

Gender, affective labor and the family-run business in Thailand during the COVID-19 pandemic

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International
Journal of Gender
and
Entrepreneurship

Received 12 December 2023

Revised 5 April 2024

27 July 2024

28 September 2024

Accepted 21 November 2024

Abstract

Purpose – This study examines how Thai female entrepreneurs utilized affective labor which typically encompasses care and emotional management to navigate the dual demands of business and family during the COVID-19 crisis. By highlighting the essential role of care work in both business resilience and familial well-being, the research challenges traditional views of entrepreneurship and offers new insights into the relationship between gender, affective labor and crisis management, showing how these overlooked resources supported entrepreneurial survival in times of crisis.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative interviews were conducted with 51 entrepreneurs in Thailand, emphasizing the traditionally “feminized” aspect of affective labor. The study utilized two interview phases to capture evolving perceptions and experiences, with data coded using grounded theory methods.

Findings – Affective labor emerged as a crucial asset, enabling female entrepreneurs in family-run businesses to exhibit remarkable resilience during the COVID-19 crisis. Despite challenges, these entrepreneurs adeptly adjusted business practices and personal lives, transforming affective labor from an obstacle to an asset.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations include interview process distractions, challenges in disclosures from single/divorced participants and complexities in responses from entrepreneurs with multiple businesses.

Practical implications – Recognizing and leveraging affective labor can enhance the resilience of female entrepreneurs in family-run businesses during crises. Policymakers, business leaders and support organizations can employ these insights to develop targeted support mechanisms for women navigating challenges posed by events like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Originality/value – This study challenges normative assumptions by positioning affective labor as a critical asset for female entrepreneurs in family-run businesses during crises. The exclusive focus on female participants provides a unique perspective, contributing valuable insights to the literature on entrepreneurship, crisis management and the dynamics of gendered labor within family-run business contexts.

Keywords Women, Entrepreneurship, Family-run business, Thailand, Affective labor, COVID-19

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Affective labor and care work have long been central yet undervalued elements of women’s economic and social contributions, particularly for female entrepreneurs balancing business and family responsibilities. These forms of “invisible” labor—encompassing emotional management, caregiving and relational work—are crucial to the resilience and success of women in times of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, affective labor became even more essential for female entrepreneurs, as they navigated heightened pressures at home and in

The research team wishes to thank the Thai entrepreneurs who generously shared their time, insights, experiences and feelings with the research team. We also thank Prapasiri Suttisome for her work supporting and organizing the research project, and Dr Busarin Lertchavalitsakul for providing additional support for the qualitative data collection.

Declaration of conflicting interests: The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.



business. The pandemic exposed the extent to which care work underpins not only family well-being but also entrepreneurial resilience, as women managed both their businesses and their families under unprecedented stress.

The COVID-19 crisis dramatically altered Thailand's entrepreneurial landscape. With tourism drastically reduced due to the country's strict border closures, small business owners, a key pillar of Thailand's economy, faced existential threats. Female entrepreneurs, in particular, were compelled to restructure their businesses while also tending to their families' heightened care needs during a period of prolonged containment measures. In cities like Bangkok and Chiang Mai, where the economic impact of the pandemic was severe, the affective labor performed by women became a critical, yet often overlooked, resource of care that sustained both their businesses and family structures.

In this study, we explore how Thai female entrepreneurs utilized affective labor to navigate the dual demands of care work and business ownership during the pandemic. While some scholars argue that the rise of female entrepreneurship in Thailand represents significant progress toward gender equality ([Sritanyarat and Sakdiyakorn, 2020](#); [ILO, 2021](#)), the COVID-19 crisis presents a unique opportunity to reassess this progress. By foregrounding the role of care and affective labor, we aim to understand how female entrepreneurs managed to maintain economic and social agency during such a turbulent time.

Although research on female entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the adaptive capacities of women in crisis ([Afshan et al., 2021](#); [Anggadwita et al., 2023](#)), there remains a gap in the literature regarding the positive role of affective labor in women's resilience. Some scholars contend that the pandemic reinforced traditional gender roles and widened existing disparities ([Basu, 2023](#); [ILO, 2021](#)). [Basu \(2023\)](#), for example, argues that male job losses during the pandemic further jeopardized the gains women had made in family enterprises. Despite these challenges, our research focuses on how the affective labor of female entrepreneurs contributed not only to their survival but also to their ability to strengthen familial and community bonds in the face of adversity.

Thailand, known for its high rates of female entrepreneurship ([Cho et al., 2020](#); [Sritanyarat and Sakdiyakorn, 2020](#)), provides a compelling case for this exploration. On the one hand, the increasing prominence of female entrepreneurship in Thailand reflects significant progress toward gender equality ([Sritanyarat and Sakdiyakorn, 2020](#); [ILO, 2021](#)). On the other hand, despite ranking as the fifth-best healthcare country globally ([GHS Index, 2021](#)), Thailand's pandemic policies inadequately addressed women's increased vulnerability ([ILO, 2021](#)). Our study investigates how female entrepreneurs leveraged affective labor to maintain resilience. This study asks: "What role did affective labor play in the pursuits of Thai female entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 crisis, and how did it contribute to their business success?"

Through interviews with 51 micro and small business owners, many involved in Kenan Foundation Asia's programs for SME owners, we found that Thai female entrepreneurs engaged in affective labor, both commodified/productive and non-commodified/reproductive, which played a crucial role in their resilience. Contrary to prevailing narratives that often frame affective labor as exploitative or limiting ([Hardt and Negri, 2000](#); [Hochschild, 1979](#)), our research reveals its positive, agency-enhancing potential. Female entrepreneurs in Thailand leveraged these forms of labor to sustain both their businesses and family relationships, challenging the perception of affective labor as inherently detrimental to business success.

Theoretical framework: Women's entrepreneurship and affective labor

Female entrepreneurs are a rapidly growing population, only recently becoming the subjects of study ([Brush, 2006](#)). [Jennings and Brush \(2013\)](#) note that studies in this field of women entrepreneurship often revolve around themes such as gender disparity in entrepreneurial engagement, financial resource acquisition, strategic decision-making, organizational

practices and performance discrepancies between female-led and male-led firms. Previous studies identify various factors influencing women's motivations to become entrepreneurs, including economic need, gender inequality, work-life conflicts, career advancement, independence and family influence (Cho *et al.*, 2020). Many women seek to increase family income and overcome societal norms limiting career opportunities, such as marriage, childcare and the glass ceiling. Studies highlight two key motivations for female entrepreneurship: self-employment offers flexible hours and the ability to work from home, which appeals to women prioritizing family needs, and families often provide essential financial and emotional support (Bullough *et al.*, 2022; Meliou, 2020; Odeku, 2020). Women, especially mothers, are often drawn to self-employment for its increased flexibility (Al-Ali, 2019).

What hasn't yet been studied about this population are the resources of care which characterize female entrepreneur's labor activities. The responsibilities and skills associated with caregiving, or "affective labor," have not been well-addressed in the literature. In contrast to the contemporary understanding of women's entrepreneurship being characterized by neoliberal norms of independence, self-reliance and the negotiation of market logics (Ahl and Marlow, 2021), and the nuanced attempts of female entrepreneurs to conform to masculine norms (Lewis, 2006), exploring female entrepreneur's experiences of affective labor and resources of care provides novel ways to understand entrepreneurship and its gendered implications. By focusing on affective labor and resources of care, we offer a fresh perspective on female entrepreneurship, moving beyond traditional analyses that often center on neoliberal norms and gender disparities.

Despite its importance in family-run businesses, the enabling role of affective labor has been largely overlooked, with most research focusing on the challenges female entrepreneurs face, especially in Asia. Studies highlight obstacles posed by cultural and religious norms such as Confucianism, Hinduism and Islam (Cho *et al.*, 2020), as well as gendered workplace dynamics that complicate the balance between family responsibilities and entrepreneurship, limiting women's access to financial resources (Acker, 2006; Meliou, 2020).

Other studies examine how gender construction limits women's career choices, particularly through the association of entrepreneurship with masculinity. For instance, in patriarchal-Islamic contexts, women's entrepreneurship has often been discouraged (Barragan *et al.*, 2018). Sociocultural norms and traditions also pose challenges. In Thai culture, influenced by Theravada Buddhism, women's primary role is often defined as that of a "good housewife"—obedient, serving her husband and children, overseeing household work and prioritizing these roles over personal aspirations (Andaya, 2002). Consequently, Thai women face restrictions in accessing business opportunities, limiting their career choices (Thakur and Walsh, 2013).

In contrast, studies on female entrepreneurship in Western contexts show how women entrepreneurs strive to move beyond the limitations traditionally associated with gender. Lewis (2006) examines female business owners in London, highlighting their efforts to downplay the significance of gender in their activities and circumstances, while Ahl and Marlow (2021) describe how a "postfeminist" perspective shapes the understandings of female entrepreneurship in policies established by Sweden and the UK.

Although both streams of literature provide insights into the relationship between gender and female entrepreneurship, few studies explore the integral role of affective labor in the lived experiences of female entrepreneurs. While research has acknowledged women's capabilities, such as multitasking, interpersonal skills and emotional empathy, much of this prior research fails to recognize that such skills complement business goals and are examples of affective labor (Newbury *et al.*, 2008; Ruderman *et al.*, 2002). Thus, while the literature on women's entrepreneurship often focuses on understanding the factors that differentiate women from men in entrepreneurship, and the structural and discursive components that inform this understanding, our study explores the type of labor commonly being undertaken by female entrepreneurs and examines its potentiality.

The economic role of affective labor

Building on these themes, another direction in the literature examines women's entrepreneurship through the lens of capitalist production. This emerging perspective highlights the changes in opportunities brought about through capitalist expansion, while at the same time penalizing vulnerable individuals during periods of transition (Rich, 2005). In this context, the concept of "affective labor," as proposed by Hardt and Negri (2000), becomes significant. Affective labor encompasses "invisible" tasks that produce immaterial goods, such as a service, knowledge or communication. It involves human interaction and manipulation of emotions, ultimately generating "a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion." In other words, the products of this labor are relationships and emotional responses. While affective labor is not exclusively performed by women, it underscores the dominant role of feminized labor within contemporary economies shaped by neoliberal dynamics.

Oksala (2016) continues this line of thinking. Basing her analysis on Marxist traditional distinctions between productive/unproductive labor and production/reproduction, Oksala categorizes the role of "affect" in various forms of labor: care work that is not commodified (e.g. caring for family members), commodified care work (e.g. day care providers) and waged labor aimed at producing "affect." An example of waged labor that produces affect includes flight attendants whose work requires inducing or suppressing emotions in order to produce in others the feeling of safety, confidence and well-being (see Hochschild, 1979). Adopting a feminist political lens, Oksala argues that understanding affective labor requires not only the recognition of the specific roles played by women's reproductive labor in capitalism but also the "moral limits of the market," wherein women can shape and manage their affects through social relations.

Affective labor during the COVID-19 crisis

Although little attention has been paid to examining "affect" in the labor activities of female entrepreneurs during times of crisis, a few studies do focus on this issue. Research in Greece and South Africa highlights the impact of financial crises and the pandemic on female entrepreneurs and gendered divisions of labor (Meliou, 2020; Odeku, 2020). In South Africa, Odeku (2020) noted that nationwide regulations, such as lockdowns and restrictions, exacerbated existing gender inequalities by imposing caregiving responsibilities primarily on women, impacting their ability to sustain their businesses. School closures forced women to prioritize childcare over entrepreneurial pursuits, intensifying their difficulties.

Meliou's research (2020) on female entrepreneurs in Greece revealed that family support can serve as a buffer during financial crises. During the crisis, family members provided entrepreneurs with "resources of care," which encompass material, affective and symbolic caring. Material caring includes practical and financial assistance, logistical support and childcare. Affective caring involves emotional support, trust and encouragement from spouses or family members. Symbolic caring, often provided through family connections, offers professional expertise, recommendations and networks and gives female entrepreneurs a competitive advantage in navigating gender-related obstacles. Each of these sets of resources can be considered forms of affective labor.

While the frameworks outlined above offer important considerations for understanding the role of affective labor in women's entrepreneurship, our study fills gaps in understanding of the potentiality of this labor, particularly during times of crisis. Moving beyond traditional discussions of gender differentials and economic utility, our analysis of female entrepreneurs' use of affective labor sheds light on the interconnectedness of women's labor within the family and its own entrepreneurial pursuits. Contrary to prevailing views of affective labor as being inherently exploitative to women, we argue that it in fact fosters resilience for both individual women and within their families.

We challenge the notion that women's performance of affective labor is solely determined by an economic structure, proposing instead that Thai female entrepreneurs operate within a

unique framework of “family-as-structure.” Here, the family sets the conditions for affective labor, whose performance in turn leads to greater resilience among all members. Unlike the conventional economic framework, our “family-as-unit-of-analysis” approach recognizes the cultural specificity and cooperative nature of affective labor—crucial for understanding its role in family resilience (Meliou, 2020). Addressing this gap in knowledge is vital for a more comprehensive understanding of affective labor’s role in women’s entrepreneurship and resilience within family businesses.

Thai female entrepreneurship and COVID-19

Women contribute substantially to Thailand’s economy, particularly in sectors such as services, manufacturing, agriculture, wholesale and retail trade—the largest of Thailand’s GDP (NESDC Thailand, 2021). Despite comprising 45% of the labor force as of 2021, compared to men’s 54.06% participation (National Statistical Office, 2021), women are predominantly represented in lower-paid sectors and hold fewer high-level positions in both business and government, indicative of persistent gender disparities. Sociocultural barriers, including expectations of women as caregivers, contribute to these inequalities, resulting in lower rates of their entrepreneurship and higher participation in household work.

Despite these discrepancies, Thailand remains one of the top twenty economies worldwide providing support to enable entrepreneurship conditions for women (Mastercard, 2020). Statistics illustrate a mixed picture of women’s entrepreneurship in Thailand, with limited access to bank loans and government support programs for capital and investment financing, in comparison with other emerging markets (Pathak, 2019). The majority of women-owned businesses are clustered in micro, small and partially medium enterprises in lower skilled retail and service sectors (Xavier *et al.*, 2016), constraining their growth potential, while male entrepreneurs predominantly operate in “transforming” sectors including manufacturing and transportation (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2019).

While women workers and entrepreneurs were already working in informal sectors requiring labor-intensive work, producing lower value-added products and lower productivity (UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2017), during the COVID-19 pandemic the barriers to women’s ability to do this work only increased. Reports show that sectors largely occupied by women such as tourism, retail and the food and beverage businesses suffered disproportionately from the economic downturn of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mastercard, 2020), suggesting that women in these sectors were disproportionately economically vulnerable during the pandemic. Additionally, increasing childcare responsibilities put women in particularly vulnerable situations, compromising their ability to generate income. In addition, women faced the challenge of adapting their businesses to digital platforms to maintain continuity within the economy (Mastercard, 2020). In light of the challenges posed by the pandemic, our research aims to shed light on the resilience of women amidst the crisis and explore the role of affective labor in their economic survival.

Methodology

To understand the experiences of female entrepreneurs in Thailand amidst the pandemic, our methodology employed a multi-stage approach. First, the research team, comprising a Principal Investigator and three Research Team Members, conducted a comprehensive literature review to identify existing knowledge and emerging themes related to the experiences of female entrepreneurs in Thailand and the effects of COVID-19 on this demographic. The question of how female entrepreneurs were faring during the pandemic emerged organically, based on lived observations made by the research team about the drastic transformation of Thailand’s small business landscape. As such questions were informed by qualitative approaches and feminist inquiries, the research team then undertook a workshop on

these complementary methodologies which, in turn, generated research questions and interview scripts while establishing a roadmap for the interviews.

The team adopted a feminist approach to our data collection tool design, in which interviews, focus groups and case studies took precedence over quantitative approaches. In line with the tenets of feminist research methodologies, this allowed participants to narrate their lived experiences while requiring the researchers to remain in a constant process of analysis and reflection, allowing recurring themes to guide our analysis (Ackerly *et al.*, 2006). Feminist methodologies ask researchers to mediate “between the knowledge from experiences in the everyday life of women and the knowledge of global gender relations” (p. 127).

The research team conducted 51 semi-structured interviews with female and male entrepreneurs. Participants were identified through an existing program offered by Kenan Foundation, a Thai non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to empowering local entrepreneurs and future leaders of Asia. The research team worked closely with Kenan to identify participants from projects aimed at enhancing skills and resilience among business owners, particularly in response to COVID-19. Due to limitations imposed by the pandemic, interviews took place by phone, followed by transcription and translation. Participants were recruited through Facebook ads, emails and existing partner networks [1].

Interviews were conducted in Thai by native speakers and subsequently translated into English. Interview notes were digitized, and scripts were transcribed into English. Verbatim transcription was used for some scripts, while others were summarized to capture the core content of participants’ remarks. Guided by a qualitative approach, all interviews underwent coding, leading to identification of 12 primary themes and corresponding sub-themes which aligned with our original research questions aimed at understanding the experiences of Thai female entrepreneurs amid the pandemic. To maintain validity, we coded the interviews according to the relevant, emergent themes identified, while adhering to a rigorous “intercoder agreement” (see Lombard *et al.*, 2002). While both men and women were included as participants, we subsequently determined that an analysis of female respondents’ experiences was more salient to the paper’s focus on exploring affective labor as performed by female entrepreneurs and their family members, as these data specifically allowed us to understand the role of affective labor on the target population.

The study had several limitations. Personal challenges and business issues distracted some respondents, hindering the interview process. Single or divorced participants shared limited information about gender and care responsibilities. Some entrepreneurs who owned more than one type of business provided confusing responses. Some respondents avoided answering questions about marital status, annual income and gender roles, despite the enumerators having clarified the purpose of these questions before the interviews. We acknowledge that these limitations could potentially influence the quality of the interview data and subsequent analysis. While these limitations highlight challenges in generalizing our findings, we believe that continuing with this approach is valuable due to the rich, in-depth qualitative data it provides. Despite these limitations, our methodology allows for a nuanced exploration of how affective labor contributes to the resilience of female family businesses during crises.

Findings

Our findings present a nuanced understanding of the role of affective labor within the pursuits of female entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 crisis in Thailand, and its implications on their success. Despite our assumptions based on the initial literature review, a number of important themes emerged from our interviews that diverged from the literature’s conclusions. While the literature pointed to an increase in female entrepreneur’s facing struggle and difficulty in the face of the crisis (due to increased childcare and domestic responsibilities, limited government policies supporting small businesses and other normative societal factors restricting women’s access to pursuing work outside the home), the interviews data produced different results.

We parse the findings into two distinct categories: First, we explore the gendered experiences of Thai female entrepreneurs and their use of affective labor in business ownership activities. This section highlights the centrality of affective labor within this context, emphasizing its significance in understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by female entrepreneurs. Next, we illustrate how Thai female entrepreneurs coped with the changing conditions of the pandemic, and the extent to which affective labor played a role in their response. This analysis allows us to examine how affective labor not only supports their business operations but also serves as a vital resource for coping with crisis situations. Parsing our findings into these categories enables us to analyze both the understanding of gender as a factor in the experiences of the entrepreneurs and the utility of affect and care work in their business operations.

Part one: gendered experiences and affective labor

Commodified/productive labor of Thai female entrepreneurs

We first explore the gendered experiences of Thai female entrepreneurs and their use of affective labor in business ownership. A primary theme emerging from the interview data is the impact of commodified labor—activities undertaken in exchange for wages—on women’s business initiation, sustainability and emotional well-being. The findings reveal that female entrepreneurs often started their businesses with family support and in collaboration with male relatives. While this support was generally seen positively, facilitating skill acquisition, it also underscores a gendered division of labor. Gendered perceptions of women in business, while often positive, also reflect underlying assumptions that could be critically examined.

One example is a 43-year-old female entrepreneur who began as a financial manager in her family’s restaurant and later expanded into an organic farm. Initially, her role was seen as traditionally associated with women’s work, focusing on financial management. Over time, her responsibilities broadened, yet significant decision-making remained under her brother’s authority. This pattern highlights not only the dynamic roles female entrepreneurs undertake but also the persistence of gendered limitations within the family business structure.

Most of the tasks were handled by my older brother. Initially, I was solely responsible for looking after the financial accounts. However, over time, I gradually became more involved in various tasks beyond accounting. (Respondent#3, 43, organic farm)

Similarly, a 38-year-old woman running a socially responsible tourism business with her husband described their distinct roles as reflective of cultural gender norms. Her husband took on the “front stage” role, interacting with external stakeholders, while she managed the “back stage,” working closely with local communities. This division exemplifies the concept that affective labor, which produces feelings of ease and satisfaction, plays a significant role in modern family businesses.

In Thai culture, there is a saying that compares a man to the forefoot of an elephant and a woman to a hind leg. I have accepted this cultural perspective, which is why I have allowed my husband to take on the front stage role while I handle the back stage responsibilities. (Respondent#24, 38, tourism business)

The respondent’s division of labor illustrates how gendered assumptions shape business roles, reinforcing the positive view of women’s affective labor while also reflecting traditional gender roles. This division of labor contributes to business success but also reinforces a gendered framework that can perpetuate unequal power dynamics.

Female entrepreneurs expressed various gendered assumptions about labor styles, including beliefs that women are more detail-oriented, stable and capable of better customer relationships. One respondent emphasized these traits positively, highlighting women’s ability to build stronger customer relationships and make quicker decisions.

Women are detailed and caring. They can build better customer relationships and reach customers better than men. In a business that involves women or household matters, women can reach customers better, have a better relationship, make quicker decisions, and understand customers better than men. (Respondent#17, 40, agricultural products for export)

These gendered assumptions underscore the significance of affective labor in business operations. However, rather than suggesting that these assumptions perpetuate the subordination of women, we argue that they reveal how affective labor is both a significant factor in business success and reinforced by positive attitudes about gendered labor roles.

Non-commodified affective labor

Respondents also spoke about their experiences of non-commodified and reproductive—meaning non-wage-earning—labor activities. We found that despite the challenges of engaging in non-commodified affective labor, respondents generally viewed this form of labor as having a positive impact on the family, the business and their own well-being.

An example can be seen in the response of a 42-year-old woman who ran a clothing business while shouldering significant family responsibilities. This respondent felt personally accountable for the well-being of her mother, brother, sister and nephew. Seeing these individuals as an essential part of her family (as separate from that of her husband), the respondent felt a strong duty to assist them. When asked what motivated these feelings, she responded:

I don't know. It's instinctive. My father passed away when I was two years old, and my mother has been there for me since I was young. Even as I am growing older and have entered marriage, she remains a constant presence in my life. I cannot simply disregard my responsibility. (Respondent#23, 42, clothing retail/wholesale)

Although fulfilling these responsibilities was rooted in a sense of duty, the respondent acknowledged that it could also be a source of stress. She expressed that her husband was not receptive to her family's issues, preferring instead that she leave these problems in the past. Thus we see that affective labor in a non-commodified form can be experienced in emotionally conflicted terms.

In a similar instance, a 45-year-old woman decided to return home after leaving to work in a big city, driven by a strong sense of responsibility toward her parents and siblings.

I have nine siblings, and I was the one determined to pursue a university degree. My parents worked tirelessly to ensure we received an education. While I lived in the city, I was merely an employee. However, my true passion lies in agriculture. Returning home was a dream come true. With the support of my family members, I started my own business, finding greater happiness in doing so. (Respondent#5, 45, orchard farm)

The above examples support our argument that women operate within a distinct “family-as-structure” framework rather than the conventional “economy-as-structure” approach to affective labor understood by the literature. Within this framework, the family sets the parameters for women's engagement in affective labor, providing essential resources such as material support and emotional care that contribute to both business success and family well-being.

This family-centric approach also encompasses the transmission of knowledge across generations. For several female entrepreneurs, the inspiration to start their businesses originates from the wisdom and expertise passed down within their families, particularly in the areas of agriculture and/or food and drink production. For instance, a 50-year-old entrepreneur capitalized on her family's traditional soda water recipe known as “Rocket water,” after encountering challenges with her previous food business. Through her family's inherited knowledge, she not only established a successful business but also preserved a familial legacy, fostering a sense of continuity and shared identity. Recognizing the role of family-based knowledge in shaping entrepreneurial pursuits strengthens our argument that affective labor is

intricately linked to the “family-as-structure” framework. Beyond emotional and financial support, the family empowers these entrepreneurs to build businesses rooted in tradition and heritage, contributing to economic success while preserving family legacies.

Utilizing gender-related capital as part of entrepreneurship work

Female entrepreneurs draw upon gender-related capital in various ways as part of their work, leveraging resources that uniquely intersect with their gender roles and societal expectations. One such resource is the power of informal networks, which play a crucial role in shaping their entrepreneurial journey. These networks often consist of close-knit family and community connections, providing invaluable support and guidance. Additionally, female entrepreneurs navigate the delicate balance between familial responsibilities and business ambitions, negotiating and finding solutions that meet both personal and professional needs. This strategic compromise empowers them to pursue their dreams while maintaining their familial roles.

A 45-year-old woman shared a remarkable account of how her family extended unwavering support for both her commodified and non-commodified affective labor. Approximately ten years prior, she and her husband encountered a severe financial crisis when her husband’s salary was drastically reduced. Faced with uncertainty, they made the decision to return to her hometown without any concrete plans for their future. However, their challenges did not end there, as another crisis struck when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

I returned home without a clear direction and ventured into agriculture with no prior experience. With the help of my relatives, parents, and brother, who provided plots for cultivation and taught me farming, I managed to survive. While I battled my cancer and raised young children, my husband took on household chores. Initially, some community members questioned why he needed to do women’s work, but he said he didn’t mind because I needed help. (Respondent#5, 45, orchard farm)

Another compelling case exemplifies the diverse ways women entrepreneurs utilize gender-related capital in their pursuit of entrepreneurial success. Here, a woman engaged in socially responsible tourism alongside her husband recounts the pivotal role her family played in establishing their business. Notably, her family’s support extended beyond emotional encouragement, as it involved a unique utilization of gender-related capital in the form of her dowry. Traditionally, a dowry represents money given to the bride’s side as compensation for raising the daughter. However, in this instance, the woman’s mother made a significant decision that defied such conventional norms. Recognizing the potential of this financial asset in aiding her daughter’s entrepreneurial aspirations, she chose to return the dowry to her daughter.

My mother believed in my entrepreneurial dream. She said she didn’t need the money. She would rather return it to me if it can help me set up my own business. (Respondent#24, 38, tourism business)

The mother’s act not only provided important financial capital for the business venture but also demonstrated the mother’s faith in her daughter’s abilities. Another woman, aged 33 and running an accounting firm, relied on a different form of family support. Balancing the demands of managing the business, caring for her young child and being pregnant, she turned to her mother for assistance with household chores and childcare. Furthermore, recognizing the need for additional labor, she sought help from her unmarried aunts, who willingly contributed to the operations of her business.

My husband is fully occupied with his full-time job, he couldn’t really lend a hand with any household chores. So, household chores fell to my mother. She also helped me with accounting during busy periods. In the early days of my business, I relied on my three unmarried aunts and my mother for office help. Without their support, my business wouldn’t have survived those early stages. (Respondent#22, 33, accounting firm)

For this respondent, family support played a crucial role in laying the groundwork for her business. Intriguingly, this respondent reported that her unmarried relatives, who did not have

the responsibilities of marriage and household chores, were also a tremendous asset to her business. Their assistance can be seen as a form of “affective labor,” driven by their genuine desire to see her business thrive. The diverse and poignant examples of women entrepreneurs harnessing gender-related capital from their families underscore the crucial role of familial support in their entrepreneurial journeys. Whether it is the emotional encouragement, financial assistance or practical help with household and business tasks, these women’s families played instrumental roles in their pursuit of success.

Part two: coping strategies during the pandemic

Changing conditions during COVID-19

Amidst the backdrop of these journeys, our investigation delved into a new and unprecedented challenge: the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on female entrepreneurs and the utilization of affective labor in this context. In this section, we illustrate how Thai female entrepreneurs coped with the changing conditions of the pandemic, and the extent to which affective labor played a role in their response to these conditions. Many respondents faced daunting obstacles as the pandemic brought changes to their working conditions and led to business closures. In response, they adopted innovative strategies to navigate the new business environment, including acquiring new skills, exploring new business markets, implementing changes in management approaches and adjusting working hours. As expressed by one:

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, our annual income was about 1.5 million baht (equivalent to 44,000 USD). During the pandemic, our income dropped to zero. Since our business was heavily reliant on foreign visitors rather than domestic ones, the travel restrictions posed a significant setback. To adapt, we shifted our target market to Thai tourists. We are aware that Thai people use social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram a lot, so we shifted to focus on online marketing through platforms like Facebook and Instagram to boost engagement during the pandemic. (Respondent#24, 38, tourism business)

Another example involves a 45-year-old woman who operated a pomelo orchard in the southern province of Thailand. She shared how she altered both her management strategies and product offerings in response to the situation:

During that time, I learned about selling products online through the Ministry of Agriculture channel. I sought guidance from the teacher who provided training on online sales of agricultural products. I also collaborated with agencies that could assist in promoting our fruit. It was a period of learning and adapting to new approaches. (Respondent#5, 45, orchard farm)

Another respondent involved in the Thai mango export business decided to venture into new markets due to the disruptions of export market. With a decrease in export orders, she sought alternative avenues for her products. Consequently, she began exploring the production of processed fruit items using fresh mangoes.

Since export orders were declined, I started to tap into a fresh market. I decided to transform fresh fruits into a range of processed offerings, including mango jelly, dried mango paste, mango juice, and dried mango. This shift allowed me to find new opportunities for my products. (Respondent#17, 40, agricultural products for export)

During the pandemic, many entrepreneurs who previously held full-time office jobs faced the loss of their employment. In response, some chose to return home to support their families while also exploring new business opportunities. One such example is a 50-year-old woman who had worked for a company for many years before being laid off amidst the crisis. Faced with uncertainty and stress, she decided to turn to her family and their business.

I was very [stressed] during that time. I was going crazy. COVID-19 was just hitting us. It got me thinking about my own family. They’re getting older, and I couldn’t just sit around waiting for them to grow older. I made the decision to join the family business, work alongside them. It just felt like the right time to do it. (Respondent#8, 50, beverages)

The respondent explained that her motivation went beyond simply starting a new venture—it was also a chance to cherish and support her aging family members while staying close to them during trying times. However, like many other female entrepreneurs, she was required to adapt and learn new skills.

At that time, the Ministry of Commerce introduced the Digital Bridge Project. I decided to join, and they provided training on how to sell products online. I didn't have any prior knowledge, so I started from scratch. Before, I was only familiar with shopping online, but now I can sell my own products online. It feels like my horizons have expanded, and I've gained a new perspective on the digital world. (Respondent#8, 50, beverages)

These examples showcase the adaptability and determination of female entrepreneurs, as they embrace change, acquire new skills, and explore alternative avenues to sustain and grow their businesses amidst challenging circumstances. Their adaptive capacity, as illustrated above, includes managing financial capital, strategic innovation and proactive persistence. Such adaptability demonstrates the positive impacts of their affective labor, not only on business outcomes but also on their experiences as entrepreneurs. Female entrepreneurs reported increasing their agency, business acumen and skill building, leading to new opportunities and resilience.

One remarkable story features a female entrepreneur who saw COVID-19 as an opportunity not only for personal growth but also community empowerment. Instead of focusing on individual success, she shared knowledge and created opportunities for her community. During the pandemic, widespread fear surrounded the safety of agricultural products, with concerns that they might be handled by individuals infected with COVID-19, potentially risking customers' health. In response, she took proactive measures and formed a network of farmers within her community to sell their products online through a major supply chain, Makro. Utilizing the fact that their community had remained free from COVID-19, she approached government agencies and requested certification to endorse their products as "COVID-19 free." This strategic move not only bolstered the confidence of customers but also opened up new market opportunities, allowing their products to sell successfully. The entrepreneur's actions showcased commitment to her community's welfare and the power of collective efforts, fostering solidarity and support during a challenging time. This example illustrates how resilience, innovation and collaboration can turn adversity into growth and empowerment, benefiting not just an individual entrepreneur, but an entire community.

Working more closely with family during COVID-19

The pandemic brought significant changes to working conditions and financial flows for many female entrepreneurs. In the face of changing conditions, they relied on familial support to meet their financial obligations. For example, a 36-year-old respondent had to shut down her homestay accommodation business, leaving her without income. Instead of taking a bank loan, she received financial support from her family, a situation shared by other female entrepreneurs who faced business disruptions during the pandemic. Some sought government relief loans, while others relied on familial support to meet their financial obligations.

Other entrepreneurs encountered difficulties balancing household chores, traditionally assigned to women, with their business pursuits. While some reported that COVID-related lockdowns and the requirement of working from home provided opportunities to spend more time with their families, others noted the mounting burden of household responsibilities during the pandemic.

A 36-year-old woman running an ecotourism business faced challenges balancing household responsibilities and entrepreneurship. To create a conducive environment for her business during the lockdown, she and her husband enrolled their son in a nursery. Financial constraints led her to seek support from her mother to cover nursery fees, allowing them to focus on work while providing a nurturing environment for their child's development.

Another instance sheds light on the increasing burdens faced by women entrepreneurs as mothers during the pandemic. A 42-year-old woman who operated a clothing business emphasized the growing weight of care work, especially with the shift to online learning for children. She found herself constantly by her child's side during online classes, adding to her already significant responsibilities. Unfortunately, she couldn't rely on assistance from her mother due to geographical distance and her sister had a full-time job.

When asked about assistance from the child's father, she hesitated to burden him further as he was focused on his job as a lawyer. Consequently, the mother took on the responsibility of caring for their daughter throughout the pandemic. To carve out some personal time for her business and relieve the constant demands, she relied on convenience stores like 7/11, referring to herself as the "7/11 mom," buying things her daughter desired to prevent disruptions and distractions.

We see this experience further highlighted in the response of a 33-year-old entrepreneur who operated an accounting firm. Prior to the pandemic, her husband was employed in an office that provided registration services to new businesses. But when the pandemic disrupted the industry, her husband decided to leave his job and join her in the family business. Thereafter, the entrepreneur found herself navigating a new set of challenging dynamics within their joint venture. To maintain a harmonious relationship, she found it essential to uphold equal roles as husband and wife, rather than asserting a "boss-like" authority over her husband. Providing him with space and autonomy was crucial, she explained, in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts. This entrepreneur referred to a Thai phrase that likens a man to the "front leg" of an elephant and a woman to the "back leg." According to this perspective, women are expected to assume a supportive role and follow their male counterparts. While a deeply gendered perspective, this entrepreneur reported that adhering to such traditional norms provided a sense of well-being and stability crucial to her business' survival.

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, female entrepreneurs demonstrated remarkable courage and resilience, embracing online platforms to showcase their talents and abilities. Selling products online, for example via "live selling" sessions, proved to be particularly successful. Several respondents noted that the pandemic served as a catalyst, helping them realize their potential and capabilities in the entrepreneurial world. In the words of one 29 year-old:

I think, even though COVID-19 was hitting us hard, during COVID, women have the courage to speak up and dare to think and act in the world. The online world that I had to embark on to help my family and my community offers a lot of opportunities for women. We women are better off in selling online stuff. We can do better than men. COVID-19 makes me realize my ability. (Repondent#9, 29, orchard farm)

The stories of these entrepreneurs shed light on the multifaceted challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the need to balance business responsibilities with familial duties. While female entrepreneurs demonstrated remarkable resilience in adapting to the changing business landscape, they also encountered significant hurdles in managing household chores alongside entrepreneurial pursuits. [Basu \(2023\)](#) observed that not only did the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate the care needs of women inside family enterprises, but when men returned to their families due to job loss, traditional gender roles resurfaced, placing men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. In contrast to this finding, we argue that despite facing the burden of household chores and the return of men to playing a more present role in daily family life, the Thai female entrepreneurs we interviewed did not perceive these challenges to be exploitative. Instead, they willingly incorporated them for the sake of their business' success and familial well-being. Hence, family became a "resource of care," helping the entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of business ownership amidst crisis. The pandemic, while disruptive, served as a catalyst for the entrepreneurs to realize their potential and reshape their roles within both the family and society.

Discussion: affective labor as site of agency

While literature on female entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic focuses on women's adaptive capacities of women in crisis, no studies foreground affective labor and care work as essential elements of women's economic and social contributions. Our research shows that not only was emotional management, caregiving and relational work crucial to the resilience and success of the female entrepreneurs interviewed here, but affective labor stood out as an essential element of their success, both in maintaining family well-being and in their entrepreneurial resilience.

Our study reveals the utility of affective labor within the lives of Thai female entrepreneurs and the intricate ways in which they operated within a distinct framework of "family-as-structure" rather than a conventional "economy-as-structure" approach. Within this framework, the family plays a central role in shaping how women engage in and carry out affective labor. The family offers essential resources such as material support, knowledge and emotional care, which contribute to the success of their businesses and the family's well-being.

The female entrepreneurs, in turn, attributed their success to the increased reliance on family support and undertaking affective labor within the family unit. In contrast to the notion that the COVID-19 crisis underscored entrenched gender stereotypes (Basu, 2023; ILO, 2021), our findings illustrate different results. Our respondents reported increases in respect, material and financial benefits, opportunities to learn skills, deepen relationships with loved ones and contribute to the community. In this way, and in line with Meliou's analysis (2019), we see how the family, in adopting "resources of care" fosters resilience—not only for the female entrepreneurs but also for the family unit as a whole.

Our research reveals that, in addition to family support, female entrepreneurs utilized resources for product innovation, market diversification and production enhancement—initiatives previously unexplored in their careers prior to the pandemic. These findings advance Anggadwita *et al.* (2023), showing how female entrepreneurs developed adaptive capacities, combined with "resources of care" provided by the family, to foster resilience. Such a perspective enriches our understanding of the conditions, dynamics and outcomes of affective labor and its multifaceted contributions to the family business and its well-being.

Our findings illustrate the limitations of analyzing affective labor through a purely economic lens. While the Marxist viewpoint takes at face value the notion that the economic structure which produces and constitutes affective labor is inherently exploitative in nature (Oksala, 2016), our site of analysis moves beyond that of the economy to that of the family as the primary structure through which the entrepreneur's labor can be understood. This discussion of family-as-unit-of-analysis is fundamentally different from an understanding of labor as confined within a corporation or a business framework. Two arguments that differentiate affective labor in the context of the family from affective labor in the context of the economy come to mind:

First, no one—be it a person or the broader economic system—forced the entrepreneurs we interviewed to undertake their work activities. In contrast to a Marxist analysis of affective labor's structural dynamics, the entrepreneurs in our study were not bound to their labor due to the economy's demands. Instead, they undertook their labor freely, and in order for the family to survive and thrive. While the family business itself is certainly tied to the broader economic structure, the women's labor within it is not: our data show that the Thai female entrepreneurs chose their vocations agentively, often rejecting opportunities to undertake other vocations in service to the family.

Moreover, and importantly, the data presented here reveal that in the context of entrepreneurship in Thailand, affective labor was undertaken not only by the entrepreneurs themselves but also by the family as a whole. That is, not only were entrepreneurs expected to perform care work and other types of affective labor, so too were their husbands, fathers, brothers, mothers, sisters and elderly family members. This finding challenges the notion that affective labor is inherently gendered and, in its gendered, or "feminized" manifestation, is subsequently exploitative of women who undertake it. Rather, affective labor provided a

balancing function within the family, allowing women to offload the burdens of care work (seen as traditionally “feminized” vocations) and enabling greater familial resilience.

While the literature on affective labor as conceptualized by [Hardt and Negri \(2000\)](#) and [Hochschild \(1979\)](#) portrays it as a negative, limiting factor that restricts women’s work, strips their agency and perpetuates the economy’s dependence on this type of labor for its maintenance, in contrast, our data show that affective labor undertaken by both the entrepreneurs and their family members was experienced in a positive light. Agency was not denied, but rather, cultivated as a primary outcome of this labor. The female entrepreneurs we interviewed were not being used or exploited for their performance of affect within the context of their labor; rather, in line with the work of [Newburry et al. \(2008\)](#) and [Ruderman et al. \(2002\)](#) who acknowledge the complementarity between gendered skills and women’s increased business acumen, the affective labor undertaken by all members of the family unit fostered greater resilience on the part of the entrepreneurs themselves.

Viewing the family unit as a site of analysis requires us to reimagine and understand the terms, meaning and consequences of affective labor as an analytical category. Through widening our lens, we see that the performance of affective labor in this context is not unproductive but in fact, serves to maintain the family unit while mitigating the burden of capitalism’s negative effects on the entrepreneurs.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an important opportunity to examine the dynamics of women’s entrepreneurship in a new and novel way. In contrast to previous understandings of women’s entrepreneurship, the context of the pandemic illuminated that affective labor and resources of care were, in fact, central to the entrepreneurs’ survival and success. Thus, these aspects of labor emerged as an important site of inquiry and contribute to a broader understanding of female entrepreneurship writ large. In times of crisis, female entrepreneurs must turn not only to their individual capacities and capabilities but also to relational means of support.

In Thailand, female entrepreneurs used resources of care as a primary function of their work, and affective labor played an enabling rather than hindering role. To our surprise, gendered expectations and the dominant role of the family-as-unit-of-analysis gave rise to increased achievement, fulfillment and success. Respondents reported starting and developing businesses with the support and active participation of their families—enabling them to access strong emotional support and material resources along with the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another. The family-centric nature of their work enabled the entrepreneurs to venture into businesses rooted in tradition and heritage, ultimately contributing to both economic success and the preservation of cherished family legacies. For the Thai female entrepreneurs, having the family’s unwavering support for their commodified labor was not antithetical to their roles as wives, daughters, mothers, sisters or members of the family unit. Moreover, the affective labor of the extended family enabled and enhanced the achievement of their business success. Embracing change, the entrepreneurs learned to cope with the challenges of the pandemic while rekindling connections with loved ones, developing new marketable skills, embracing change and exploring alternative avenues to sustain and develop their businesses. Despite the disruptions of the pandemic, women’s affective labor was experienced in an overwhelmingly positive light.

The streets in most cities in Thailand are bustling again. The pandemic has become a distant afterthought, and female entrepreneurs are back to work, selling their wares, engaging in professional networks and managing day-to-day business operations in both urban and rural areas. While future directions in research on women’s entrepreneurship may turn their attention to post-pandemic areas of inquiry, it is crucial to reflect on the “pause” these women experienced during these long years of crisis. For it is often through crisis that we come to understand the conditions that enable new social dynamics to come into play and resilience to be found.

Note

1. We note that due to the reliance on existing networks and Facebook usage, participants were limited to urban-dwelling, Thai-speaking small-business owners, and did not include marginalized groups such as rural and ethnic minority (i.e. non-Thai-speaking) populations. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to all demographics of female entrepreneurs in Thailand.

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