

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE GLOBAL DIGITAL AGE: CHALLENGES AND SUCCESS FACTORS

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ABSTRACT

Women entrepreneurs are becoming powerful forces for innovation, change, and economic expansion in the quickly changing digital age. But even with significant advancements, they continue to face particular difficulties in the areas of culture, technology, finances, and structure. By examining significant barriers and pinpointing the essential success factors that allow women to prosper in the digital entrepreneurial ecosystem, this paper investigates the state of women's entrepreneurship in the global digital age. The study also covers case studies, policy implications, and tactics to enable women to take advantage of digital opportunities for long- term company growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the digital revolution has drastically changed entrepreneurial practices by presenting previously unheard-of chances for creativity, scalability, and connectivity. Historically underrepresented in many business fields, women entrepreneurs are now using digital platforms to overcome historical obstacles. Women are leaving their mark in a variety of fields, including fintech, e-commerce, edtech, and creative digital endeavors. However, obstacles that are specific to gender still prevent them from reaching their full potential.

In order to examine how gender, entrepreneurship, and digitalization intersect, this research paper will concentrate on the following topics:

- The difficulties faced by women in the digital entrepreneurial ecosystem.
- The elements that contribute to women entrepreneurs' success in the global digital economy.
- Suggestions for policies and calculated actions to promote inclusive growth.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Digitalization as an Equalizer (UNCTAD, 2021):

- Digital technologies lower entry barriers by reducing the need for physical infrastructure.
- They offer cost-effective tools for marketing, distribution, and networking—particularly beneficial to women facing mobility or social constraints.

Gender Gaps in Access to Digital Skills (OECD, 2020):

- Women globally are underrepresented in ICT-related education and occupations.
- This limits their ability to launch or scale tech-driven businesses.

Structural Barriers to Finance (IFC, 2021):

- Female-led startups receive disproportionately less venture capital.
- According to Crunchbase, only 2.3% of global VC funding went to female-only founding teams in 2020.

Social Norms and Stereotypes (World Bank, 2019):

- Gender norms and patriarchal expectations limit women's participation in entrepreneurship, especially in conservative regions.
- Women are often steered toward "acceptable" sectors like fashion or food, rather than high-growth tech or logistics.

Digital Entrepreneurship as a Catalyst for Inclusion (GEM Women's Entrepreneurship Report, 2022):

- Digital platforms enable women to participate in flexible work arrangements.
- Entrepreneurship from home—via online marketplaces or freelancing platforms—is rising globally among women, especially post-COVID.

Importance of Social Media and Online Branding (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010):

- Social media serves as a tool for visibility, customer engagement, and business development.
- Women, in particular, use Instagram and Facebook to build brand-centric businesses with low startup costs.

Incubators and Ecosystem Support (SheStarts, Women's Startup Lab, etc.):

- Women-focused incubators offer tailored mentoring, funding, and training.
- These initiatives help overcome the 'network gap' that often isolates female founders from influential investors.

Need for Policy and Institutional Support (ILO, 2020):

- Governments play a vital role in providing digital infrastructure, access to markets, and regulatory support.
- Women-specific entrepreneurship policies (e.g., MUDRA Yojana in India, SheTrades in Africa) are critical for inclusive development.

Cybersecurity and Online Safety (UN Women, 2022):

- Online harassment and cyber threats disproportionately affect women.
- Lack of redressal mechanisms in many countries deters women from fully engaging in digital businesses.

Intersectionality in Challenges (Crenshaw, 1989):

- Marginalized women (rural, minority, disabled) face compounded digital exclusion.
- Intersectional approaches in entrepreneurship policy and program design are necessary for equity.

3. METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative research methodology, this paper examines academic literature, policy papers, reports on global entrepreneurship, and case studies of prosperous women-led digital businesses. Additionally, it integrates viewpoints from surveys and interviews with 20 female entrepreneurs from a range of industries and regions.

4. CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

4.1. Digital Divide and Skill Gaps

In many parts of the world, women have limited access to training and digital tools. Digital fluency and STEM education deficiencies limit access to high-growth tech industries.

4.2. Access to Finance

Women-led start-ups find it more difficult to obtain funding due to gender biases in venture capital, limited collateral, and restricted networks, particularly in digital sectors that need early-stage capital.

4.3. Cultural and Social Constraints

In many places, social norms restrict mobility or discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurship, which affects public leadership positions, branding, and networking.

4.4. Cybersecurity and Online Harassment

Women entrepreneurs are frequently more vulnerable to digital threats, data privacy violations, and cyberbullying, which deters them from using online platforms to their full potential.

4.5. Lack of Role Models and Mentorship

Aspirants are unable to confidently follow similar paths in digital entrepreneurship due to a lack of visible and approachable female role models.

5. SUCCESS FACTORS EMPOWERING WOMEN IN DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

5.1. Digital Literacy and Education

Online business courses, coding boot camps, and targeted digital upskilling initiatives have made it possible for more women to take an active role in the digital economy.

5.2. Access to Global Markets via E-commerce

By overcoming conventional retail barriers, women can now reach customers worldwide thanks to platforms like Etsy, Shopify, and Amazon.

5.3. Support Networks and Incubators

Incubators dedicated to women, such as SheStarts and Women Who Tech, offer crucial peer support, funding access, and mentorship.

5.4. Government and Policy Initiatives

Through grants, digital training, and infrastructure support, nations like Canada, India, and Rwanda have implemented policies aimed at promoting the digital inclusion of female entrepreneurs.

5.5. Social Media and Personal Branding

With little initial investment, women are using social media sites like YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn to launch businesses centered on wellness, education, art, and personal brands.

6. CASE STUDIES

6.1 Falguni Nayar – Founder & CEO, Nykaa (India)

• Background:

A former investment banker with Kotak Mahindra, Falguni Nayar founded Nykaa in 2012 as an e-commerce platform specializing in beauty and wellness products.

• Digital Strategy:

- Focused on creating an **omnichannel experience**, integrating online sales with physical stores across India.
- Developed an engaging **content-to-commerce model**, including tutorials, blogs, and influencer partnerships.

• Success Factors:

- Strong brand positioning in a growing beauty market.
- Transparent return policies and reliable logistics, improving trust among online shoppers.
- Use of data analytics for personalized marketing.

• Impact:

- Nykaa became a **unicorn** and later went public, making Nayar one of India's wealthiest self-made women.
- Empowered a new generation of women to consider entrepreneurship in e-commerce and digital branding.

6.2. Richa Kar – Founder of Zivame

Sector: E-commerce (Lingerie & Innerwear) Background:

Richa Kar, an engineering graduate and MBA, founded **Zivame** in 2011. She identified that Indian women often faced discomfort shopping for lingerie in physical stores due to societal taboos.

Use of Digital Strategy:

- Built **India's first online lingerie platform** offering discreet browsing and delivery.
- Developed features like **fit consultants**, online size calculators, and virtual fitting rooms.
- Focused on user privacy, comfort, and education about body confidence and fit.

Challenges:

- Faced criticism and pushback from conservative voices.
- Difficulty securing funding due to perceived social stigma around the product.
- Convincing women to shop for lingerie online in a conservative market.

Success Factors:

- Created an **anonymous and safe environment** for women to shop.
- Used **digital education** (blogs, videos) to raise awareness and normalize the topic.
- First-mover advantage in a niche yet massive market segment.

Outcome:

- Zivame has served millions of women, normalized online innerwear shopping, and inspired similar platforms.
- Acquired by Reliance in 2020.
- Richa Kar became a role model for building taboo-breaking brands in India.

6.3 Shradha Sharma – Founder & CEO, YourStory Sector: Digital Media / Entrepreneurship Background:

Shradha Sharma launched **YourStory** in 2008 as a digital media platform to share untold stories of Indian startups, including women, rural, and social entrepreneurs.

Digital Innovation:

- Built an **independent online platform** before the startup boom fully took off in India.
- Used **multilingual storytelling**, video content, and social media distribution.
- Scaled the platform using data to target content for different geographies and industries.

Challenges:

- Limited investor interest in media-tech at the time.
- Difficulty establishing credibility in a male-dominated ecosystem.
- Operating in a bootstrapped mode for several years.

Success Factors:

- Deep storytelling approach created **community loyalty**.
- Shradha's focus on **inclusivity**, highlighting women and non-metro entrepreneurs.
- Built strong digital reach without heavy reliance on traditional media.

Outcome:

- YourStory is now one of India's leading entrepreneurship media platforms.
- Features over 70,000 entrepreneur stories.
- Shradha Sharma is a prominent voice in digital journalism and women-led innovation.

Entrepreneur	Company	Sector	Digital Leverage	Key Outcome
Falguni Nayar	Nykaa	Beauty e-commerce	Content-to-commerce, omnichannel	Unicorn, IPO success
Richa Kar	Zivame	Lingerie retail	Online privacy, fit tools, social content	Mainstreamed online lingerie sales
Shradha Sharma	YourStory	Digital media	Storytelling, vernacular, social media	India's leading startup media voice

7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Digital Infrastructure for Women:** Ensure broadband access and digital tools in rural and underserved areas.
- **Inclusive Financing Models:** Develop women-friendly VC models, microcredit schemes, and crowdfunding options.
- **Gender-Sensitive Cybersecurity Policies:** Enact strong laws and reporting mechanisms to protect women online.
- **Education and Mentorship:** Encourage partnerships between academia, private sector, and NGOs to offer entrepreneurial training to young women.
- **Recognition and Advocacy:** Promote female role models and celebrate women entrepreneurs through awards, campaigns, and media.

8. CONCLUSION

The global digital age presents both a disruption and a unique opportunity for women entrepreneurs. While digital tools can democratize access and innovation, systemic gender-based challenges continue to inhibit women's entrepreneurial potential. A collaborative approach involving governments, private sectors, educational institutions, and civil society is essential to foster a truly inclusive digital entrepreneurial ecosystem. When women thrive as digital entrepreneurs, economies grow, innovation accelerates, and societies progress toward greater equality.

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