

Beyond Essential and Non-Essential: Migrant Women Entrepreneurs' Experiences of COVID-19 in the UK

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Abstract

This qualitative exploratory study explores how migrant women entrepreneurs in the UK experienced and responded to the COVID-19 crisis in the UK, in childcare, food retail, and hospitality businesses. The empirical material presented in the paper is part of a bigger exploratory study on women entrepreneurs during COVID. Drawing on four qualitative case studies, it examines how government designations of “essential” and “non-essential” services, exclusion from formal relief schemes, and the weight of caregiving responsibilities shaped entrepreneurial pathways.

The analysis shows that motives for entrepreneurship were multi-layered, combining necessity, passion, and family considerations, and varied across sectors. Crisis conditions were strongly structured by sectoral boundaries: while childcare and hospitality providers faced enforced closure, food retail businesses remained open but operated under intense strain. Formal support was often inaccessible, leading women to blend welfare, community ties, and family labour as alternative mechanisms.

Responses were further filtered through identities as mothers, migrants, and community members, which influenced how entrepreneurs navigated disruption. Post-crisis trajectories reflected not only economic outcomes of recovery, stabilisation, or plateau, but also the emotional legacies of stress, fatigue, and faith.

Key words: Migrant women entrepreneurs, COVID-19, Crisis response, Childcare and hospitality sectors, Sectoral boundaries, United Kingdom

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