

Innovative Decision-making and Ambiguity: Women Entrepreneurs Exploring Internationalisation Opportunities

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Abstract

The ongoing economic impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic upon national and international economies has provided a novel set of challenges and barriers for organisations; particularly for small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This has led to an increased focus upon sustainable decision making and long-term survival and growth strategies, such as internationalisation opportunities, for SMEs during obscure times and fluctuating economies. Thus, examining how SMEs within ambiguous economies are adopting innovative decision-making to continue to sustain and grow their enterprises provides a vital perspective and understanding of not only enterprise survival but enterprise growth during times of economic uncertainty. This chapter proposes a conceptual framework that explores internationalisation opportunity through an intersectional lens. The framework depicts that intersectionality as an enabler during ambiguous times for Maldivian women entrepreneurs generates innovative decision-making towards internationalisation as part of sustainable growth practices. The conceptual framework offers theoretical implications for empirical studies of an inductive or deductive nature and offers pragmatic importance for women entrepreneurs considering internationalisation through sustainable growth during obscure times and fluctuating economies. This chapter contributes to the growing body of knowledge in the field of international entrepreneurship, particularly innovative decision-making, and sustainable growth through internationalisation opportunities of women entrepreneurs, whilst advancing our understanding of gender and entrepreneurship studies. Studying innovative decision-making and sustainable growth practices of women entrepreneurs additionally provides a new perspective to intersectional works within entrepreneurial growth during uncertain times.

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Introduction

Women entrepreneurs perform an equal role in their economies and often explore sustainable growth through internationalisation opportunities, as they display one of the most flourishing type of entrepreneurial activity. In spite of this, international entrepreneurship scholars have largely focused on men entrepreneurs (Mostafiz and Goh, 2018). Whilst attention is beginning to be paid to women entrepreneurs within international entrepreneurship (Khan, 2015), studies in this area are still underwhelmed. As innovation closely aligns in the decision-making of entrepreneurs to internationalise their business (Golovko and Valentini, 2011; Saridakis *et al.*, 2019), innovative decision-making plays a more significant role within contexts and settings of ambiguity and uncertainty. Global markets across many nations are experiencing ambivalent landscapes, such as the rapid dispersal of COVID-19 and climate change related impacts. To this end entrepreneurs and businesses have an urgency to implement innovation to continue to be competitive in local and international markets. Innovative decision-making and internationalisation are complex procedure for entrepreneurs, and it becomes even further perplexing during uncertainty.

Women owned enterprises have evidenced a noteworthier quality of entrepreneurial activity (Verzhinina *et al.*, 2020) and increasing scholarly interest is focused on how inhibited female entrepreneurs manage and grow their businesses in socially embedded gendered environments (García and Welter, 2013; Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2019; Lassalle and Shaw, 2021). Nonetheless, the study of international opportunity recognition has been dominated by the concept of 'male entrepreneurs' for too long (Mostafiz and Goh, 2018); which has led to little understanding of women entrepreneurs intentions concerning international entrepreneurship and opportunity (Mas-Tur *et al.*, 2015; Ratten and Tajeddini, 2018; Jafari-Sadeghi *et al.*, 2021;

Hussain, 2022). This chapter aims to narrow this knowledge gap through an intersectional lens concerning international opportunity recognition and exploring how innovative decision-making is central to sustainable growth during uncertain times.

Intersectional works ordinarily enquire into the oppression and disadvantages that manifest through multiple intersectional social categories (del Río-González *et al.*, 2021) often creating more challenges for female entrepreneurs, as a disadvantage group of entrepreneurs. This chapter applies an intersectional lens to explore how intersectionality can be capitalised upon through innovative decision-making to cognise internationalisation opportunities during ambiguous times. In this fashion, this chapter offers a conceptual framework placing intersectionality at the forefront in aiding internationalisation opportunity for women entrepreneurs within ambivalent landscapes, effectuating innovative decision-making (and sustainable decision making) during internationalisation opportunity recognition.

This chapter is structured as follows. The following section offers the study context, whilst section three contains the theoretical background regarding women and entrepreneurship; internationalisation opportunity recognition; innovative decision-making; and an overview of intersectionality. Thereafter, a conceptual framework is offered to exhibit intersectional social categories are empowering towards internationalisation opportunity and foster innovative decision-making during ambivalent times. The chapter concludes with theoretical implications, and directions for future research.

Study Context

The Independent Republic of Maldives, the lowest lying country - with an average elevation of 1.5 meters above sea level (Shakeela and Becken, 2015) - is inclusive of 1,149 atoll islands totalling to 227.4-km² land area (Naseer and Hatcher, 2004), lies in the heart of the Indian Ocean (Magnan and Duvat, 2020). Despite being positioned southwest of India and Sri Lanka, Maldives' climate is tropical meaning that it is fervent year-round but also incurs monsoons. This positions Maldives' islands in an opportune space for tourism due to hosting 3.1% of the world's coral biomass and home to diverse marine organisms (Peterson, 2013). The issue of marginalisation, poverty and inequality that persists across the population on atolls that are positioned in certain geographical, social and economic locations "remains a burden" (Giampiccoli *et al.*, 2020:431). Census (2014) statistics illuminate the population of Maldives to be at 437,535 people (MBS, 2022a), though it is more likely to be at around 540,000 according to The World Bank (2022). It is anticipated that in the country's capital city, Male - also the 'concrete jungle', that over 64% of the Maldivian population inhabit the region by 2054 (MBS, 2022a), whilst currently over 30% reside in Male (The World Bank, 2022). Islam is the main

religion within in Maldives, having been prevalent for over 800 years (Zahir, 2022). Within South Asia, the Maldives has the highest per capita income (Asian Development Bank, 2015; MSB, 2022c).

Maldives is befitting in this study context, as it has and continues to prevail through ambiguous times. Maldives is particularly fragile in the way that it is prone to natural disasters, climate change impacts, economic shocks and the effects of the pandemic. Due to their positioning, small sized islands and low elevated islands (Magnan and Duvat, 2020) they are extremely vulnerable to natural disasters. Such as the tsunami of 2004 (Kench *et al.*, 2006), which blighted all of Maldives' islands except nine, as result of an earthquake in the Indian Ocean. Environmental vulnerability like ocean pollution (Imhof *et al.*, 2017), microplastics (Shiyana *et al.*, 2022) and climate change related vulnerabilities including increasing threat of rising sea levels, extreme weather, coral bleaching and beach erosion (Shakeela and Becken, 2015), threaten the future of not only the islands but also the nation.

Not only is tourism a heavily relied upon industry within Maldives, the country is a globally renowned tourist destination. Evidence points towards the rapid growth of tourism (Shakeela and Becken, 2015) through an increasing number of resorts, hotels and guest houses (Magnan and Duvat, 2020) spanning 1190 islands within 26 natural atolls (Giampiccoli *et al.*, 2020). This is transcended through the marketing of 'Sun, Sea and Sand', water-related activities and unsurpassed island facilities (Kundur, 2012), which enriches the tourism experience. At least 20% of the Maldivian population works within this sector (MBS, 2022b). Fishing and agriculture follow from the tourism industry as the three largest industries of Maldives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when global travel restrictions were in place, this gravely impacted Maldives' tourism industry. This led to the country in reassessing its resilience to such external uncertainty (The World Bank, 2022), whilst reviving its tourism and economy after the damaging impacts of the pandemic.

Maldives exhibits a low unemployment rate, with 96.2% the Maldivian population employed (MBS, 2022b). However, contradictory evidence illumines high levels of unemployment amongst populations on atolls (MBS, 2022c). The distinctive settings of its islands, particularly their remoteness from the capital city, places, its geographical location and limited populations per island places Maldives in an optimal condition for entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial opportunities (Giampiccoli *et al.*, 2020). Entrepreneurship studies within the Maldives have generally concluded that a positive relationship exists between Maldivian women entrepreneurs' success and lack of access to finance and networks, social expectations and undeveloped infrastructure. Though Zulham *et al.*'s (2022) study examining Maldivian women entrepreneurs revealed a negative relationship between success and underdeveloped

infrastructure. This is perhaps the reason that Maldivian women entrepreneurs look towards internationalisation opportunities to neighbouring countries or culturally similar countries such as Malaysia and Singapore.

Women and Entrepreneurship

It is widely recognised that recent works examining women entrepreneurs intentions for internationalisation opportunities and contribution to international entrepreneurship are sparse (Mas-Tur *et al.*, 2015; Ratten and Tajeddini, 2018; Jafari-Sadeghi *et al.*, 2021; Hussain, 2022). As women's entrepreneurship is seen as a potential for increasing human resource who can overcome a range of economic challenges and subsequently is essential for achieving economic stability and sustainability (García and Welter, 2013; Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2019). It is championed that encouraging women to participate in entrepreneurial activity in the finest program a state can offer increases the rate of its economic growth and employment generation (Mostafiz and Goh, 2018; Bunagan *et al.*, 2020). This has led to many governments assuming an invested interest towards empowering women through entrepreneurial activity and increasing their participation in new venture creation (Mostafiz and Goh, 2018).

Several works have illuminated that start-ups and SMEs were subject to substantial risks during COVID-19, which emerged in early 2020, due to their infancy, restricted scope, liability of newness and smallness of size (Afshan *et al.*, 2021). According to data from the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020), over 50% of SMEs witnessed significant income losses and were obliged into insolvency. Women entrepreneurs were more severely affected than men, since they were seen to experience more vulnerable circumstances (Grandy *et al.*, 2020; Lazić *et al.*, 2020). As Manolova *et al.* (2020:481) specified, COVID-19 "disproportionately affected women entrepreneurs as their firms [were] younger and smaller".

Women entrepreneurs habitually experience innate obstacles and prejudice (Williams *et al.*, 2020). Impediments faced by women entrepreneurs arise from gender discrimination challenges, work-family conflicts, difficulties raising capital (Villaseca *et al.*, 2020), unstable businesses, economic and political environments (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2019), socio-cultural norms and values (Afshan *et al.*, 2021) and more. These factors continue to impact women entrepreneurs including their internationalisation decision-making. It is worth noting that the impacts of such factors have been further amplified during COVID-19 (Grandy *et al.*, 2020).

Due to the uncertainty, unpredictability and severe global impact, i.e. lockdown policies and large-scale disruptions of global supply chains, of the pandemic (Grandy *et al.*, 2020; Lazić *et*

al., 2020), globally women entrepreneurs have suffered the burden of unpaid work, additional childcare duties, elderly caregiving and home-schooling, in addition to sustaining their enterprise. A study from Quebec revealed that 60% of women entrepreneurs reported a 50% reduction in productivity as a result of COVID-19, which is nearly three times the rate reported by men (Grandy *et al.*, 2020).

Various entrepreneurial internationalisation theories have been developed and several studies, both regionally and nationally, have been conducted that consider facets linked to behaviours and interpersonal relationships, commercial activities and the environment that influences the internationalisation processes of women led enterprises (McClelland, 2004; Pergelova, 2018; Mostafiz and Goh, 2018; Williams *et al.*, 2020; Jafari-Sadeghi *et al.*, 2021). However, the distinctive entrepreneurial culture of Maldives arguably renders these theoretical models insignificant, as internationalisation opportunities are sought earlier in their entrepreneurial venture to overcome the challenges of underdeveloped local infrastructure and the ambiguity around operating across multiple islands.

Internationalisation Opportunity Recognition

International entrepreneurship is the process of “discovery, enactment, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities across national borders” (Oviatt and McDougall, 2005:540). Within international entrepreneurship studies, international opportunity recognition has been studied by various scholars (Zahra *et al.*, 2005; Kontinen and Ojala, 2011a, 2011b; Angelsberger *et al.*, 2017; Faroque *et al.*, 2021). For the purposes of this chapter, international opportunity is defined as the process of opportunity recognition and opportunity development (Di Gregorio *et al.*, 2021). Townsend and Harkins (2005) define opportunity recognition as a ‘skill’ for those entrepreneurs who can monitor and examine external markets and discover economic opportunities through a cognitive transformation. This can be perceived through penetrating a new market, establishing a new venture or developing an existing venture across borders (Christensen *et al.*, 1990). International entrepreneurial opportunity recognition is a cognitive ability that enables those who can intellectually process information to identify an unexploited opportunity (Kirzner, 1973; Shane, 2003; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). This ability includes personal characteristics, such as human capital (Shane, 2000; Lumpkin and Lichtenstein, 2005; Siegel and Renko, 2012) and social capital (Ozgen and Baron, 2007) which is associated with available internal and external resources and managerial skills to mobilise those resources (Vahlne and Johanson, 2013). The chances of international opportunity recognition is further increased if the entrepreneur is in possession of more

financial incentives (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021) and technological competencies (Knight and Cavusgil, 2004; Biancone *et al.*, 2021).

Unfortunately, works examining international entrepreneurial opportunity recognition have been dominated through a focus on men entrepreneurs (Mostafiz and Goh, 2018) and has not considered women as a distinct category of entrepreneurs until somewhat recently (Khan, 2015), despite women entrepreneurs playing an equal role to their home countries' economy. This latter point has been compared with men entrepreneurs in several countries (De Bruin *et al.*, 2006; Langowitz and Minniti, 2007). Entrepreneurship studies about women entrepreneurs largely focus on personal characteristics of women entrepreneurs, such as management and negotiation skills (Kim, 2006a; Kim, 2006b; Roper and Scott, 2009; Sara and Peter, 1998) or risk-taking and decision-making (Fabowale *et al.*, 1995). Although, traditionally personal characteristics of entrepreneurs were a principal success factor for the international expansion of their enterprises, others, such as digital technologies, can affect international market knowledge and democratise entrepreneurship (Pergelova *et al.*, 2019). Thus, highlighting the urgency to consider female entrepreneurship concerning internationalisation opportunities in more depth. Innovative decision-making, particularly at times of uncertainty and ambiguity, can enhance the internationalisation process; the subsequent section explores this in further detail.

Innovative Decision-making

Innovation and internationalisation are vital elements for business survival and growth in the globalised world (Lisboa *et al.*, 2011; Halilem *et al.*, 2014; Love and Roper, 2015; Freixanet *et al.*, 2021) as it makes firms more competitive in the global market (Genc *et al.*, 2019). This is particularly of importance for entrepreneurs and enterprises with limited resources (Genc *et al.*, 2019) where the process of internationalisation is associated with higher level of risk. SMEs are often more flexible to create an innovative output (Duran *et al.*, 2016) which places them aptly to take on the risks of internationalisation. Regarding business performance, innovation and internationalisation are interconnected (Golovko and Valentini, 2011; Saridakis *et al.*, 2019); though the decision-making process holds weightier complexity, risk and uncertainty within international markets (Hsu *et al.*, 2013; Ray *et al.*, 2018), as SMEs do not have the same level of market knowledge like their home countries. To overcome such uncertainty and complexity, innovation is crucial for entrepreneurs to obtain competitive advantage within a foreign market (Lisboa *et al.*, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2012; Biçakcioğlu-Peynirci *et al.*, 2020)

SMEs with higher levels of innovation are increasingly likely to engage with the internationalisation process, like exporting (Alayo *et al.*, 2021). This is because innovation creates international opportunities for entrepreneurs (Knight and Cavusgil, 2004) and increases the chance of internationalisation for the SMEs. Hence, entrepreneurs could exploit innovative decision-making to capitalise on internationalisation opportunities. Entrepreneurs can modify their products or services to cater to foreign markets based on their experience within the market (Sousa *et al.*, 2020) or exploit opportunities through their ethnic, religious or cultural similarities. Innovation is crucial amongst entrepreneurs in recognising internationalisation opportunities but also towards the sustainable development of their enterprise(s) (Silvestre, 2014). As the external environment of entrepreneurs quickly evolves and fluctuates, entrepreneurs are required to continuously reshape their innovative outputs and thinking to be compatible within their market (Huisingh *et al.*, 2013). The prevalence of studies in this area emphasise the role of innovation concerning sustainable development (Silvestre, 2015). However, the process of innovation development is complex dynamic and uncertain (Silvestre and Țîrcă, 2019) but when successful, entrepreneurs can recognise successful internationalisation opportunities. Innovative decision-making and internationalisation opportunity realisation can be aided by an intersectional lens. The following section draws attention to the intersectionality framework and how it has insofar been adopted.

Intersectionality

The responsibility, agency, and decision-making power of entrepreneurs in relation to how they initiate manage and grow their businesses can be attributed to social structures based on characteristics such as age, gender, race, migration, ethnicity, nationality, class, health, sexual orientation, and place. Recognising the compounding effects of multiple intersections, the complexity and fluidity of identities are vital for a deeper understanding of how female entrepreneurs act and behave throughout the entrepreneurial process. Intersectionality has recently become a *cynosure* within female entrepreneurship studies, as scholars are increasingly ascertaining and emphasising that multiple social categories such as gender, race, religion, class, culture and location interconnect and entwine to manifest as power or oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990; Atewologun, 2018; Dy, 2020). The intersection of these multiple social categories as either power or oppression materialise through lived experience (Walby *et al.*, 2012; Romero and Valdez, 2016; Zeinali, 2016) owing to the uneven dispersal of power (Dy and Agwunobi, 2018).

Emerging through Black feminist and critical legal scholarship, intersectionality has been widely adopted in studies transcending the field of entrepreneurship, including law, politics, equality and social opportunity (Nash, 2008; Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2008; Fielden and Davidson, 2012). Entrepreneurship researchers have enquired into intersectionality related to entrepreneurship opportunity i.e. Essers and Benschop, 2007, 2009; Essers et al., 2010; Dhamoon, 2011; Forson, 2013; Knight, 2016. Lassalle and Shaw (2021:1496) express how intersectionality is apt for deliberating enigmatic experiences and phenomena of individuals' heterogenous backgrounds who are "situated at the intersection of different complex and oppressive structures".

An intersectional lens contends that society is traditionally prejudiced, and as a consequence supremacy, power, advantage and resources are dispersed unequally (Dy and Agwunobi, 2018). Intersectionality enables researchers to evaluate the interconnectedness of social categories (Atewologun, 2018), which, for instance, allows the impact of gender, race, religion, culture, class and location to be examined concurrently. On account of these social categories being individually evaluated through lived experience, women's experiences are cultivated in another way than if they are intersected social categories (Styhre and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008; Gopaldas, 2013). Although scholars can offer no concrete reasoning or rationale why gender, race, religion, culture and class offer women power and privilege (Azmitia and Thomas, 2015), intersectionality can enhance studies and existing knowledge regarding how women entrepreneurs can empower themselves through their intersecting social categories in exploring internationalisation opportunities. Evaluating multiple social categories in concert with one another can offer new understandings and insights into women entrepreneurs' diversified roles, manifold identities and individual experiences (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2008), particularly for women entrepreneurs looking at internationalisation. On that account, each social category is inherent in its intersection with one another as women entrepreneurs' experience towards internalisation opportunities are not homogenous.

Some scholars focus on the intersectional approach showing the way entrepreneurs' social identities can overlap, creating compounding experiences of discrimination and exclusion. As such, discriminated and marginalised entrepreneurs may undoubtedly feel more excluded than people who fit into normative patterns. Works by Browne and Misra (2003), and Barrett and Vershinina (2017) have proven intersectionality to adversely affect women. Barrett and Vershinina (2017) unveiled that Polish entrepreneurs located within the UK faced negative experiences as their ethnicity and origin of birth eclipsed their entrepreneurial identity. Similarly, Browne and Misra's (2003) work unmasked how migrant women workers within the US were unfairly disadvantaged. Despite holding professional qualifications and originating from affluent backgrounds, they were obliged to accept low-paid work and appreciate that they were

able to secure a position in the US. Countering this narrative, recent works have explored the inter-relational dynamics of intersectional social categories and imparted that such inequalities can be reframed. Stead (2017) investigated how women entrepreneurs could mobilise their influence and resources, by adopting strategies of belonging, careful negotiation and multiple identities, and depending on the markets they target, the women either concealed their dissimilarities or amplified them. These works point towards how intersectional social categories manifest as oppression and multiple inequalities, rather than advantage and power, leading to a knowledge gap of how intersectional social categories can be exploited to manifest as power and privilege.

Internationalisation Opportunity and Innovative Decision-making

Although there is greater focus on intersectionality manifesting as disadvantage and oppression (del Río-González *et al.*, 2021), there are a few works examining intersectionality through power and privilege in an esoteric way (Kao and Benstead, 2021). The conceptual framework offered in figure 1 enables intersectional social categories to manifest as advantage and power for Maldivian women entrepreneurs. For instance, Maldivian women entrepreneurs could exploit gender and religion to explore internationalisation opportunities in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore where infrastructure for sustainably growing their enterprise is more advanced than Maldives underdeveloped infrastructure (Zulham *et al.* 2022). Maldivian women entrepreneurs could appropriate gender and ethnicity, or gender, religion and ethnicity to cognise an international opportunity for their business through utilising networks that they can connect with or become part of, or develop international connections, through these intersecting social categories. The intersection of gender, ethnicity and language could be advantageous for Maldivian women in determining a sustainable growth and internationalisation opportunity in Singapore, where one of the country's main languages includes Malay. By accessing a pool of resources women entrepreneurs can marshal these, like human (Siegel and Renko, 2012; Shane, 2000) and social capital (Ozgen and Baron, 2007), through ambiguous landscapes to realise internationalisation opportunities. Thereby sustainably growing their businesses during ambivalent times; this conceptualises innovative decision-making which transpires through women entrepreneurs successfully navigating their enterprises through uncertain times.

Key point 1: Women entrepreneurs can adopt multiple intersectional social categories as advantage or power to recognise internationalisation opportunities.

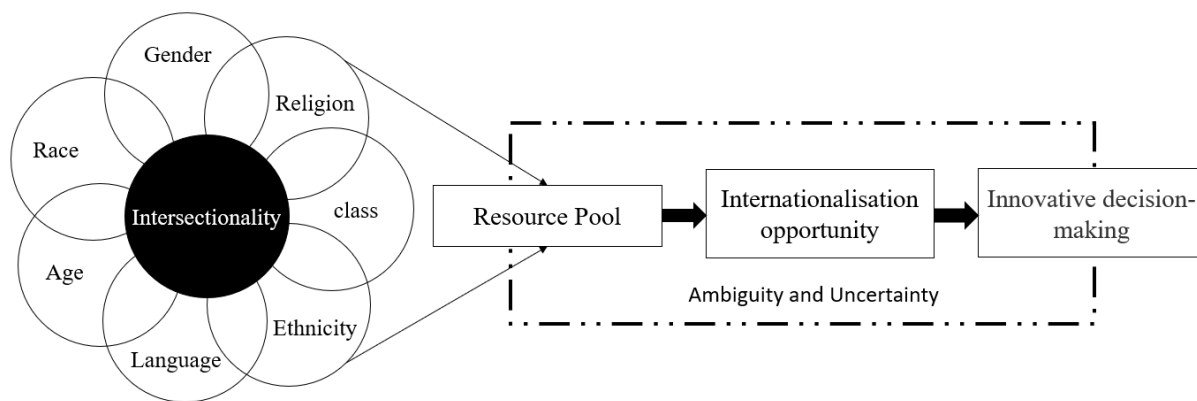


Figure 1. Internationalisation opportunity and innovative decision-making conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework illustrates how multiple intersectional social categories support decision-making through innovatively exploiting these categories to access suitable resources including capital. Multiple intersectional social categories manifest as an enabler in accessing resource and capital for internationalising their business. Intersectionality could behave as a support system in innovative decision-making. It is important to distinguish that the innate prejudice and marginalisation faced by women entrepreneurs (Williams *et al.*, 2020) is not diminished; though women can espouse their multiple intersectional social categories as advantageous in accessing networks, resources and capital within the internationalisation process, particularly where Maldivian women entrepreneurs are enduring the challenges brought about by the country's ambiguous landscape. As intersectionality manifests as power, this enables women entrepreneurs the privilege to access a resource pool, with better access to resources (Ozgen and Baron, 2007) and capital (Lumpkin and Lichtenstein, 2005) women are quicker to perceive internationalisation opportunities. The intertwined and simultaneously experienced social categories may produce varying levels of advantage and power for entrepreneurs shaping their decision-making and behaviour. Maldivian women entrepreneurs have succeeded on the capitalisation of these hidden assets, marshalling resources such as personal networks, mentors, knowledge, and markets.

Key point 2: When manifesting as advantage or power, intersectionality enables access to a pool of resources that support innovative decision-making.

As Maldivian women entrepreneurs within ambivalent contexts are somewhat pressured into identifying other or creative opportunities, such as internationalisation this produces innovative decision-making. Innovative decisions transpire from the 'creative' or 'other' opportunities that women entrepreneurs consider or identify to not only sustain their enterprise but also sustainably grow their business. This relates to how increased innovation employed by entrepreneurs in their business increases the likelihood of internationalisation (Alayo *et al.*,

2021), where entrepreneurs realising internationalisation opportunities frequently stems from innovation (Knight and Cavusgil, 2004). In this innovative decision-making process, intersectional characteristics transmute into hidden assets to enhance the process such as quickening the recognition of opportunities to sustainably grow their enterprise, particularly through uncertainty. Thereby, the decision-making process is unconsciously influenced by women entrepreneurs' multiple intersectional social categories.

Key point 3: The higher number of intersectional characteristics that women entrepreneurs utilise as advantage leads to increased innovative decision-making and recognition of internationalisation opportunities.

Ambiguous and uncertain situations invariably trigger negative emotions such as fear and anxiety. Such as, the tsunami of 2004 (Kench *et al.*, 2006), which felled all but 9 atolls. The islands' population and government were forced to rebuild from nothing. The growing concern over microplastics (Shiyana *et al.*, 2022) and ocean pollution (Imhof *et al.*, 2017), mainly derived from plastic waste, amongst climate-related impacts of sea level rise, extreme weather, coral bleaching and beach erosion (Shakeela and Becken, 2015) and recovering from the impacts of COVID-19, significantly contributes to the country's uncertainty and future resilience. Accordingly, by operating in these ubiquitously uncertain and unambiguous environments ensues a unique set of experiences faced by these Maldivian women entrepreneurs, through navigating their enterprise within this type of environment. Illuminating these unique and heterogenous experiences of Maldivian women entrepreneurs unveils how women entrepreneurs are conditioned to cognitively consider sustainably, particularly sustainable growth ideas, due to the ongoing threats of their nation, in order to thrive in their business.

For Maldivian women entrepreneurs, a positive disposition, despite the country's uncertainty, and sustainable thinking aided them to be more innovative in their internationalisation process. For instance, innovatively sustaining their businesses through adapting or creatively management during COVID-19 enabled these women to innovatively make decisions regarding international opportunities, especially where such opportunities may not exist within the Maldives. These positive emotions and outlook, coupled with information availability, further promoted resilience and adaptability resulting in the women changing or altering their thinking and businesses as part of sustainable growth. As ambiguity ultimately restricts the rationality of the decision-maker and the amount of accessible information (regarding possibilities and the future), positivity and optimism for innovative decision-making is a rather valuable resource (Afshan *et al.*, 2021).

The multiple intersecting social categories of Maldivian women entrepreneurs enabled them to integrate and synthesise various points of view and access information (Huisingsh *et al*, 2014), leading to sustainable and innovative internationalisation opportunity identification. Conventional approaches to decision-making start with facts and, if none are available, to meticulously obtain them before making any decision is impossible to apply (Duran *et al*, 2018). Contrarily, being fraught with uncertainty, these women entrepreneurs begin with what and whom they know and positively exploit their intersectional social hierarchies to determine an advantageous innovative internationalisation decision within the constraints of ignorance (Freixanet *et al.*, 2021). In doing so and accessing the resources and/or capital and social resources (Ozgen and Baron, 2007) within the resource pool enhances the likelihood of sustainable decisions for internationalisation; this is deemed as innovative decision-making.

Key point 4: The presence of ambiguity engenders more sustainable decisions and growth opportunities through internationalisation processes.

Conclusion

This chapter was grounded in the intersectionality framework to inform this research and aid articulation of how Maldivian women entrepreneurs at the intersection of their SMEs internationalisation processes, cultural contexts and gender identities generate innovative decision-making during challenging yet ambivalent times. The intersectional lens offers a narrowed focus on discrete processes, effectively allowing not only Maldivian women entrepreneurs but women entrepreneurs in other countries situated within ambiguous economies to mature their businesses and sustainable growth through adopting innovative decision-making. Indeed, intersectionality provided an apt lens through which to analyse how Maldivian women entrepreneurs decided on the internationalisation of their business situated at the intersection of different structures, attributes and contexts in their entrepreneurial activities. This provides a paramount perspective in recognising how SMEs can survive but also how entrepreneurs can identify internationalisation opportunities during times of economic uncertainty. It is furthermore crucial for Maldivian women entrepreneurs to endorse and reflect upon these experiences, then act accordingly to maintain their innovative edge during uncertain times.

Applying an intersectional lens to explore internationalisation opportunities for women entrepreneurs has enabled the prospect for holistic scrutiny of the potential for the intersection of multiple social categories to be utilised as empowerment rather than being hindered by multiple oppressive structures (Dy and Agwunobi, 2018; Dy 2022). By adopting an intersectional lens, this chapter has expanded the mainstream notions of exclusion and

oppression. The conceptual framework offered in figure 1 demonstrates how intersectionality can enable power and privilege within different country contexts through inclusion which generates innovative decision-making towards internationalisation. To this end, creating a more equitable field of international entrepreneurship research.

Theoretical Implications

Women entrepreneurs can pragmatically consider intersectional social categories and how their social categories can be utilised as strengths rather than weaknesses. The conceptual framework would benefit from both inductive and deductive application to empirical studies to test or modify the framework in the context of women entrepreneurs recognising internationalisation opportunities during uncertain times. This chapter contributes to the increasing knowledgebase in three areas. First within international entrepreneurship through sustainable growth and internationalisation opportunity within ambiguous circumstances, second by advancing current knowledge about women entrepreneurs in gender and entrepreneurship works and third towards intersectionality works within entrepreneurship through understanding how intersectionality can manifest as advantage and power inconspicuously.

Future Research

This work recommends a continued and further but empirical application within women entrepreneurs and SME internationalisation research and practice. Another recommendation for furthering this line of research is the foregrounding of an intersectional understanding of the women entrepreneurs who participate or engage in internationalisation processes, without marginalising them but rather empowering them. Future studies could examine the internationalisation process in detail, such as the choice of internationalisation strategies, positioning tactics and the swiftness of the internationalisation process (Di Gregorio *et al.*, 2021). Future works could also differentiate between the exploration and exploitation of internationalisation opportunity through an intersectional lens.

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