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram. A said, *"My husband's support helped my business growth, but the lack of support from my friend Nasira's husband became a barrier for her to join the business."* The contrast between her own experience and that of her friend Nasira shows that family support was a structural determinant of whether women's entrepreneurship becomes possible at all.

Case B also received immense support from her family. She said, *"My husband took charge of household responsibilities and my children also adjusted to my busy routine and started taking care of many things by their own without depending on me."* This really helped her in focusing on her business.

Case G's business had family's involvement from the beginning itself. The family operated during the pandemic with a clear division of labour. Case G said, *"I handled cooking and preparation, my son managed packing, my husband handled delivery and a family friend helped me with social media marketing."* This collective mobilisation of family and friend networks allowed each person to contribute according to their ability. Their home became a site of collective economic action.

Case E's mother-in-law was her greatest support system as she helped with childcare and household responsibilities, assisted with cake preparation and packaging when she was busy. Case E said, *"Managing both home and business would have been much more difficult without the support of my family members."* This statement points to a gendered dimension of social capital. For women managing enterprises within homes while performing household labour at the same time, family support is not just helpful, but determines whether the business can function at all.

Similarly, Case C's mother-in-law helped her with household responsibilities, parents purchased baking equipment and her husband helped her in packing and delivering her products. Case C said, *"Without my family handling things at home, I could not have managed the orders and the kitchen at the same time. Their support was what made the business practically possible."*

It could be understood from these cases that family support was not only practical, but also emotional. Hence, in these cases, family labour functioned as a form of social capital.

Friends also played an important role in several cases. It was Case A's friend Naseera, who instilled the idea of business on A's mind. Case A said, *"It was Naseera who first opened my eyes to the possibility. She was the one who noticed the waste and suggested me to make something out of it"*.

Case B's friends served as early product testers, provided feedback that helped her in refining the taste and quality of her food products. Their networks also brought in new customers and extended the reach of the business beyond the immediate household.

Case G's friend Sujisha played a pivotal role in building the customer network and expanding the business's visibility in the food industry. Another friend, Dr. Shahila, suggested the brand name and assisted her with marketing. Case G said, *"My business did not succeed because of one person alone. It grew because several people contributed at different stages."*

Institutional networks like Kudumbashree also contributed to the expansion of social capital in the post-pandemic phase. Cases A and B both registered their units with Kudumbashree, which provided them with wider market access and connections to other entrepreneurs. Case B was selected for the Kudumbashree-IIMK Live incubation and mentorship programme which she described as extremely valuable. Case B said, *“Being selected for the Kudumbashree-IIMK mentorship programme was itself a recognition. The mentorship I received there helped my business a lot”*. Hence, institutional support was also a major social capital that helped the women in their journey.

Across all seven cases, social capital was the commonly cited pillar of resilience by women entrepreneurs. Bourdieu defined social capital as the *‘aggregate of resources linked to membership in a durable network of relationships.’* In the context of this study, this refers to immediate family, friends and institutional networks like Kudumbashree. The trust, labour and encouragement from family, friends and institutional networks like translated directly into business operations, market access and the emotional resilience needed to persist through uncertainty. Hence, these personal connections performed functions that financial capital alone could not have served. From the earliest days of the pandemic to the post-pandemic phase, these networks remained an active presence throughout their entrepreneurial journeys.

Sub-theme 3.2: Mobilisation of Cultural capital

This sub-theme examines how women entrepreneurs mobilised cultural capital in the form of personal skills, practical knowledge and digital competencies to initiate and sustain their businesses during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Case A carried a deep personal interest in plants and used to experiment with organic materials at home. She had no formal training in agriculture or business, yet this hands-on curiosity became the foundation on which the business was built. Case A’s relationship with digital technology evolved gradually. Case A said, *“In the beginning, I did not know how to use UPI or any of these online tools. It was my son who sat with me and helped me learn. He taught me how to do UPI payments and social media marketing”*. This trajectory from digital illiteracy to digital literacy shows that cultural capital can be acquired through learning.

Case B entered the food business without any prior experience in the industry. But the professional competency she had built as a lawyer became her cultural capital. Her legal

training had given her the ability to think in a structured manner, follow procedures, manage people and make decisions under pressure. All of these translated into skills she needed for running her business. She was comfortable with digital tools and used them to manage business communication and operations. Case B said, *“Every woman should have at least one skill, because skill opens the door to opportunity.”*

Case C’s cultural capital was the baking skill she had learned informally by watching her mother and grandmother at home over many years. This observational learning became the technical foundation of her venture. She was also already comfortable with digital platforms before the business began. She used Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp actively from the start to promote products, post photographs and communicate with customers.

Case D’s most important form of cultural capital was her digital fluency. She was already familiar with smartphones, social media platforms and internet use before the pandemic began. This comfort with technology became a direct advantage when the business required a fully online presence. She used her home internet connection to maintain regular communication with suppliers across different states. She said, *“I educated myself by watching YouTube videos of similar businesses to understand product selection, presentation and selling methods. This self-taught learning expanded my existing knowledge.”*

Case E’s cultural capital was the baking skill she had learned informally over the years. When the lockdown gave her time to bake more seriously, these skills became the starting point of the venture. She also knew how to handle various digital tools. She managed all customer communication, order handling, digital payments and promotion through Instagram and WhatsApp on her own.

Case F’s cultural capital was her tailoring skill, which she had practised as a personal hobby for years before the pandemic. She said, *“I used to stitch clothes for myself and for those around me, but had never considered this as a commercial possibility. It was only when financial necessity arose, I started to think of about utilising my skills”*. She used Instagram from the very beginning to promote her work, manage enquiries, and communicate with customers about measurements, designs, and delivery timelines. The platform became central to build her customer base.

Case G’s cultural capital was the culinary knowledge she had built through decades of domestic food preparation. She had cooked for her family and prepared pickles at home for years, without ever thinking of this as something marketable. What made her recognise the

commercial potential of this skill was the enthusiastic response of her son's friends to the pickles she had prepared for dinner.

Across the cases, it is evident that cultural capital which was accumulated through domestic practice, personal interest and lived experience has functioned as the primary resource with which these women entered entrepreneurship. None of them possessed formal business training. But each of them carried a form of practical knowledge that became the operational foundation of their venture. Bourdieu noted that cultural capital can be used to generate economic capital under the right conditions. This conversion dynamic is visible across multiple cases. Skills that had previously been part of everyday domestic or personal life were mobilised and translated into a source of livelihood. Knowledge on usage of digital platforms further enhanced their cultural capital by g

Sub-theme 3.3: Mobilisation of Economic capital

This sub-theme examines how women entrepreneurs managed their financial resources by relying on personal savings and family contributions and reinvested their earnings strategically to grow their ventures.

Case A mentioned she dispatched her finances strategically. Case A says, *"I started the business with very little investment. My main expenses were for bottles and labels. I used my personal savings and did not take any bank loan or financial assistance. Later, when the business became stable and started growing after the pandemic, I took a loan of twenty lakh rupees and built a small manufacturing unit attached to my house."*

Case B began the business entirely with her own money and made a conscious decision to avoid borrowing until the venture had established a stable footing. Case B said, *"Initially, I did not want to take financial risks before the business had become stable. My approach was to build the venture gradually, observe the market and scale up once the foundation was strong. But right now, the venture has become large scale. I am considering taking loan to expand further."*

Case C began the business from her own kitchen with equipment that was already available at home. Hence, her initial cost was minimal. She said, *"My parents contributed by purchasing additional baking equipment as the orders grew. I did not seek any financial or institutional*

assistance at any point. The business was built entirely through personal resources and family support, without depending on any loans.”

Case D started the business using her own money and did not seek any external financial assistance at any stage. She said, *“To manage the risk of holding unsold stock, I adopted a flexible sourcing arrangement and purchased products from suppliers only after a customer had placed an order. This approach helped in reducing financial risk.”* The decision to remain financially cautious while still growing the business steadily reflected a clear understanding of risk management.

Case E started the venture using her own personal savings. She said, *“Since home baking required only a modest initial investment and the basic equipment was already available at home, I was able to begin without taking on any financial burden.”*

Case F began the business using her own money and did not seek any financial assistance in the early phase. She said, *“I focused on customised stitching orders that could be managed from home. This kept my costs low. As the business grew and income became more regular in the post-pandemic phase, I reinvested by opening a physical store and employed five workers.”* This expansion from home to a physical establishment with staff is a perfect example of usage of accumulated economic capital.

Case G began with a very small initial investment. She said, *“Raw mangoes and other raw materials were already available at home. This limited my expenses only to bottles, labels and packaging materials. I did not take any loan and relied entirely on my own personal savings.”* The business was sustained in its early phase through collective family effort where each member contributing their labour. This allowed the venture to function without external financial support.

The pattern of economic capital management across these cases reflects a deliberate resilience strategy. All of them started the business with their own personal savings. They did not invest much initially and avoided taking loans. When businesses grew and income became more reliable in the post-pandemic phase, strategic reinvestment became the next step. They started taking loans and scaled up the business by establishing new shops and employing more staff. This movement from careful conservation of limited capital to purposeful reinvestment illustrates the ‘convertibility of capital’. According to Bourdieu, *‘Each form when mobilised effectively can generate the conditions for acquiring further resources and consolidating a more durable economic position.’* This is seen across the cases. Economic capital generated

was used to acquire further resources, expand operations and consolidate the business beyond its initial survival phase.

THEME SUMMARY

This theme shows that resilience is not only dependent on personal strength, but also on the ability to identify and use available resources efficiently. It reveals that social capital, cultural capital and economic capital functioned not as separate resources, but as an interrelated system. When Social capital provided emotional support, cultural capital provided skills and knowledge and economic capital provided the financial base. This mobilisation did not happen all at once. Social support came first, then skills were put to use, then finances were managed and eventually the business picked up. These women efficiently accumulated various forms of capital to gain symbolic capital later on.

Theme 4: CHANGES IN APPROACH AND FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

Research Question 4: How did the women entrepreneurs' strategic approaches and future aspirations evolve as they transitioned from pandemic to post pandemic era?

In this theme, the researcher attempts to trace how the strategic approaches and future ambitions of the women entrepreneurs shifted as they moved from the difficult conditions of the pandemic into the more stable, but competitive post-pandemic environment.

Case B's experience illustrates this transition clearly. During the pandemic, she received many online orders for fresh cut chicken, fish and frozen products because physical shops were closed. Just before the post pandemic era, she noticed that the demand for these products declined as shops reopened and customers went back to physical shop just like before. She observed this shift and understood that her original business model would not sustain growth in this new environment. So, she decided to diversify her product line. Case B said, "*After the pandemic, I shifted from retail to wholesale goods and introduced delivery services through Instamart and Blinkit. The products are now available in Lulu hypermarkets across India. I also want to collaborate with other Kudumbashree women entrepreneurs who produce good products so that we can work together and widen our market reach.*" This strategic idea to shift from perishable retail products to preserved wholesale goods and the idea to include

delivery across India through Lulu Hypermarkets and services like Instamart and Blinkit are perfect example of proactive resilience. She did not wait for the market to change and then react. Instead, she anticipated the change and repositioned accordingly. Beyond this, her future aspirations are collaborative in nature. This aspiration reflects a sense of social responsibility alongside individual ambition.

Case C faced a similar post-pandemic challenge. She anticipated that the baking sector will become more competitive and saturated as many home bakers who had started during the lockdown continued to function after the pandemic. Rather than competing on the same terms, she diversified her products and services by introducing flash sales, dessert hampers, cake slices and cake jars. These innovations addressed customers who wanted smaller, more affordable or more convenient baked goods. She also began participating in community food events like 'Eat Trivandrum' to increase visibility and reach new customers. Her strategy of product diversification and community engagement transformed her simple home baking venture into a more visible and diverse enterprise. Case C said, *"I do not want Spatula Songs to remain a home kitchen forever. My dream is to open a proper store, have a team working with me and build it into a brand that people truly recognise."* This aspiration to transition from home-based to storefront business shows the development of her entrepreneurial identity and desire to obtain a more visible space in the formal economy.

Case A incorporated a lot of changes after the pandemic. She was involved in formalisation, market expansion and product diversification. Case A said, *"I took license and registered with Kudumbashree after the pandemic. I even opened two shops that have courier and delivery services. I also created an Instagram page and website to increase visibility. I expanded the product line from bio-fertiliser to a full range of organic garden products including manure, soil mix, seeds, vegetable plants, home garden kits and garden tools. Due to these efforts, the products are now available across India. I am currently planning to expand to GCC countries and Europe"*. This trajectory from a home experiment to a nationally recognised brand with diversified products and widening markets represents proactive resilience in its most developed form.

Case D also evolved her business from an informal WhatsApp-based retail operation into a more professional Instagram-driven enterprise with customers across India and abroad. She recognised that festival seasons and wedding periods brought more orders and started planning product introduction around these cycles. She decided to remain an online-only business as she

prioritised flexibility and lower workloads. Case D said, *“I started with saris because that was my passion. But now I want to expand into other products like Kurtis, nightwear, baby clothes”*. This shows her intention to grow beyond the sari brand into a broader fashion retail brand.

Case F initially started a home-based tailoring venture during the pandemic. In the beginning, she mainly relied on customised stitching orders received through Instagram and online communication. But as customer trust increased and repeated orders became more common, she decided to handle larger workloads, manage workers and maintain delivery schedules. Hence, her business shifted from a small home-based activity into a more organised shop having 5 workers and two business units after the pandemic. Her present future aspirations are consolidating in nature. Case F said, *“I am not rushing into expansion. First I want to make what I have stronger. A solid foundation matters more to me right now than how fast I grow”*. This careful approach reflects an understanding that sustainable growth requires solidifying the foundation before extending reach.

Case G made an important strategic shift to focus on bulk orders and expand geographical area covered. Case G said, *“I am already thinking about new flavours. The business has shown me that there is more possibility than I imagined when I first started packing pickles at home”*. During the pandemic, sales were local and delivery-based. After the pandemic, customers began coming directly to the home to purchase which gave the business greater local visibility. Bulk orders to Gulf countries was a significant geographical expansion as it opened a new customer group which includes migrant workers and Gulf-based Keralites. This shows that she replaced her survival mind-set with an innovative mind-set. In the future, she plans to target specific customer segments like working people and hostellers with convenient, ready-to-use pickle products. This is the type of strategic planning which was not present when she first began packaging pickle in bottles during the lockdown.

The transition from the pandemic period to the post-pandemic period required women entrepreneurs to rethink their business strategies. During the lockdown, their primary challenge was to survive under critical conditions. As the pandemic ended and markets reopened, they faced new challenges like increased competition from other home-based businesses that had emerged during the lockdown and the return of physical shops that reduced demand for certain products. They understood that they need to develop a more scalable business model for their survival. So, the women began to think beyond immediate survival and started adopting new

strategies and long-term entrepreneurial aspirations centred on expansion, diversification and business stability.

When analysing these narratives, a profound shift is seen in how these women negotiated crisis and opportunity. By connecting these empirical findings to the theoretical framework, it can be said that there is a shift from 'reactive resilience' to 'proactive resilience'. What is significant here is that the women did not remain confined within the temporary 'survival mode' created by the pandemic. Although the crisis acted as the initial catalyst, their journeys evolved after the pandemic only due to their continuous strategic adaptations. Just before the post- pandemic era, the women started analysing customer behaviour, recognising market shifts and planning strategically for long-term sustainability. Their thinking gradually moved beyond immediate income generation towards business expansion. This was because they had realised their potential. This gradual understanding of the market and future-oriented thinking also shows that they have accumulated cultural capital. The respondents started gaining more knowledge, practical business understanding and greater confidence through their engagement with the market. Their transition from reactive to proactive resilience was not automatic and continuous. It required women to continuously read the market, learn from their experiences and make deliberate strategic decisions. These aspirations shows that the pandemic was not simply a crisis that the women overcome. It was a transformative experience that showed them what was possible for themselves and their business. The proactive resilience reflected in their future visions is grounded in practical knowledge, social networks and self-confidence that they gained while building a business from scratch under the most challenging conditions.

THEME SUMMARY

Overall, this theme shows that the women did not remain still after they established a business. Their activities evolved from crisis-driven survival activities into growth-oriented activities. The respondents expanded their ventures, refined their products, read the market more carefully and began thinking in terms of sustainability. Their stories shows that entrepreneurship during and after the pandemic was not static. It was a constantly evolving process shaped by learning, adaptation and expanding ambitions.

Theme 5: IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Research Question 5: How does running a business shape the identity of women entrepreneurs?

The fifth and final theme discusses the most significant consequence of entrepreneurship for the women in this study which is ‘the transformation of their identities.’ In this theme, the researcher attempts to understand how the entrepreneurial journeys of the respondents influenced the way they view themselves within family and society and the way they are being perceived by the society. Drawing from the experiences of Cases A, B, C, D, E, F, and G, two sub-themes have emerged which includes the ‘changes in self-perception’ as they moved from homemaker to entrepreneur and the ‘changes in social perception’ as they accumulated symbolic capital through their business.

Sub-theme 5.1: Changes in self-perception

This sub-theme examines the ways in which participants’ perceptions of themselves evolved through their entrepreneurial experiences.

Case A’s transformation is worth mentioning. Case A said, *“I was a timid person before this journey. I did not know how to speak in front of people. Due to the demands of the business I had to speak at public events and that changed me.”* This was due to the demands presented by varying situations. She now speaks at exhibitions, explains her products publicly, interacts with officials and presents herself with visible confidence. She has won approximately fifty medals and awards, including district-level, state-level and national-level recognition. Her product even entered the India Book of Records in 2025. These achievements were not merely external honours. They reconstructed her self-understanding. She is no longer only a housewife. She is now a recognised entrepreneur and someone whose work creates employment for others.

Case D also described a similar trajectory. Before starting the business, she considered herself a person with weak communication skills. Case D says, *“Dealing regularly with wholesalers and customers, making decisions and managing financial matters has boosted my confidence and communication skills.”* Over time, what had been seen as a weakness became her professional strength. Hence, business became a space of situated learning that produced new competencies and new self-understandings.

Case B moved through several identities such as homemaker, lawyer, and entrepreneur. She mentioned that entrepreneurship gave her a different kind of freedom from her previous job. Case B said, *“Before this, I was a lawyer advising people from the outside. Through the business, I became someone who was able to create value, livelihoods and practical solutions”*. She consider this as a more complete form of contribution than legal service. She believed she could help people beyond solving their legal disputes and transform their lives. In her case, entrepreneurship did not replace her earlier professional competence. Rather, it expanded her competence into a broader social role.

For Case E, entrepreneurship helped her rediscover herself during a difficult phase of motherhood amidst the global pandemic. She had quit her professional career after marriage and the pandemic had confined her to a domestic space she found boring and isolating. Through baking and the gradual growth of ‘Rolls n Bakes,’ she found what she described as a ‘different sense of confidence and purpose.’ Case E said, *“Entrepreneurship was a journey that transformed the way I viewed myself. What began as a small personal interest during a difficult period slowly became an important part of my identity.”* The business returned her sense of self that she had partially lost during the transition from professional to homemaker. Customer appreciation ‘deeply motivated her’ because it meant that her skills were recognised and valued by others. This external validation helped in changing her own self-assessment.

Case C’s identity transformation also involved a return to a professional setting after a period of domestic withdrawal. She had left her career as an HR at Mercedes Benz Research and Development after marriage and childbirth. Through ‘Spatula Songs,’ she rebuilt a professional identity on her own terms by combining her knowledge of baking with her earlier profession of business management. Case C said, *“Through the business, I began to see myself differently. I gained confidence through handling online orders, communicating with customers, managing production and making business decisions.”* The business allowed her to occupy multiple identities at the same time. She played the role of a mother, homemaker and entrepreneur, rather than being confined to a single domestic role.

One of the most striking and repeated observation from across the respondents is the profound shift in how they perceived themselves as a result of entrepreneurship. Before starting the business, several participants identified themselves as passive, dependent and confined to social roles. However, entrepreneurship became a turning point that replaced how they viewed themselves with a growing sense of capability, agency and purpose. After starting their

business, they started to see themselves in a new light as businesswomen and decision-makers, and not just as wives, mothers, homemakers, or former employees. These transformations in self-perception are not just by-products of business activity. They were structurally produced through entrepreneurship as a social practice.

Sub-theme 5.2: Changes in social perception

The second sub-theme discusses ‘changes in social perception,’ which refers to the outward dimension of identity transformation.

Case G’s journey offers one of the most apt examples of this kind of transformation. She explained that her close relatives were dismissive of her starting a business during a time like covid. This caused much emotional distress for her. However, these relatives who had initially mocked her pickle business became buyers and admirers as the business proved its worth. Case G said, *“It was not just about sales, it was more about recognition after rejection. The social environment that once doubted me now began to value me.”* This reversal from mockery to admiration had a powerful significance for her that went beyond mere satisfaction. In this case, symbolic capital is being visibly accumulated. The same person, the same business is now being positioned very differently within her social network. Case G received an award for the best food category at the 'Trivandrum Eat Awards 2025'. Case G said, *“I won an award for the best food category at the 'Trivandrum Eat Awards 2025'. It was not just an award, it was a validation for years of hard work and consistency.”* For women like ‘G’ who is operating business from domestic spaces without any formal credentials, recognitions like these provide a sense of legitimation that their earlier social positions had not offered. Hence, awards, exhibitions and public recognition convert the accumulated effort and quality of a business into publicly visible symbolic capital.

Case A’s experience also strongly reflects this transformation. Case A said, *“I have won around fifty medals and awards, including state and national-level recognitions. I even entered the India Book of Records in 2025. All of these recognitions made the social environment that once doubted me to value me”*. She explained that these achievements helped in establishing a public identity that goes beyond her immediate community. Earlier, people knew her through her domestic role, but now they recognised her through her business, products, and achievements. A qualitative shift in social recognition from ascriptive (who one is by birth or marriage) to achieved (what one has accomplished) can be seen here.

Case F was discouraged by her parents when she decided to start a business. But their attitude changed after seeing that the business brought home money. She observed that her social status changed as the business grew. This was because people began to identify her not only as a homemaker, but as a woman entrepreneur who had successfully built something of her own. Case F said, *“Entrepreneurship gave me a public identity that domestic life alone could not have provided”*.

Case B received the Best Venture Award from Kudumbashree unit in Thiruvananthapuram and was selected for the Kudumbashree-IIMK Live incubation and mentorship programme. She considered this recognition a great honour as it confirmed that her work had social value and broader significance beyond income generation. She also demonstrated a sense of empowerment that extended beyond personal achievement to include a responsibility toward other women. Case B said, *“When women like us succeed, it does not only change how others see us, it shows other women what is possible.”* This also shows that once accumulated symbolic capital can also function as social capital for others.

Case D gained financial independence after starting her business. Before starting the business, she was economically dependent on her husband. The business changed this dynamic. Case D said, *“The business also made me financially independent and has led to changes in how her family and relatives viewed her.”* Hence, financial gain not only made her independent, but also changed her social positioning within the family and in the wider social network.

From the above cases, it can be understood that the women's entrepreneurial identities were not only shaped through internal confidence and personal satisfaction, but also through external recognition from family, customers, institutions, awards, social networks and the wider community. As their business became more visible and appreciated, the women gradually experienced a transformation in social status, public recognition and self-worth. This recognition gave public value to the labour that was once confined within domestic spaces and helped convert their efforts into socially acknowledged achievements. Hence, 'entrepreneurship is a vehicle of social mobility' that does not only generate income, but also produces new social positions and new forms of recognition.

The women in this study moved from social invisibility (as homemakers, mothers) to social visibility (as entrepreneurs, award recipients, and community contributors.) This can be explained using Bourdieu's framework of capital. The social, economic and cultural capital they have accumulated over time gets converted to symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu,

‘Symbolic capital refers to the prestige, honour and recognition that comes from socially valued achievements.’ The accumulation of symbolic capital through entrepreneurship gradually repositioned themselves within the social field. But, this accumulation of symbolic capital is never completely personal. It shifts the position of the individual within the social field and alters the possibilities available to them and to those around them.

THEME SUMMARY

Across all seven cases, it became evident that entrepreneurship is not just an economic activity, but also a personal process of self-redefinition. These women who previously identified themselves as homemakers, mothers and professionals started to see themselves differently as entrepreneurs, decision-makers and socially recognised contributors. When women take on the role of entrepreneur by making decisions, managing resources, interacting with markets, receiving public recognition, they step into a subject position that carries social weight and symbolic value. Using Bourdieu’s framework, this transformation can be understood as the accumulation of symbolic capital, which brought changes in how these women were perceived by others and how they perceived themselves. Thus, the theoretical framework identifies identity transformation and empowerment as the final outcome of the resilience cycle.

5.3 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has presented a thematic analysis of the lived experiences of seven women entrepreneurs from Thiruvananthapuram who started and sustained businesses during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. After data collection, the researcher read the case descriptions thoroughly, identified code and patterns from it. These were developed into five themes and 10 sub-themes which were aligned with the specific research questions of the study.

The first theme explains that circumstances that led the women to start ventures during the COVID- 19 pandemic were either necessity or opportunity driven in nature. The second theme discusses the operational, logistical, social or institutional challenges these women encountered while establishing their businesses during pandemic conditions. The third theme revealed how the mobilisation of social, cultural, and economic capital helped them maintain the business during and after the pandemic. The fourth theme traced the transition from reactive to proactive resilience during the post-pandemic era when women adapted their strategies and built

ambitious long-term visions for their businesses. The fifth theme captures the most significant consequence of entrepreneurship which is the identity transformation and empowerment in women due to the accumulation of symbolic capital. This has made women confident, socially recognised and empowered agents.

Hence, these themes demonstrate that women's entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic was a deeply sociological phenomenon. It was shaped by structural forces, enacted through individual agency, sustained by social relationships and brought identity transformation and empowerment. The theoretical framework which has integrated Bourdieu's Theory of Capital, Giddens' Structuration Theory and the concept of reactive and proactive resilience has provided the analytical tools to understand how these processes unfolded and what they have produced. The findings of this chapter will inform the discussion of major findings, suggestions, and conclusions presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the major findings of the study. The findings are based on the thematic analysis discussed in the previous chapter and on the empirical material gathered through in-depth interviews with seven women entrepreneurs from Thiruvananthapuram. The findings are informed by the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's Theory of Capital, Giddens' Structuration Theory and the concepts of reactive and proactive resilience. They emerge from the repeating patterns identified across the five themes and their sub-themes. Each finding is presented in relation to the study's research questions. The chapter then offers practical suggestions for policymakers, institutions and the wider social environment. It concludes with a reflection on the study's overall significance and its contribution to understanding women's entrepreneurship, resilience, and identity in a time of crisis.

6.2 MAJOR FINDINGS

Finding 1: External adversity of the pandemic has resulted in crisis induced entrepreneurship among women

The COVID-19 pandemic was not the main factor that led to business initiation among women. Instead, it functioned as an initial trigger that created conditions adverse to entrepreneurial activity among women. The adversity brought about by the pandemic manifested in multiple forms. Hence, crisis-induced entrepreneurship among the respondents took shape along two distinct pathways. For a section of the participants, financial necessity due to sudden unemployment and economic hardship was the factor that necessitated the pursuit of alternative livelihoods. For others, the physical confinement and boredom imposed by pandemic restrictions facilitated the identification of unexplored opportunities. In all the cases, the skills and competencies required for entrepreneurial engagement were already possessed by these women prior to the pandemic. They did not utilise it till now. Hence, the external adversity did not generate new capabilities, but rather served as a sufficient disruption to the existing status quo and compelled these women to apply skills that was not early utilised.

Finding 2: Women's agency during the pandemic was an expression of their deeply internalised sense of responsibility towards their family.

The entrepreneurial agency exercised by women during the pandemic cannot be understood in isolation from the broader sociocultural context in which these women were raised. From an early age, the women were moulded into gender roles knowingly or unknowingly. This slowly positioned them as the primary caregivers and nurturers within the family unit. Over time, these externally imposed expectations become deeply internalized and shaped the very identity and value system of women. It is this internalized sense of responsibility towards the family that explains why women chose to mobilise their agency during a period of crisis and not before. When pandemic-induced economic disruption threatened household stability, it was the women who came forward to restore it. This response was not only due to personal ambition alone, but was also driven by a profound sense of duty oriented towards the welfare and security of their families.

Finding 3: While women received family support for their pandemic-era businesses, this backing was necessitated by economic desperation and the loss of primary household income rather than any ideological embrace of women's entrepreneurship.

Women who initiated businesses during the pandemic received considerable support and encouragement from their family members. In some cases, it was during the starting of the business, while in some cases it was when the business progressed. However, a critical examination of this support reveals that it was not driven by any fundamental shift in the family's attitude towards women's entrepreneurship. It was not also due to a renewed recognition of women's capabilities and potential. The encouragement extended to these women did not stem from an ideological embrace of gender equality. Rather, it was the economic desperation brought about by the pandemic that made the family to lend their support. Prior to the pandemic, these same women possessed skills that was not utilised. There was no encouragement from the family to pursue entrepreneurial activity before the pandemic. This was largely because the household already had a primary breadwinner whose income sustained the family. When the pandemic resulted in job losses and the primary source of household income was disrupted, the family found itself in a position where the women's skills offered the only immediate and viable means of economic recovery. The male members, whose

employment made the women's economic participation unnecessary, now lacked the skills that could be readily deployed under the constraints of limited mobility and restricted opportunities that the pandemic imposed. It was under these circumstances that the family turned to support the women's business endeavours. Hence, it was not out of a changed worldview, but out of a compelling economic need.

Finding 4: Gendered barriers operated alongside practical challenges and compounded their effect

The challenges these women faced while establishing their businesses during the pandemic were not gender-neutral. At the practical level, they had to deal with disrupted supply chains, delivery problems during lockdown, the risk of perishable products and unstable market conditions. At the same time, they were also dealing with social barriers like sceptical customers who doubted home-based online sellers, family members who questioned whether the business would succeed, communities that mocked the idea of starting a business during a crisis and institutions that did not readily recognise home-based products because they lacked formal credentials.

These were not separate difficulties. They often worked together and made one another worse. For example, when a delivery failed it did not remain just a logistical problem. It was used by relatives and others as proof that the business was not serious. Likewise, when a woman approached an institution for recognition, she often had to do so without the symbolic capital that established businesses already possess, such as prior credentials and formal affiliations. Hence, the absence of socially recognised legitimacy made even ordinary business challenges harder to manage. This is also consistent with the UNDP's observation that women-led start-ups during COVID-19 faced difficulties that were intensified by existing social and financial barriers. What makes the resilience of these women especially significant is not simply that they continued in business under difficult conditions, but that they did so in a context shaped by gendered expectations and unequal recognition. They were not only surviving a crisis. They were doing so in a social environment where both practical obstacles and gender-based barriers reinforced each other.

Finding 5: Knowledge of digital platforms enhanced the scalability of women's entrepreneurship

The study found that digital platforms became integral to women's entrepreneurship during the pandemic. With physical markets closed and many customers moving online, women had to rely on social media platforms such as Instagram and to initiate their entrepreneurship. In this setting, knowledge of how to use digital platforms became an important form of cultural capital. Women who were already familiar with digital platforms had an advantage in reaching customers, staying in touch with suppliers and making their businesses visible. At the same time, not every entrepreneur possessed the skill. Those who began with little or no knowledge learned through necessity from family members. This shift from limited digital use to practical digital confidence shows that skills can be developed through experience and regular use.

Finding 6: After recognizing their potential through sustained income generation, women entrepreneurs became more ambitious and demonstrated a shift from reactive to proactive resilience

During the pandemic, the entrepreneurial responses of women were largely reactive in nature. Their main aim was their immediate survival, so they made short-term adjustment to rapidly changing circumstances. However, as their businesses sustained themselves over time and continued to generate consistent income, a significant transformation occurred in the way these women perceived themselves and their ventures. The sustained income generation served as tangible evidence of their own capability. This caused a recognition of potential that had not been previously acknowledged. This realization made the women who had initially entered entrepreneurship out of financial necessity or due to the identification of an immediate opportunity to start thinking of possibilities beyond sustenance. The business was no longer seen solely as a means of survival. It was something that could be expanded and developed further. It was this recognition of potential that laid the foundation for the shift from reactive to proactive resilience. These women entrepreneurs began to engage with their businesses in a more forward-looking manner. Rather than responding to challenges as they arose, they started anticipating change and adapting their strategies in advance. When physical shops reopened and competition from other home-based businesses intensified, those who continued to perform well were the ones who had already begun diversifying their products, shifting platforms, exploring wholesale channels and formalising their brands. This transition shows that resilience

is not an inherent personal trait, but a dynamic process which was shaped by learning and observation.

Finding 7: Entrepreneurship produced a transformations in self-perception and social identity among women.

The most far-reaching finding of this study is that entrepreneurship brought a deep change in identity. For many of the women, starting a business not only changed their economic situation, but also the way they saw themselves. Women who had earlier described themselves as timid, dependent or professionally inactive gradually came to see themselves as entrepreneurs, decision-makers and public figures. This change happened through everyday business activities such as dealing with customers, negotiating with suppliers, handling money and receiving recognition for their work. Over time, these repeated experiences helped reshape their social position within the family and in the wider community. Awards, institutional connections and public appreciation gave their work greater social value. In this sense, entrepreneurship became much more than a source of income. It became a process of confidence-building, recognition and identity change.

6.3 SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions are directed at policymakers, institutions and the wider social environment:

1. Existing mentorship programmes should be accessible for emerging women entrepreneurs

The reach and impact of existing mentorship programmes should be strengthened and extended to ensure that emerging women entrepreneurs have access to structured guidance and institutional support at every stage of their entrepreneurial journey. These programmes play a vital role in building capacity and confidence among women. Hence, their potential must be more fully realized through wider coverage and sustained engagement.

- 2. The usage of digital platforms must be utilised by other entrepreneurs as it enhance the scalability of the businesses.**

Digital platforms have proven to be significant enablers of business growth during and after the pandemic. Hence, it is recommended that women entrepreneurs who are yet to adopt them should be actively encouraged and trained to do so. The ability to operate across platforms help them to reach a wider customer base beyond geographical limitations and thus enhance the scalability of the business.

- 3. Financial assistance schemes should be actively communicated at the grassroots level to ensure that women entrepreneurs can access them easily.**

Financial assistance schemes and credit facilities available to women entrepreneurs often remain underutilized due to a lack of awareness at the grassroots level. It is therefore essential that information regarding these schemes be disseminated through easily accessible community-level mechanisms .This will ensure that women are aware of and able to avail the support that is available to them.

- 4. Family and community sensitization programmes should be devised to ensure that women receive consistent encouragement beyond periods of crisis.**

The support extended to women entrepreneurs during periods of economic crisis should not be based on necessity alone. Family and community sensitization programmes must be developed and implemented to provide an environment of consistent encouragement. This will affirm women's entrepreneurial potential irrespective of prevailing economic conditions.

- 5. Structured peer networking platforms should be established to enable women entrepreneurs to collaborate and share resources**

Structured peer networking platforms should be established to facilitate meaningful collaboration among women entrepreneurs. Such platforms would enable the sharing of resources, experiences, and market knowledge. This would help build a collective ecosystem in which women can support one another's growth and navigate challenges more effectively.

6. Women entrepreneurs should invest in formalizing and documenting their business practices.

Many of the respondents in this study built their businesses through trial and error, often without maintaining records of costs, pricing or inventory. As businesses transitioned from crisis-driven survival to sustained ventures, maintaining basic financial records, formal registration and simple business documentation would help entrepreneurs' access credit, schemes and partnerships more easily. This would also support long-term scalability rather than relying solely on experiential learning.

7. Women entrepreneurs should actively seek out and build peer and mentorship connections rather than relying only on informal networks.

The study found that many women entrepreneurs navigated early operational and gendered challenges largely on their own. They had limited access to trade networks or mentorship. Rather than waiting for such networks to be extended to them, women entrepreneurs should actively seek out peer groups, mentorship opportunities and collaborate with other women entrepreneurs rather than an informal support system alone.

6.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the major limitations faced during the study was the difficulty in data collection due to the busy work schedules of women entrepreneurs. Since most participants were actively managing their businesses, it was often challenging to find sufficient time for conducting detailed interviews. In certain cases, some potential participants had to withdraw from the study because of work-related commitments and lack of availability.

Another limitation was the time constraints experienced during the interview process. Some participants preferred to complete the interviews quickly due to their professional responsibilities which could have affected the depth and length of the responses. These practical challenges influenced the speed of the data collection process.

6.5 CONCLUSION

The present study examined how women entrepreneurs in Thiruvananthapuram who established their enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic were able to sustain them beyond the pandemic period. Using a case study design, the study explored the push factors that led women into entrepreneurship, the challenges they encountered, the strategies and resources they mobilized to sustain their enterprises, the changes in their aspirations, the mobilization of different forms of capital and the ways in which entrepreneurship transformed their identities. Through the lived experiences of seven women entrepreneurs, the study sought to understand entrepreneurship not merely as an economic activity but as a social process shaped by crisis, resilience, agency and structural conditions.

The study found that women's entry into entrepreneurship was influenced by diverse circumstances. While financial necessity arising from economic uncertainty acted as an important push factor for several participants, others entered entrepreneurship after recognizing new market opportunities created during the pandemic. The findings further reveal that women entrepreneurs encountered multiple challenges while establishing and sustaining their enterprises. These included operational difficulties and social, gendered and institutional barriers arising from domestic responsibilities, societal expectations and limited institutional support during the initial stages of their entrepreneurial journeys. These experiences demonstrate that although women possess the capability to establish successful enterprises, their journeys continue to be shaped by broader social and structural inequalities.

The study also found that the sustainability of these enterprises depended largely on women's ability to mobilize a wide range of resources and adopt adaptive strategies. Family support emerged as one of the most significant enabling factors, while digital platforms, social networks, previous skills, and personal savings played equally important roles in maintaining business continuity. As market conditions evolved beyond the pandemic, the participants diversified their products, expanded their digital presence, strengthened customer relationships and adopted long-term business planning.

Another important finding of the study is that entrepreneurship enabled women to effectively mobilize and convert different forms of capital. Cultural capital in the form of skills and knowledge, social capital through family and community networks and economic capital through personal investments collectively contributed to the expansion of their enterprises. Over time, these resources were transformed into symbolic capital which includes public

recognition, social status and visibility within both the family and the wider community. The study further reveals that entrepreneurship brought about significant changes in women's identities and self-perceptions. Many participants described increased self-confidence, greater financial independence, and stronger decision-making abilities and enhanced social recognition after becoming entrepreneurs. The transition from reactive resilience during the pandemic to proactive resilience in the post-pandemic period reflects their ability to move beyond survival and focus on long-term sustainability and growth.

Overall, the study concludes that the women who established enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated remarkable resilience by transforming an unprecedented crisis into an opportunity for long-term entrepreneurial growth. Their experiences show that entrepreneurship is shaped not only by individual determination and agency, but also by the interaction between family support, social networks, digital technologies, institutional opportunities and broader structural conditions. While the pandemic temporarily reshaped the social and economic environment and opened new opportunities for many women, it was their continuous learning, strategic adaptation and effective mobilization of available resources that enabled them to sustain their enterprises beyond the crisis.

At a broader sociological level, this study raises an important question. If a period of global crisis could create circumstances that enabled many women to recognize opportunities, exercise agency and build sustainable enterprises, why should such opportunities remain confined to moments of disruption? The experiences of these women suggest that entrepreneurial potential has always existed. What has often been absent were supportive social, institutional and economic structures that could nurture their potential. Rather than viewing women's entrepreneurship as a response to crisis alone, the findings call for the creation of a gender-responsive entrepreneurial ecosystem that provides equitable access to finance, digital capacity building, and mentorship and market opportunities. The central question emerging from this study is not whether women possess the ability to become successful entrepreneurs, but whether society is willing to create systems that consistently enable them to realize that potential. Hence, addressing this question is essential for advancing sustainable development of women's entrepreneurship.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

A. GENERAL PROFILE

1 .PERSONAL PROFILE

- ❖ NAME
- ❖ AGE
- ❖ PLACE OF RESIDENCE
- ❖ EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION
- ❖ MARITAL STATUS
- ❖ FAMILY STRUCTURE (nuclear/joint)
- ❖ NO OF FAMILY MEMBERS
- ❖ OCCUPATION OF FAMILY MEMBERS (agriculture, business, salaried employment, etc)
- ❖ STATUS BEFORE STARTING BUSINESS (student, employed, unemployed, home maker)

2. BUSINESS PROFILE

- ❖ NAME OF BUSINESS
- ❖ NATURE OF BUSINESS (retail/service/manufacturing)

- ❖ YEAR OF ESTABLISHMENT
- ❖ IS THIS YOUR FIRST BUSINESS VENTURE?
- ❖ PRIOR WORK EXPERIENCE
- ❖ OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE OF THE BUSINESS (individual/partnership)
- ❖ NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES
- ❖ LOCATION OF BUSINESS OPERATIONS(home based/shop/online/hybrid)
- ❖ TARGET CUSTOMERS

B. MOTIVATING FACTORS

- What motivated you to start your business during the COVID-19 period? (Financial need/ loss of job/personal interest/demand for certain products)?
- Why did you choose this particular type of business?(Skills, previous experience, personal interest, market demand, available resources)
- How did people around you influence your decision to start the business? (Family encouragement, peer support, community)
- Did you receive any financial or institutional assistance when starting your business?(government schemes/loans/other forms of assistance)

C. CHALLENGES

- Did you face any financial challenges while running your business during the pandemic? (lack of capital, reduced income, difficulty accessing loans, managing expenses, losses)
- What kind of difficulties did you experience in managing your business operations during this period? (lockdown restrictions, access to market, supply issues, demand fluctuations, transportation, finding customers)
- Was using digital platforms a challenge for you? (online marketing, use of social media ,digital payments, lack of technical knowledge, internet access, managing online customers)
- How did you manage your business along with household responsibilities? (Household work, childcare, time management, support system)
- Do you think being a woman created any additional challenges for you to run this business (Lack of family support, societal expectations, mobility restrictions, safety concerns, credibility issues)

D. STRATEGIES, RESOURCES, AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

- What strategies did you adopt to sustain your business during the COVID-19 period?
(Shifting to online platforms, changing products/services based on demand, home-based production, delivery, pricing, customer engagement, innovations)

- When your business faced difficulties, how did you handle those situations and keep the business running?(problem solving methods, decision-making, risk-taking, learning from failure, adjusting plans)
- What were the most important resources you relied on while running your business, and how did you access them? (Personal savings, loans, Kudumbashree/other SHG support, digital tools like Instagram/WhatsApp, skills, raw materials, workspace, labour)
- What sources of support helped you sustain your business over time? (family involvement, regular customers, peer networks, institutional support)

E. CHANGE IN APPROACH AND ASPIRATIONS

- What key lessons from the pandemic continue to influence your business decisions today? (handling uncertainty, financial management, risk-taking)
- In what ways has your approach to managing your business changed from the COVID-19 period to now? (planning, customer handling)
- Can you share any major achievements your business has received so far?
- What are your future plans for your business?(expansion, new products ,entering new markets)

F. IDENTITY AND SELF - PERCEPTION

- Do you see yourself differently now compared to before starting your business? If yes, in what way? (from homemaker/student to an independent entrepreneur)
- How has running your business influenced your confidence and sense of independence? (speaking to customers, financial control, decision-making ability)
- Has your role or position within your family or society changed after starting your business? How? (Respect, recognition, decision-making power, financial contribution)

G. FINAL REMARKS

- Looking back at your journey from the COVID-19 period until now, what does this entire experience of running your business mean to you?
- What message would you like to give to other women who want to start a business, especially during difficult situations like the pandemic?