

# Exploring the Marketing Competencies of Women Entrepreneurs in Micro-Small Enterprises (MSEs) in Khartoum State-Sudan

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**Abstract:** This study deals with the marketing competencies and capabilities of women entrepreneurs who own and manage micro-small- and medium (MSMEs) ventures in traditional and non-traditional lines of activities within the urban settings in Khartoum State, Sudan. Entrepreneurial and marketing competencies are part of the dynamic components that contribute to venture survival and success especially for women-owned/ managed MSEs. This study addresses the perceived knowledge gap in the literature regarding the marketing competencies of women entrepreneurs, using the marketing mix approach and the resource-based theory. It is a qualitative study which follows an interpretive approach and applies grounded theory techniques. The study is framed within the Marketing Mix approach and the resource-based theory highlighted within a gendered perspective. It examines how women entrepreneurs perceive and apply the marketing function within their MSEs to maintain success within highly competitive, turbulent and unpredictable markets. In such conditions it is essential to understand what marketing competencies do these women entrepreneurs are endowed with and utilize while practicing the marketing function in their entrepreneurial ventures and thrive for high performance and success.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurial competencies, Entrepreneurial marketing, Capabilities, 'Customer intimacy', Gender, Marketing competencies, Marketing mix, MSEs, Resource-based theory, Social relations and networks, Urban settings, Women entrepreneurs.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 20th century has witnessed a significant focus on women, where improving the status of women became a global imperative and it became necessary to enhance women's economic involvement and contributions. One realm is through increasing the opportunities for productive employment especially for new entrants to the labour force in paid jobs in the formal sector. Another realm is through self-employment and independent ownership of productive resource, for economic empowerment, through the establishment of micro-small enterprises (MSEs). Since the 1990s more women are observed to be getting involved into business startups of various sizes particularly in MSEs.

In Sudan, women's work in general, and establishing business in particular are to a great extent shaped by the overall socio-cultural context. Despite diversity, this context is predominantly governed by sets of value systems and norms that encompass a patriarchal ideology which male supremacy and women subordination, within the family, at work and within the society at large. A strict gender role segregation prevails and transcends the family and the household and has its implications on women's engagement in productive economic activities, especially self-employment, establishing business, and their performance and advancement.

However, in urban settings important transitions, especially increased education, are moderating the manifestations of the gender ideology, and play an important role in changing perceptions towards women's involvement in the economic sector. This has been reflected in the increasing numbers of women who are seekers of viable economic opportunities,

opting for self-employment and starting Micro-Small Enterprises(MSEs). Thus women entrepreneurship has flourished in Sudan with considerable numbers concentrated in Urban markets in Khartoum State.

Women entrepreneurship has grown in scope and complexity, and displays emerging themes that have been arousing interest among researchers, such as, entrepreneurship and gender. In this field, part of the international research included studies about contribution to economic development, factors and experiences of female entrepreneurs (Farah, 2009; Bertaux and Crable, 2007; Botha et al., 2006), training programs and risk capital (Botha et al., 2006), characteristics and types of businesses run by female entrepreneurs; and necessity women- owned enterprises (Iakovidou et al., 2009; Hossain et al., 2009). Relatively, very scant research has been conducted on entrepreneurship in Sudan, with limited focus on female entrepreneurs. Examples of this limited line of studies include: Home-based women MSEs, those supported by Microfinance services in Omdurman (Pitamber, 2000); The Impact of Training on Women's Micro-Enterprise (Leach et al. 2000) ; The Integration of women-owned MSEs in Urban Markets in Khartoum State ( A/Rahman, 2006); Women in food and beverages businesses in Khartoum (Badawi et al. 2008); Emerging Women Entrepreneurs in Sudan: Individual Characteristics, Obstacles and Empowerment (Musa, E.2012); Sudanese Women Entrepreneurship (Welsh and Memili,2013). Despite the fact that these studies cover diverse areas of female entrepreneurial practice and experience non has focused on the 'how' dimension to which entrepreneurial competencies are main contributors. In assuming the managerial functions in their ventures, entrepreneurs are driven by the level of competencies they possess in the various operational fields such as finance, production, marketing, organizing and leadership.

Despite a growing body of literature in the field of entrepreneurial competencies, globally, (Baum and Locke, 2004; Eysteinnsson, and Guaugsson, 2016; Mitchelmore, S. and J. Rowley,2013) there is still a considerable gap of knowledge on entrepreneurial competencies of female entrepreneurs especially within the Sudanese context. Thus, the need arises for studies that can offer more insights and better understanding of entrepreneurial competencies and how they influence the performance of female entrepreneurs.

This study aims at exploring the marketing competencies and capabilities, as one element of the entrepreneurial competencies, of women entrepreneurs and the way in which these entrepreneurs perceive the marketing function and how they assume their role as marketers within their entrepreneurial ventures in Urban markets in Khartoum-Sudan.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to investigate the entrepreneurial competencies that characterize women entrepreneurs while responding to quotidian (daily) needs and challenges to run their businesses, with focus on the marketing competencies and capabilities. It also aims to understand how these competencies shape the practice of the marketing function by women entrepreneurs. Without concern for enumeration and/or measurement of the events studied nor the generalization of the results, this research is classified as exploratory.

This study adheres to the Grounded Theory (GT) methodology using an interpretive approach to deconstruct a social phenomenon, where the actors and their perceptions are considered to play a role in shaping the social reality pertinent to the phenomenon. Thus, the study adopts an epistemological interpretive position, seeking to explain the phenomenon under scrutiny according to the perspective of the participants, without imposing external viewpoints formulated a priori (Strauss and Corbin,1967).

The study is conducted in Khartoum State, which constitutes the biggest business center in the country with the highest number of entrepreneurs in the different sectors. A considerably growing number of female entrepreneurs, especially in non-traditional types of activities, is recognized.

To reach the targeted women entrepreneurs in Khartoum State a non-probability, purposive and snow-ball sampling techniques, based on theoretical saturation rather than a predetermined number of sample elements (Glaser,2002), have been utilized. The sample in a GT methodology research does not obey rigid criteria; the choice of the unit of analysis is basically determined by where the information and the phenomenon to be researched are located. Research sites were selected to achieve a diverse sample that provides many possibilities for comparison, which enables richer data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Focus has been on successful cases (those in business for more than three years) especially from those operating micro-small enterprises (MSEs), in traditional and non-traditional lines of business.

In this research, the key question is about the entrepreneurial marketing competencies of women entrepreneurs, and how they perceive and experience the marketing role in their ventures.

In-depth face-to-face interviews were used for gathering data of the experiences of the recruited participant women entrepreneurs, which allowed the interviewees to report their ideas and experiences freely and flexibly (Strauss & Corbin, 1967; Glaser, 2002; Charmaz, 2006). The data obtained allowed for the emergence of many concepts aligned with the objectives of the study, nature of the phenomenon studied and the methodological and epistemological definitions of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1967; Glaser, 2002; Charmaz, 2006). In this GT qualitative approach an inductive logic was adopted; the researcher made suppositions that emerged from the process of data collection and analysis at an early stage from the field interaction and along the advanced stages. Reference to basic conceptual and theoretical understanding of the entrepreneurial and marketing competencies (Man and Lau, 2005; Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013), guided the interviews and permitted identifying the concepts and categories already learned from the literature. Besides, the interviews facilitated the possible emergence of other context ascribed variables that have been discovered, commented and interpreted throughout the process of analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

One hour in-depth interviews were conducted and took place upon prior arrangements with the participants regarding place and time, and consent to contribute to the study. An iterative process was applied where some participants were reached for further information to fill gaps (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and to clarify some concepts as perceived by the participants to consolidate interpretation and guarantee their relevance. Since the interviews were conducted in Arabic (the local language), field notes were professionally translated and transcribed as soon as possible after each round of interviews. This allowed the process of theoretical sampling to occur. Writing case-based memos right after each interview, sometimes while being in the field, allowed the researcher to capture initial ideas and make comparisons between participants' accounts. These memos enriched data analysis and guided further data collection.

Data analysis followed the paradigm model technique (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), and relied on continuously asking questions, making comparisons and formulating hypothesis that stem from the data. Along the paradigm model a coding process and memo writing went through identifying categories, and their dimensions, pertinent to the phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In this study, most apparent were categories related to the women entrepreneurs' profiles, i.e. their characteristics and traits, to the business i.e. type, size, location, and to the marketing competencies that shaped their experiences and practice. The issues of focus in the interviews revolved around the way these women entrepreneurs perceive themselves and their entrepreneurial practice; their competencies and marketing capabilities, their chances of success and their perception of their ventures' performance. The interpretations of the findings highlighted the emerging concepts which were given relevant meanings, introducing a wide range of disciplinary contextualized perspectives. This has been done by highlighting the relationships between the emerging concepts and comparing with the literature, and also incorporating some relevant observations.

The findings encompassed many categories which were reflective of what have emerged from the data and were grounded on the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The line of reasoning and interpretations guided the findings towards the study objective of understanding how do women entrepreneurs employ their competencies, with focus on marketing competencies and capabilities, to manage their businesses and be successful despite all the challenges they face.

Since this study adheres to the GT methodology within an interpretive perspective, a theoretical and conceptual base is crucial to stimulate theoretical sensitivity, to direct theoretical sampling and to be used as supplementary validations (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **3.1 Entrepreneurial Competencies**

The study of competencies is important for understanding their vital role in business and entrepreneurial practice. Competencies have many facets and applications, and they play a role in business performance and success (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Competencies are distinct because they do not depend only on the attributes of individuals, but also on the situation and social/contextual factors (Hayton and McEvoy, 2006).

Mansfield defines competence as “a certain characteristic existing in someone for producing effective or superior performance” (in Gilley and McMillan, 2009). Armstrong (2006) defines competence as “characteristics – knowledge, skill, mind-set, pattern of thinking – which, at the time of being used, either respectively or in various combinations, produce successful performance” (in Gilley, 2009). Knowledge and skills constitute a hard competency, namely the competence that tends to be more visible, is easily seen in someone and is relatively easier to be developed. Another set of competencies includes self-concept, traits, and motives belong to soft competency, which is more hidden, constitute a person’s personality and are more difficult to measure (Spencer & Spencer, 1993) and to develop.

Mitchelmore and Rowley (2010) offer five categories of competencies specifically identified as follows: entrepreneurial (focus on innovation); businesses and managerial (focus on development of resources and operational and strategic aspects); human relations (focus on culture, leadership and persons); and conceptual and relationship (focus on communication, relationship with stakeholders and decision-making). Some key competencies are associated to the role of the entrepreneur. The recognition and exploitation of opportunities are concepts that distinguish the entrepreneur from the administrator (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Timmons and Spinelli, 2004). Man and Lau (2005) affirm that the competencies of the entrepreneur act as a bridge between the characteristics at individual level and the performance at company level. For these authors, the definition of competency is the total capacity of the entrepreneur to perform his/her professional role successfully. The work by Man and Lau (2002), however, discusses entrepreneurial competencies without much focus on gender distinctions. Thus the theme of gender, needs more development and exploration especially in emerging and developing countries.

### **3.2 Marketing Competencies of Entrepreneurs**

Marketing competencies and Capabilities strongly link to the goals of marketing at the firm level; to enhance the value of the firm’s products in the minds of its current and potential customers. This goal is partly reflected in enhanced sales, through a better understanding of customer needs and distinctive targeting of appropriate customers. To achieve such goals, firms utilize various competencies to employ a number of resources available to them.

Many studies highlight the capabilities used to orchestrate resource inputs involving marketing strategy development and execution (e.g., Capron and Hulland 1999; Day 1994; Morgan et al. 2003 cited in Vorhies and Morgan 2005). From an empirical study based on previous literature, Vorhies and Morgan (2005) identified eight distinct marketing capabilities that are viewed as contributing to business performance; (1) product development, the processes by which firms develop and manage product and service offerings; (2) pricing, the ability to extract the optimal revenue from the firm’s customers ; (3) channel management, the firm’s ability to establish and maintain channels of distribution that effectively and efficiently deliver value to end-user customers;(4) marketing communications, the firm’s ability to manage customer value perceptions; (5) selling, the processes by which the firm acquires customer orders; (6) market information management, the processes by which firms learn about their markets and use market knowledge; (7) marketing planning, the firm’s ability to conceive marketing strategies that optimize the match between the firm’s resources and its marketplace and (8) marketing implementation, the processes by which intended marketing strategy is transformed into realized resource deployment .

High levels of marketing competencies and capabilities, help in designing comprehensive marketing strategies, regarding the different components of the marketing mix, with extra focus to incorporate customer dimensions. In most situations, this seems to have a positive effect on the relation with customers which translates to better business performance (Santos-Vijande et al., 2012). The better than average performance allows these firms to gain a better competitive status and outperform their direct local competitors. Besides they are more likely to perform in export markets and become globalized resulting in higher than average financial performance (Morgan et al., 2012). However, in assuming the marketing manager’s role, entrepreneurs must take a wide and diversified range of decisions. Therefore, they are more like “generalists” (Carson and Gilmore, 2000). It is unlikely that they will take a decision regarding a marketing issue – for instance, the percentage of discount on the price of a product – in isolation from other aspects of business strategies, such as the financial aspects. This creates a specific situation for marketers where they need to think and act beyond traditional marketing competencies. Entrepreneurs are forced by dynamic and exchanging nature of the market to improve their marketing competencies and adopt entrepreneurial marketing skills.

### 3.2.1 The marketing mix theory

The literature identifies specific capabilities used to transform resources into valuable outputs based on the classic 4Ps marketing mix, which is a conceptual framework which guides the principal decisions that marketing managers make in setting strategic plans and configuring their offerings of goods and services to suit customers' needs. It serves to develop both long term strategies and short term tactical programs. The works of (Bitner and Booms, 1981; Boom et al.1981) defined 7Ps of the marketing mix as an advancement of the traditional framework which comprised the 4Ps; products, pricing, physical distribution channels, and promotion. The additional Ps presented by Bitner and Booms (1981) added people, process and physical evidence in acknowledgement of their complementary significance to the marketing function.

Inherent in the marketing competencies are some of the marketing mix elements such as product development, pricing and distribution channels management. The value of what is presented by Vorhies and Morgan (2005) is the managerial and pragmatic elements such as marketing planning and implementation in addition to marketing communication which highlights the customer perspective and the ability of the firm to manage customer value perceptions.

### 3.2.2 Resource-based theory

Linking competence and capabilities to entrepreneurship, some scholars are adhering to the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Peteraf, 1993), and they suggest that differences in performance in business ventures are related to the resources availed to the entrepreneur leading the venture and the level of efficiency these resources are mobilized and utilized.

According to the resource-based view it is suggested that the total assets of a firm comprise resources and capabilities, and that the firm's performance is shaped by the tangible and intangible resources of that firm (Wernerfelt, 1984), including competencies and capabilities.

Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) argued that product development is a dynamic capability of the firm, because of its ability to alter the resource configuration of the firm. Product development is one of the important mechanisms by which firms create, integrate, recombine, and shed resources.

Most empirical research on the resource-based perspective have basically focused on large, high-growth firms, however, a study by Chandler and Hanks (1994) examined and analyzed the relationship between resources, capabilities and performance of small firms in the industrial sector in the US. The study revealed that venture performance is influenced by the resources and capabilities owned by the firm (Chandler and Hanks ,1994). Higher levels of resources and capabilities, most likely, lead to better performance. Priem and Butler (2001) suggested there is a great research opportunity to study the accumulation of resources and capabilities. Lerner and Almor (2012) in a study of women-owned small businesses investigated the relationship between resource and capabilities and revealed the importance of the strategic capabilities and resources, in relation to the venture's performance.

### 3.3 Marketing Competencies: Link to performance

A considerable number of research on entrepreneurial and marketing competencies indicates a significant positive relationship with firm performance (Yusuf et al., 2016; Tehseen & Ramayah, 2015; Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010; Ahmad et al., 2010b). For firms to compete successfully both locally and globally, SMEs owners must be equipped with strong diverse competencies which are carried out by individuals, who start and grow their businesses. In order for SMEs to survive and be successful in today's competitive and rapidly changing environment, entrepreneurs need to continuously enhance their entrepreneurial competencies (Song & Kee, 2013). Marketing competencies are part of the entrepreneurial competencies that bring together a set of competencies all of which are centered around creating value to customers as a means of successful performance, within a strategic planning and control framework (Mitchelmore and Rowley, 2013).

However, some other studies have delivered mixed and weak findings (Narkhede et al., 2014; Man et al., 2008; Fenwick & Strombom, 1998; Chandler & Hanks, 1994; Reuber & Fisher, 1994; Cooper, 1993 cited in Bin Hashim et al.2018). Similarly, the study of (Lopa & Bose, 2014) indicated that entrepreneurial competencies are not significantly associated with firm performance of SMEs. Therefore, it can be said that the relationship among entrepreneurial competencies and small firm performance is questionable because of the inconsistent findings of studies related to this relationship.

Mitchelmore & Rowley (2013) said that 'there are grounds for further investigation regarding entrepreneurial competencies affecting the small firm performance. This study does not focus on 'measuring' performance, but it considers the survival beyond three years of firm's operation may be indicative of satisfactory levels of performance that relates to some extent to the role of entrepreneurial competencies.

### **3.4 Women Entrepreneurship and the Role of Competencies**

Significant numbers of women, 104 million women in 59 economies which represent more than 52 per cent of the world's population and 84 per cent of world GDP embarked on new venture creation and development. These self-employed women comprise between 1.5 per cent and 45.4 per cent of the adult female population in their respective economies (Levie and Hart, 2012). These numbers are increasing and women entrepreneurs are almost equal to their male counterparts in the studied economies by GEM in 2107/18 (GEM, 2018 Report). Accordingly, women-owned businesses make an increasingly important contribution to economies. Many of these businesses are micro-small-medium enterprises (MSEs), and are more likely to start out of necessity and remain life-style businesses (GEM Report, 2018). Women-owned businesses are frequently sole proprietorships with limited number of employees and depend largely on the owner and her skills and competencies (Lerner et al.1997 cited in Saffu and Manu, 2005). Interest in entrepreneurial competence derives from the supposed link between competencies and the birth, survival and growth of a venture (Bird, 1995; Baum et al., 2001). There is evidence to suggest that understanding of the competencies in small businesses will support the development of competence, and will in turn have consequences for successful business growth (Churchill and Lewis, 1987; Low and MacMillan, 1988).

Some research examined the types of competencies more endowed to women business owners; they tend to feel that the capacity to develop social relations and interpersonal skills are their strongest assets and competence (Birley et al., 1987; A/Rahman, 2006). On the other hand, some research findings suggest that women skills to manage financial and accounting operations are relatively weak compared to men (Stevenson, 1986; Collette and Aubrey, 1990). In further review of the literature, Jennings and Cash (2006) note that there is a solid base of empirical research demonstrating a gender variation in representation of some competency areas such as: developing social and human capital; motivations; goals; growth orientations; strategic choices; and acquiring and managing financial capital. Women in general are to a great extent disadvantaged due to the unjust gender ideology which creates and perpetuates gender inequalities in the general spheres of women's lives. As a result, when women opt to entrepreneurship and start business (of any size) they are more likely to be disadvantaged in their access to various entrepreneurial capitals, given their personal backgrounds, employment experiences and the socio-economic and cultural context in which their businesses operate (A/Rahman, 2006; Carter and Shaw, 2006).

In general, a plethora of studies have been conducted into entrepreneurial competencies, however only few studies dealt with the competencies of female entrepreneurs, and least focus is on the marketing competencies and capabilities. One of the recurrent distinctions in the literature on the entrepreneur's competencies is that between management competencies or skills and entrepreneurial competencies or skills (Smith and Morse, 2005). Chandler and Hanks's (1994) research is based on the assumption that entrepreneurs needed to be competent in two key roles, i.e. entrepreneurial (recognize and envision taking advantage of opportunity) and managerial (acquire and utilize resources to co-ordinate the business interest and activities). Despite the broad agreement among researchers that managerial and entrepreneurial competencies are multidimensional constructs, in their overview of the competencies literature, Smith and Morse (2005) observed that there are two broad themes in managerial competencies: (1) functional competencies, such as marketing and finance; and (2) organizational competencies, such as the skills related to organizing and motivating, personal skills and leadership. This indicates that a number of investigations in different contexts that have sought to generate lists of entrepreneurial competencies, with varying levels of categorization, fall short in examining these categories specifically by gender, and in least sized/resourced ventures.

## **4. RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **4.1 participants' profile**

Description of the demographic features of the women entrepreneurs included in this study is necessary for understanding aspects related to their entrepreneurial experience. Only the most relevant properties of this category were brought to focus; such as age, level of education, marital status, etc. For coding this part of the data it was thought helpful to quantify the qualitative data to give description of the dimensions of each category.

The majority (40%) of the participants in the traditional type of ventures fall in the age range 36-45 years old, are illiterate (72%), and most of them (86.6%) had no previous work experience at all. While results of the data on the second group, those in non-traditional lines of ventures, show that most of them tend to be in the younger age group, all are educated, many with university degrees. One participant, who is considered as an 'odd case', as she represents both groups by running two ventures one traditional and the other non-traditional, was not educated. Only few members of the sample (8%) had previous work experience in various professional jobs (a teacher, bank officer, nurse, a photographer with a university degree, and a clerk), however one participant has, deliberately, never thought of seeking employment. Marital status and number of children are important variables in shaping the entrepreneurship experience of women entrepreneurs. In total almost half of the participants (49.3%) were widows, while (24%) were married. Single participants made up to (12%) of the total number.

About 64% of the participants live in relatively big families with up to six children. Husband's occupation for the married participants emerged as a socio-economic moderating factor. 24% of the participants stated that their husbands are salaried employees albeit at low level jobs. Others are; traders, daily laborers, farmers, and a military soldier. The majority women entrepreneurs in the sample may thus be considered as representing middle-class elites, with relatively stable family income.

#### **4.2 The Personality attributes of Women Entrepreneurs**

It was deemed necessary to acquire knowledge about the personality attributes of the participants. Each participant women entrepreneur was asked to give a description of how she perceives herself. From these personal reflections, a profile of these women entrepreneurs has been painted, based on their perceptions and description of themselves. The general attributes that the majority have stated were that they consider themselves as; (1) self-reliant and independent with good capacity to make decisions pertinent to themselves, their families and businesses, supported by advice from relatives and friends. (2) Highly sociable, interactive and open to share views with others. (3) Having low propensity for risk taking. (4) Laborious, active and dynamic. (5) Having high levels of need for achievement, and persistent. (6) As managers of their ventures, they considered themselves as "innovatively adaptive" in running their business. (7) optimistic, with ability to tolerate mistakes and learn from them. (8) Having good team spirit, sensitive towards others, especially customers and employees. (9) Utilize their talent and expertise in opportunity recognition as well as business operations.

#### **4.3 Perceived Marketing Competencies and Capabilities**

Women's place in the market as economic actors or traders of any type or size is still facing gender biases and stereotyping. Marketing and markets are mostly considered as public domains highly dominated by males (A/Rahman, 2006). However, there seems to be some difference between markets as geographical locations, and markets as a broader sphere where all the marketing functions take place. Thus an important dimension of women entrepreneurship is their marketing capacity, at both domains 'spatial' as being physically located in markets and 'functional' when assuming the marketing functions in general. In this part the participants highlighted key concepts exemplifying their marketing competencies and capabilities while assuming their role as entrepreneurs.

\*Fictitious names are used maintain anonymity of the participants.

##### **4.3.1 Identifying customers' needs**

A basic function of entrepreneurs is to employ resources in an optimal manner, so as to offer products and/or services compatible with customers' needs in a specific market at a specific time.

Participants in this study revealed that in their effort to establish/run their ventures the greatest majority did not conduct any form of systematic market survey or feasibility study. Almost all the participants relied on non-professional information gathering, analysis and evaluation regarding the market situation. Identification of customers' needs which represent the demand side of entrepreneurship, is mainly done through contact with the direct environment and listening to others, from own experience, and sometimes from suggestions/recommendations of others who know that one has such capacity to grasp a specific opportunity. Many participants who work in traditional activities, e.g. food processing, informed that,

'...It is not very hard to identify what people (customers) need; it is mostly a reflection of the context conditions, especially products that are related to specific social events and seasons. For example, we shift from serving daily meals as usual to offering 'Fatoor Ramadan' which is the main meal during the wholly month of Ramadan when all Muslims fast during day-time and breakfast at sunset. We actually change the products offered and the timing of business operation'', informed one of the participants who own a small food selling point, denoting the seasonality of this customer's need.

Some participants consider their own personal need and/or experience as the means by which they have identified their customers' need. \*Fatima said; ".....From your own pattern of needs, then you can sense that quite a number of your day customers can come to break the fasting and eat a meal, 'Fatoor Ramadan' if it is served to them, because they are fasting and sure they need the meal in the evening...", she added. Another participant who operates a non-traditional type of venture, informed that she relied on her personal experience in identifying the need for telephone communication services to make business phone calls; she narrates, " A personally felt need can be the signal for a business opportunity...Since this is the situation with me, then it must be the same for many others ... why not provide this service?" she said. That was how she has identified the opportunity and started a telecommunication business in the commercial center of Khartoum, more than eight years ago. With changes in the context, and where the demand for mobile phones became escalating, she introduced a line of mobile phone selling and maintenance more than communication services, to match change in customers' needs, she informed.

#### 4.3.2 Application of the marketing mix

During the interviews the majority of the participants have a common perception that marketing is mainly selling products; other components of the marketing mix were not clearly perceived as relevant to the marketing function. Almost all those involved in this study expressed limitations in their marketing skills and competencies, and perceive marketing as a main challenge facing them. A young participant who own a small traditional restaurant informed;

"... The main problem is to know the right amount (demand) that can be sold in a day, I only prepare small quantities of products so as to be able to sell fast ...we don't have any inventory, not raw or prepared items".

More focus on selling was expressed by another participant who owns a gift and handicrafts corner Kiosk, she informed,

"Selling national products will soon vanish ...preference is for cheap 'imitation' products from abroad, I hardly sell few items during the whole week, only for little money ...".

Those who work in the traditional ventures have shown less concern about developing marketing strategies or plans; however, many of them have expressed their worries in facing the competition, particularly from similar ventures owned by the young and the educated. Others have shown great content, optimism and 'Tawakol' (meaning reliance on fate and God's Will) which they consider as the pillar on which their business practices and success stand.

The participants engaged in non-traditional ventures tend to be more formalized and carry a level of marketing planning with variation according to the type and scope of the venture. One participant who runs an interior design business informed;

" I believe planning is important.... a business plan should be ready at the business inception phase, and should contain a component on the marketing side of the business operations. In our case a marketing plan has been prepared by a professional expert and we implement with flexibility...".

In the following part the participants' perceptions on the application of the marketing mix elements is exhibited:

##### 4.3.2.1 Product development

Most of the participants engage into businesses with offerings already known to customers. The product development competence, which entails creativity and innovation is found to be very limited since the majority of the participants are running imitative businesses. The data reveal that these participants try to match the available products to the needs and demands of the target customers. Thus, the entrepreneur's competence in this component of the marketing mix focuses on the ability to accurately identify the needs of target customers, and respond to niche markets' conditions. The participants stress that an important feature relevant to product strategy is customization of products according to customers' needs, expectations and purchasing power. One participants expressed,



"...I started with very basic products based on advice from some friends, and my ability to prepare in good quality ... later on I added some items because the customers asked for them", explained Hafsa\* showing the list on her cafeteria menu.

Another participant who owns and operates a non-traditional venture, Real Estate Agency, narrated how she has shifted focus from accommodation services for UN and International NGOs after the secession of Southern Sudan and the decline of the oil boom, to Real State investors especially for National Sudanese Migrants in the diaspora, she informed; '*... the political environment, policies and regulations influence our businesses. Recently, good opportunities of serving foreign companies (B-to-B) specifically for the influx from Turkey, China, Russia and recently from Gulf States*'.

#### 4.3.2.2 Pricing and selling

Pricing, is the element of the marketing mix which reflects the ability of a venture to extract the optimal revenue from its customers, through customer orders from the firm's offerings. To maintain lucrative levels of sales these participants informed that they adopt various pricing modes (strategies). Asia, who established a micro business nearly six years ago and maintained a level of growth which has successfully placed her to the next size zone (from micro to small) according to increased number of employees, scope of operations and assets acquired, expressed that pricing is crucial for business success. She thinks that pricing food items typically follows the prices of others, she expressed;

*" In the food line at the traditional MSEs one has to follow others in the same market; if not, it is most likely to lose customers, sacrifice product quality, and lose revenues from decreased sales".*

As for petty traders, however, there seemed to be greater flexibility and a wider range in matching product/price depending on the customer purchasing capability and behavior. A participant engaged in home-based petty trading said;

*" .... Price flexibility is a must for us, she says..... some considerations may necessitates setting different prices and payment schedules to suit customers' purse...".*

These entrepreneurs proved high level of adaptive actions to retain sizeable numbers of customers. One participant who operates a small gift shop offering beauty products, confirmed the same concept of flexible pricing and highlights how she adopts a customization strategy by selling smaller portions of expensive beauty stuff to match customer' request and buying capacity.

Those who operate more formalized non-traditional ventures informed that the nature of their contractual transactions makes pricing less diversified. However, they all agreed that the contracts they conduct are subject to negotiations;

*"...setting prices, even in formal contracts, depends on a number of issues such as length of customer relation, repetitiveness of purchases, mutuality of referrals and personal relations "*, explained one who own a State Agent business.

#### 4.3.2.3 Physical distribution channel

It indicates the firm's ability to establish and maintain channels of distribution that effectively and efficiently deliver value to end-users/customers. The study informs that in case of the traditional ventures physical distribution decisions mostly opt to traditional markets, small shops and kiosks at moderate locations, and use of partial spaces in established ventures. Direct contact distribution and personal selling is also applied through networks, social groups following 'event distributions' at times of popular social occasions.

The majority, who use formal contracting in their marketing practices informed that personal relations and networks are key for the process. Amna, who works in the garment industry, revealed that she mostly deals with institutional customers (NGOs, Zakat Chamber, Popular Defense Force etc.), and she uses direct channels of distribution – from the production workshop to the customer. She explained;

*" Direct selling and distribution are inherent in the bidding contracts; key elements are decided including, methods of physical delivery of products. However, to reach these types of customers I depend on social networks and relations that offer me access to such opportunities ....",* she added.

#### 4.3.2.4 Promotion and Advertising

A striking observation from the interviews was that all the participant women entrepreneurs, even at the micro level, perceived the need for advertising. However, the mentioned major constraints facing applying effective promotional strategies; lack of technical know-how and the high costs entailed are shared constraints facing all, as one participant informed;

*"To do advertising is for big companies; I don't know how to do it and don't have enough money for that..."*. Another participant added;

*".....we wait for those who try our service to come back and tell others about us . That is why we try to make them happy and like us..."*, she smiles indicating word-of-mouth by customers and members of her network.

The majority of these women entrepreneurs were found to rely on very simple techniques for promotion actions such as direct personal selling, word-of mouth and gifting their products to friends and relatives on social occasions. All participants have mentioned that promotion and advertisements are costly, and to many the costs are beyond the tight budgets and limited resources they possess.

#### 4.3.2.5 People, Personal relations and network

It indicates the ability to manage relationships with customers, employees, management, suppliers and everybody else involved, in such a way that accentuate high performance. The results of the study inform that the participants build on personal contacts and relations for most of the marketing processes; including identification of customers' needs, to decide on the product line, gain of information of competitive practices such as price patterns, sales and purchase strategies, acquiring of some of the needed resources and the adoption of promotion actions such as personal selling and word-of mouth advertising. They confirmed that personal relations utilization is key to their business operations in every step of the process; one participants expressed;

*"...we are a society that value social relations and networks, to us relationships are valuable assets that need developing and nurturing..."*.

#### 4.3.2.6 Process of marketing strategy implementation

It is the processes by which intended marketing strategy is transformed into realized marketing offerings that optimize the match between the firm's resources and its marketplace. From the study findings it was evident that the participants follow steps to develop and implement marketing strategies, however they are less systematic, less formalized, less conceptualized but more pragmatic. Commonly, the majority of these participants (especially in traditional ventures) don't write proper business/marketing plans, in the best situations they write simplified feasibility studies at the establishment phase, as stated by a youth participant who ventured in a flower nursery;

*" I run the business focusing on simple day-to-day actions, not following a marketing plan per sei. I only have a simple business plan that I have presented to the Agricultural Bank to get the starting capital from microfinance credit"*.

#### 4.3.2.7 Physical Evidence

It refers to the ability to develop methods of providing an appropriate offering, and physical (evidence) on the experience of using that offering. Most participants perceive the influence of the type and scope of interaction between the entrepreneur and the customers to maintain *physical evidence* mainly by utilizing personal relations with the retained customers. The feedback and requests for some products come from those who have repetitive transactions with the venture. *"However, we fail to trace irregular customers..."*, informed one of the participants.

#### 4.3.3. Resource leveraging as a marketing capability of women entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurial marketers are not constrained by the resources they currently have at their disposal; they were able to extend the resources in many ways. Since leveraging in its basic meaning refers to doing more with less (Morris et al., 2002), women entrepreneurs in this study are able to leverage their resources in a number of ways. An example was depicted in cases of petty traders and 'Home- based - baking' micro ventures in the study sample. They have informed that they utilize personal relations with influential employees who give them the green light for accessing such

organizations e.g. banks, ministries and universities, especially those with high concentration of female employees, to create a market niche clientele base offering specific products mostly demanded by women. One of these petty traders expressed;

*“...dealing with this segment would not have been possible without knowing people in social networks and building on personal ties and relationships, these are important resources to us...”*

Other participants (‘Home- based - baking’ micro ventures) mentioned a relatively new trend of leveraging simple technological resources – Mobile phones- to reach customers through applications such as WhatsApp. Another way of resource leveraging is using other people's (or firm's) resources, where some innovative ways are identified from the data;(1) The majority of these participants are leveraging the financial resources by means of involvement in traditional rotating saving/lending groups to avail informal credit. Many informed that they rely on their social groups such as friends, relatives and colleagues (other traders or entrepreneurs) to form these lending groups. (2) Many of the women entrepreneurs, especially in the traditional lines, informed that by following a credit purchase strategy to obtain production inputs from their network of suppliers, interest free, they manage to leverage their resources. (3) Others use some established enterprises as channels of distribution of their products either free of charge or for nominal charges compatible with the volume of sales and intensity of products. (4) In other cases, some participants are stretching resources by selling products with already established markets by larger firms (mainly in the non-traditional lines selling ‘Hi Tech’ products such as mobile phones and computers), as confirmed by a participant who owns and operates a small firm dealing with computer and mobile phones accessories. She expresses; *“..Few years back the demand for Mobile phones was very limited even in the capital city. .... the increase in demand, I think was partly due to good promotions by the big mother companies...globally, and we have benefitted from that situation”*.

## 5. DISCUSSION

From the study findings, it is evident that the majority of the participants do not conceptually perceive or discuss the marketing constructs; neither do they consciously perceive their actions as ‘planned’ marketing strategies. In most cases they focus on ‘selling’ rather than ‘marketing’; however, in practice they ‘intrinsically’ take actions that are core marketing principles. For example, these women entrepreneurs stress that they offer products according to customers’ need identification (e.g. shifting to offer a meal for breaking the fasting, ‘fataor’ during Ramadan, an adaptive strategy mentioned by most food sellers in previous studies (Badawi,(2008) ; A/Rahman, (2006); A/Rahman, (2008-9)), follow a pricing strategy based on the *“prices of others”* connotation of competition, *“matching customers pocket”*, *“adopting relational promotion methods”*, *“giving samples of the product as gifts”*. These anecdotes are responsive statements that reflect some of the participants’ perceptions that guide their actions in the marketing domain. Only few of the participants have reflected a degree of conscious understanding of the conceptual elements of marketing. This indicates a gap at the conceptual level, but not a totality of lack of both knowledge and practice; these entrepreneurs are in a state of *‘doing without naming’* (A/Rahman, 2006). This gap could be attributed to many factors pertinent to the demographic characteristics of the participants; such as age, level of education, experience and limited resources, in addition to limited cultural orientation on doing business in general.

The comparative method of analysis has supported the impact of human capital since the more educated (especially among those in the non-traditional lines of businesses) have expressed more awareness of marketing; its dimensions and to some extent the crucial impact of the marketing competencies and strategies on the performance of their firms. In all types of women enterprises in this sample, the attitudes and perceptions are found to build on a relational perspective towards marketing practices. Regardless of the level of human capital, personality trait, venture type or size, location (marketplace/home-based) or the level of competition, all the participants acknowledged the perceived effectiveness of personal relations, not only in the marketing function but almost in all other dimensions of their entrepreneurial competencies. The obtained data confirm the above claims in the various marketing strategies depicted within the marketing mix and resource leverage approaches. In the marketing mix dimension, the ‘Product’ element does not show much innovation where the majority of the enterprises in this study are imitative. Innovation (defined as introduction of new technologies), does not apply to the majority of firms in the developing world (Baumol, 1988). In most cases these women entrepreneurs follow the Schumpeterian perspective of innovation which ascertain the practice of ‘creative destruction’ (Schumpeter, (1934) cited in A/Rahman, (2006)), not only the introduction of new technologies or products.

The improvement of available products, and the application of concepts such as product customization, related to product size, packaging, timing of availability (*seasonality*), all are dependent on the participants' capability to strategize in relation to products. In so doing, they capitalize on information gained from personal ties with their customers. This enables them to have an unrivalled depth of knowledge and understanding of customers within that market (Gilmore et al, 1999; Cummins et al 2002; Carson and Gilmore, 2000b), and become adaptive to customers' needs and expectations. They may also obtain products and offer services beyond the venture's standard offering, to retained customers, to ensure that they stay loyal to the business (Gilmore, 2011). Similarly, other elements of the marketing mix - promotion, advertising, pricing and physical distribution - are all managed by developing strategies that are strong manifestations of utilization of personal ties, social relations and networks in providing the needed information to develop more localized, consumer centric innovative strategies (Day 1994; Morgan, Katsikeas, and Vorhies 2012). Consequently, the concept 'entrepreneurial marketing' (EM), has been proposed as an integrative construct for conceptualizing the marketing practice in situations of change, complexity contradiction and tight resources (Kotler,1992; 2001; Gilmore and Carson,2007). Personal relations and social networks are exemplified as the essence of the marketing experience of women entrepreneurs to the extent that some see it as vital to "*invest on relations before products*".

In their entrepreneurial endeavor, women proved the ability to optimally use some resources, to create customer value, through marketing tactics which involved insight, experience and skill. This study has shown strong relationships between marketing practices and entrepreneurial competencies; It highlights an extended non-conventional marketing approach. The study suggests that women entrepreneurs in MSEs mostly take an active approach of entrepreneurial marketing which is based on the development of both social relations and network ties. A philosophy of 'customers' intimacy', and more customized action/interaction strategies guided the entrepreneurial marketing practices of these entrepreneurs. Most apparent are product customization, pricing strategies based on competitors' prices, the dependency on word-of-mouth communication and social capital. An array of actions reflects situations of flexibly applying the marketing mix components depending on the venture's type and size, however, commonly used by almost all women entrepreneurs in this study.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study addresses an identified knowledge gap regarding the marketing competencies of women entrepreneurs within the Sudanese context. The study is conducted in Khartoum State, where a considerably growing number of female entrepreneurs, especially in non-traditional types of activities, is observed.

To understand the marketing competencies of women entrepreneurs running MSEs in this context, the study utilizes the marketing mix approach and the resource-based theory.

It is a qualitative study which follows an interpretive approach and applies grounded theory techniques. Non-probability, purposive and snow-ball sampling techniques are followed, based on theoretical saturation rather than a predetermined number of sample elements. In-depth face-to-face interviews were used for gathering data from the recruited participants, which allowed the interviewees to report their ideas and experiences freely and flexibly. The data obtained allowed for the emergence of concepts aligned with the objectives of the study, nature of the phenomenon under scrutiny and the methodological and epistemological definitions of the research. Reference to basic conceptual and theoretical understanding of the marketing competencies, guided the interviews and permitted contextualized interpretations and knowledge production.

This study suggests that women entrepreneurs in MSEs mostly follow an active approach of entrepreneurial marketing which is based on the development of both social relations and network ties, a philosophy of 'customers' intimacy', and more customized action/interaction strategies. These strategies in the marketing domain have reflected great awareness and sensitivity to the direct context with regard to resource tightness, consumer behavior, attitudes, values and perceptions of the entrepreneurial function. In such circumstances entrepreneurs come out of the conventional boundaries and engage in more flexible, adaptive and socialized patterns of marketing practice, as they deal with the marketing mix elements. The study accentuates that all strategies pertinent to the marketing mix are manifestations of reliance on social relations and networks to leverage resources and enhance the marketing competencies of women entrepreneurs.

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This study contributes to the subject by highlighting the concept 'entrepreneurial marketing' (EM), which has been proposed as an integrative construct that guides women entrepreneurs' marketing practice in situations of change, complexity, contradiction and limited resources. Personal relations and social networks are considered the essence of the marketing experience of women entrepreneurs, to the extent that some see it as vital to "*invest in relations before products*".

Since the study has dealt with two lines of business activities; traditional and non-traditional ventures, the need becomes evident for further studies that focus on each line separately to better understand how relevant strategies need to be elaborated based on the specificity of the line of ventures. Additionally, other areas of entrepreneurial competencies need to be investigated such as businesses and managerial competencies and leadership competencies.

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