

Original Article

A Success Story of Women Entrepreneurship: The Case of Bushka Mama Maryan in Mogadishu, Somalia

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Abstract - In Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, most restaurants are owned or operated by men, and most of the workers are also men; yet, at the domestic/household level, women are attributed to exceptional expertise in cooking and all other matters related to the kitchen. However, to participate in entrepreneurship in the food industry, especially in cooking and selling food to customers, many women tried to venture into operating their own small food service outlets or restaurants in marketplaces and in the vicinity of areas where many people work. These types of eating houses are known as bushka (singular) and bushashka (plural). Although somewhat Somalized in their formal use, the terms have been loaned from the English language and are attributed to low-level food service outlets that are not qualified to be called restaurants despite them serving the same purpose. This essay aims to discuss the operation of one such bush-eating facility in the Halane area in Mogadishu, near the Airport Hotel. It is owned by a woman named Maryan but whom people refer to as Mama Maryan, and her bush restaurant is Bushka Maryan or Bushka Mama Maryan.

Keywords - Bush-restaurants, Foodservice, Small-scale enterprises, Women entrepreneurs.

1. Introduction

In Somalia, women face a lot of challenges in most areas of the business sector. Particularly in the restaurant or food service industry, a very small number of women participate in the activity, despite their expertise in cuisine preparation and kitchen work. In addition, many women are family breadwinners and selling food could be an ideal initiative to help them generate income that helps them improve the livelihood of their families. Investigating this type of entrepreneurship from a gender perspective, especially in the Somali context, makes us appreciate the tension between Somalia's male-chauvinistic culture and the recent dynamics that grew out of the impact of the civil war in the country.

However, an important phenomenon of these dynamics is the growth of women's participation in roles believed to have been exceptionally exclusively for men. Women entrepreneurship has, therefore, in certain aspects, overturned the traditional thinking of the lowly place of women in Somali society (Hassan 2017), at least as informed through the biases of *Caddaan Studies* (Eno 2016)—in other words, misinformed western-led characterization of the society such as by Lewis (1955, 1961) and followed later on by an unanalytical first generation post-colonial Somali scholars as critiqued in Ahmed (1995) and Eno (2017, 2022). In fact, the tension alluded to here is what Somali-British scholar and

critical sociologist Ahmed Hassan problematizes as "part of a transformational process in which Somali women have effectively complicated the traditional by constructing a unique status in their new role" (Hassan 2017, p. 45).

Further delving into the crux of his analysis, Hassan reveals the extent to which women are "transforming the general Somali social relationships as they explicitly challenge the old and linear patriarchal culture," hence a complication that assumes "a social transformation from below" (p. 47). To achieve the goal of their new role and fulfill the responsibility, women "employ several useful skills and rare strategies of home financial practices", thereby "spending on the needy members at home." This unique approach of strategic spending, according to Hassan, is what "makes these women happier than spending on bills or on gifts for themselves" (p. 53).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Significance of SMEs

According to ILO (2015), different countries define small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in diverse ways, such as observing the size of employees, yearly revenue, or the worth of assets of properties owned by the concerned entity. Thus, microenterprises are defined as entities that employ about ten workers, small enterprises as initiatives with ten to



hundred employees, and medium-sized enterprises that employ any number between 100 and 250 employees (ILO 2015). Within the span of this definition, the ILO (2015, p. 5) reports that "In some developing countries, informal SMEs far outnumber formal enterprises of the same size." However, the current study uses small-scale for the enterprise under its observation rather than microenterprise as indicated above in the ILO interpretation, in the sense that it is not operating with microfinance credit.

In the United States, more than half of the workers in the private sector are employed by the 25 million small business enterprises in the country, contributing over 50% of America's gross domestic product (GDP), in addition to being the main creator of new jobs in the nation's economy, as stated by Latha et al. (2008). In the United Kingdom, the Bolton Committee Report (BCR) suggests that businesses that fall under the category of a small enterprise or small firm are those defined according to the number of people they employ, such as less than 200 in the manufacturing sector; less than 25 employees in the construction industry; below 5 vehicles for transport firms; as well as by their turnover in the retail business: below £50,000 turnover, and less than £200,000 in the wholesale trade (Tonge 2001).

Comparative to the US classification, Curran and Blackburn (2001) state that in the European Union (EU), the businesses classified to be in the realm of micro firms are those that employ less than 10 workers, while firms employing 10–49 employees are categorized as small. Enterprises classified as medium-sized are those with a number of their personnel in a range between 50–249 employees, while those at the top and considered large firms and companies are businesses that employ 250 workers. As Haksever (1996) explains, small firms have an independent management system whereby the owner or a close family member may be the manager or a senior management team member—hence not reporting to anyone.

In a 1990 study funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Carl Liedholm (1990) describes that in Africa, "Most of the employment is generated by microenterprises, firms with 10 workers or less, and the vast majority of these firms employ fewer than five persons." Liedholm, invoking scholarly literature from studies carried out in different countries and contexts across the African continent, states that "Studies in Nigeria (Aluko, 1972), Sierra Leone (Chuta, Liedholm, and ILO 1985), Ghana (Ghana, 1965), Egypt (Davies et al., 1984), and Zambia (Milimo and Fisseha, 1985) have found that 95 percent or more of the small-scale firms employ fewer than five individuals. Many are simply one-person enterprises." Remarkably on the fragility of the survival of small-scale enterprises, experts note that the collapse of firms occurs in several ways and at various proportions of the total deaths of these companies. Exemplifying Sierra Leone as a case in

hand, Chuta, Liedholm, and ILO (1985) reveal that twenty percent of the firms reported as dead might have moved to another location, a matter worthwhile considering in discussions on the closure of small enterprises.

Endris and Kassegn (2022:2) highlight the importance of the informal sector as a thriving source of employment for a growing number of African youth and older workers seeking to capture and benefit from the entrepreneurial opportunities out there whenever they can access them. Thus, the coauthors maintain that "Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) make crucial contributions to job creation and income generation" (Endris and Kassegn 2022:2; AFDB 2019). This scenario explains the reason why the International Labor Organization acknowledges that "The promotion of SMEs has been a key area of intervention in recent years in view of the major employment challenges" (ILO 2015). Analyzing the approximate rate of contribution from the sector, Endris and Kassegn, in their citation of the ILO report of 2019, state: "...the employment share of the self-employed in low-income countries is almost five times (54%) the share in high-income countries (11%), and the employment share of micro-enterprises (2–9 employees) also much higher" (Endris and Kassegn 2022:2; ILO 2019).

2.2. Role of Women in SMEs

Reliable and up-to-date data on the number of women-owned SMEs is scarce. However, scanty data are available for only a few, mostly Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in which Africa is not represented. For developing countries, the International Finance Corporation (IFC 2014) estimates that there are 8–10 million formal SMEs owned by women, representing roughly a third of all formal SMEs. In this case, while female entrepreneurship is skewed towards smaller enterprises, a third of very small enterprises are owned by women and only 20 per cent of medium-sized enterprises (ILO 2015:7). In their constructive review of scholarly literature on female entrepreneurship, Espoir, Smith-Hunter and Nolan (2022) reveal "Scholars in female entrepreneurship (Nina et al., 2005; Robert, F. et al. 2008) show that this difference in gender management is not significant (Didier and Typhaine 2013; Fiona et al. 2007) and sometimes, it is based on gender discrimination (Ascher 2012; Balemba et al. 2014; Chamberlin 1996; Malika 2001; Mohammed, 2011)."

One of the most articulate studies on African women's entrepreneurship was Roland Berger's "Women in Africa Entrepreneurship Study." Berger (2018) provided insights into the entrepreneurial role of women in the continent, estimating their contribution to the African economy and growth in a range between US\$250 billion and US\$300 billion in 2016, equivalent to about 13% of the continent's GDP. This was supported by McKinsey's work that "the female economy is the world's largest emerging market with

the potential to add US\$12 trillion to global GDP by 2025," according to a conference paper at Harvard University Center for African Studies (2020).

Uzonwanne, Igbanugo, and Ezenekwe (2016), in their study on SMEs in the African setting, reveal the prevalence of "a vast untapped source of innovation, job creation and economic growth in the developing world" despite African women's suffering from "general barriers that affect SMEs and entrepreneurship in Africa (such as low income per head, dearth of infrastructure, harsh economic environment)." In addition, Uzonwanne et al. elucidate the harsh environment in which "the African woman still battles with certain peculiar barriers such as gender-induced low access to finance, poor social network, the demeaning value system in an African setting, multiple roles of woman, among others."

3. Research Method

3.1. The Success Case Method (SCM)

This study uses the success case study method to discuss the story of Bushka Mama Maryan. According to (Brinkerhoff, 2003, p.3), the SCM is best employed for "finding out what is working and what is not, which also provides accurate and trustworthy information that can be used to make timely decisions." However, while many case methods (SCM) observe phenomena using systems of measuring quantitative data, the SCM changes the paradigm by exploiting the richer qualitative data, "and in particular, the art of storytelling" (Gundermann 2018). Robert Brinkerhoff, attributed to be the founder of SCM, elucidates that "the Success Case Method is a carefully blended balance of the ancient art of storytelling with more modern methods and principles of rigorous evaluative inquiry and research" (Brinkerhoff, 2003). Although several studies focused on the success related to the institutional evaluation of training programs and their effects, the strategy can be adapted to other disciplines and fields of study and from multidisciplinary aspects. According to Brinkerhoff, SCM is "a simple and proven way of quickly finding out how well a business initiative is doing." As Jocher highlights (1928, 203), "It is in [the] mythological and fictitious material—fables, allegories, dreams, the Greek tragedy, epics, and narratives of many kinds—with its predominantly moral and philosophical character that the roots of the case method are buried."

3.2. Research Design: The Case Study Approach

According to Best and Kahn (2004:193), the case study, regardless of the focus on success or not, explains matters and situations about society like "a person, a family, a social group, a social institution, or a community." As Best and Kahn (p. 193) confirm: "The case study probes deeply and analyzes interactions between the factors that explain present status or that influence change or growth." Following the theoretical principles mentioned by the scholars cited in this section, the study considered using the case study to achieve

its objectives, focusing on investigating only one bush restaurant, namely Bushka Mama Maryan, and the general environment in which the business operates in its daily routine.

3.3. Sample Population and Size

The target population of this study consists of the owner, Mama Maryan. It was selected considering several factors, including the convenience of time and transportation and the fact that this particular outlet is a unique facility compared to the other high-end food service outlets in the Halane/Airport Compound.

3.4. Data Collection Instruments

The study employed two data collection instruments: 1. Observation of the activities in the restaurant and 2. A structured interview with open-ended questions to Mama Maryan, the owner. While interviewing, the owner aimed to collect data related to the overall concept of establishing the restaurant and its daily operation. Some of the employees were discussed informally to elaborate on some of the arising issues for which the owner could not provide further clarification. However, while this is the study's first phase, the section on customers' perception of the food service facility will be the principal matter of discussion in the second phase.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data were interpreted using content analysis of the responses by the interviewee. Where necessary, extracts were taken from the respondent's answers and at varying lengths as were deemed necessary in supporting the aim.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Establishment of Bushka Mama Maryan

Bushka Mama Maryan is owned by a female entrepreneur named Mama Maryan, hence the restaurant deriving the nomenclature from its owner—Bushka Maryan or Bushka Mama Maryan, as some customers call it. The land where the restaurant is situated is in Halane Compound, particularly in the vicinity of the Airport Hotel. The plot was initially owned by Adow Ali Geeseey, a prominent political figure, who, in 2015, allowed Mama Maryan to use part of his plot to start her bush restaurant. Earlier in her childhood, she used to work closely with her mother, helping her with household activities like cooking, washing and cleaning. During those childhood days, Maryan developed an extraordinary interest and skills in cooking. People were always astonished by the nice taste of her food in that she, time after time, added a different kind of flavor and cuisine to the family meals.

After she grew up, Mama Maryan was married but widowed after the death of her husband. As the only living parent of the family, she had to have a way of doing some activities to take care of her children. After several days of

contemplation, she came up with the idea of establishing her current business. As she puts it, "The will to solve my family's problems inspired me to overcome every hindrance in my way so that I could support my children to live a normal decent life, get a good education and good career in the future." Connecting her current activity to her early life experience, Mama Maryan explains, "Although I cooked for fun and pride when I was a small girl, my cooking skills help me a lot now, especially since I am a single mother caring for a big family." She recalls, "... those days, I was fond of working in the kitchen, watching how my mother planned her cooking, and I was helping her with the work."

But unlike the small-size family meals, Mama Maryan now deals with a larger number of diners as well as varieties of cuisine. One of her challenges is attracting customers who have several restaurant choices and can change to other food service outlets the moment they feel dissatisfied with the flavor of her food and the selection on her menu. She has to maintain good quality standards for breakfast and lunch, the two meals on the menu.

4.2. Breakfast Menu at Bushka Mama Maryan

For clients who like to eat early in the morning, breakfast is available for them to start the day well. Like many restaurants in Somalia, the breakfast menu is often informed to the client orally, as a written menu card does not exist. For example, *canjeero* (flat Somali-type pancake), *rooti* (bakery-baked bun/bread), or chapati eaten with *kalaankal* (tiny pieces of freshly fried mutton), *suqaar* (small chunks of fresh mutton in the stew), and *beer ari* (fried mutton liver). Mama Maryan says, "Breakfast is usually served with black tea or tea with milk, depending on the client's choice." On a normal day, Bushka Mama Maryan serves approximately 18 to 25 customers. The entrepreneur Mama Maryan gives a reason for the low number of clients in the morning:

"Since most of our customers are Somalis who reside outside the Halane compound area, they usually have breakfast at home before reporting to the office at 8:00 o'clock in the morning. However, some few casual staff members of the organizations in this area, including drivers, loaders and cleaners, who are approximately 18 to 20 customers, enjoy their early breakfast in our restaurant."

4.3. Lunch Menu at Bushka Mama Maryan

The lunch menu of Bushka Mama Maryan contains a richer selection of items than breakfast. A client can choose from fresh fried, grilled, or scallop fish; goat meat of two or three varieties, spaghetti; *soor* the Somali equivalent of posho-meal, chapati, and salad. Any type of meat ordered by the customer comes with either chapati, spaghetti, or rice. For those who like dessert or could be on some sort of diet, sliced fresh fruits are available. With any meal order, a client

has a selection of drinks that include bottled mineral water and juices like pawpaw, watermelon, and grapefruit.

On an average day, Bushka Mama Maryan serves about 50 clients for lunch, although a higher number is possible more often times than not. As Mama Maryan states:

"Lunch time is our peak hour, you know, because many workers in this area do not retire from the day's work till 4 or 4:30 pm, so they have to eat. Another reason is that for many local workers, the chic restaurants are too expensive for them to afford because they are not paid as high as the expatriates. So, you see, that gives us an advantage with the locals who are also traditionally accustomed to the natural taste of our Somali food."

Mama Maryan adds, "You know, our clients are not only from local Somalis; you may find an international staff of different nationalities who work for the companies in the compound come time after time with their Somali colleagues or alone to enjoy our fresh food." Business closes at Bushka Mama Maryan in the afternoon around 3:30 pm, after which they do cleaning. The entrepreneur explains the reason for not extending their service to the evening: "I am a single mother, so I have to return home to catch up with the children before evening. That is the main reason why we don't prepare anything for dinner in the evening. In fact, what I make for the day is enough to keep my family going, so I can't complain."

Lunchtime is the busiest period in the restaurant for the reasons mentioned above; in terms of the days of the week, the three days of Sunday, Tuesday, and Wednesday have the highest numbers of clients visiting the facility for a meal. Mama Maryan thinks the reason is that these are official working days in the country, and workers report to their duty stations. Thursday is the last working day of the week, so many people leave early, anticipating that they can have a meal at home with their families or in a restaurant with a friend. Friday is the weekend because people need to rest and prepare for their Friday prayers in the mosque—Somalia is a Muslim country. So, business-wise, we do not plan to do as much activity on Thursdays as the other three days I mentioned. Saturday is not a busy day because some international organizations work from Sunday to Thursday, while they take Friday and Saturday as their weekend.

The fresh food, superior taste, and even the seating make Bushka Mama Maryan more local/traditional than modern restaurants. Here, unlike other restaurants with their imported chairs and tables or custom-made locally as per the owner's design, customers are seated on sharing forms where two or three share a form and a table on one side and another on the opposite side of the table with the same number of people. Of course, there are chairs too, but one can easily notice the different types of seating available upon entering. Despite its

inclination to traditional characteristics in the taste of food and setting, Bushka Mama Maryan is a clean environment with good hygiene. According to Mama Maryan:

"Although we have only one toilet for our clients, we ensure that we keep it clean. Someone is assigned to keep checking it now and then and clean it immediately so that the next customer is not disappointed when they enter. Also, we maintain the cleanliness of our storage, the containers and jerricans and all the other equipment we use."

4.4. Outdoor Catering/Takeaway

Bushka Mama Maryan shares several things in common with many of the other food service enterprises. One of these is the restaurant's takeaway services to customers who prefer to take out food than eat inside the restaurant. To this, she replies, "Yes, the restaurant caters to takeaway foods— for example, grilled fish, rice, spaghetti and all the other items on the menu. We don't supply big banquets like weddings, but we serve a number of take-out orders on a daily basis."

4.5. Staff & Daily Supplies

The responsibility of cooking falls in the domain of Mama Maryan herself as the lead chef and is assisted by an assistant cook. There are three waitpersons, two of whom are female. Upon finishing the meal, clients send the money by way of the commonly used electronic bill-payment method known in Somalia as EVC, which counts out the employment of a cashier. Another reason could probably be that many of the diners are regular clients who pay their bills at the end of every month.

Mama Maryam receives her daily supplies from Via Liberia Market, not far away from the location of Bushka Mama Maryan. Supplies are transported through Madina Gate, one of the heavily guarded entry points of Halane Compound, where the goods undergo checking by the designated security personnel before clearance is obtained. On what marketing strategy she uses to promote the business, Mama Maryan embarks on a detailed description of her perspective: "We do not engage in marketing programs, and advertisements like other restaurants do. It is because our target is limited only to the Halane Compound workers, specifically the local staff working for international companies and organizations. Secondly, we close business well before the evening; so, even if we spend money on advertising and promotion, it may not help us achieve much due to the fact that there are special nightlife outlets in the compound where people socialize. Thirdly, we assume that for the quality of food we cook and the competitive prices we offer to our customers, which we believe is a good value for money, we did not think it is important to wage advertisements to attract customers. Our scale is low, but we compete with a significant competitive advantage in food quality, a minimum number of staff, strategic location, and target clients, among others."

On staffing matters, Mama Maryan is assisted by her daughter, another female employee, and a male assistant cook who sometimes doubles as a waiter. The small number of employees, half of whom consist of the family, contributes to the strategy of saving money for the family. Even though the business picked up well immediately upon its establishment, the number of workers required for the restaurant was decreased due to restrictions on security.

4.6. Management

The management of Bushka Mama Maryan is under Mama Maryan herself, enabling her to assume the dual role of a manager and a lead chef, a common characteristic of family-run small-scale enterprises, particularly in the context of Somalia. This is different from ordinary restaurant businesses, where managers take shifts to supervise the daily operation of the business. "For one reason," Mama Maryan responds genuinely, "I cannot afford to pay a cook or a manager out of what we make from the day's business. Considering this is a very small family business, I have to work hard to save as much money as possible to cover all my children's needs. This is another challenge which makes me make some extra effort to save money." Although Mama Maryan has acquired adult education to learn a bit of literacy and numeracy to enable her to read and write and do some basic arithmetic, she has not undergone any managerial training that could expose her to modern management methods. However, her endeavor is an indication of the fact that with focus, determination, as well as the exploitation of skills, women can advance their livelihood.

4.7. Challenges

Despite all the advantages highlighted above, Bushka Mama Maryan is also not short of challenges. "The most difficult challenge is accessibility to the Compound," she admits. With the dismay in her voice clearly noticeable, Mama Maryan notes:

"In fact, the accessibility of the entire airport area, or for that matter Halane Compound in general, is really the most difficult issue; it is too limited. No one without an ID card can access the area, yet it is guarded by heavily armed troops of the African Union Mission for Somalia (AMISOM)."

Mama Maryan was also too keen to discuss the problem the Covid-19 pandemic has caused to her business, the people in the capital city Mogadishu, and the entire country. She mentioned how the lockdown and restrictions of movement had affected her trade. Still discussing the challenges, Mama Maryan thinks that even specific UN or international holidays and weekends are not favorable to her business as she has to close the premises during these occasions.

4.8. Future Plans

Although Bushka Mama Maryan is running well, Mama Maryan has plans for the future. She aims to extend the

restaurant space and modify the seating to accommodate a larger number of clients. While the extension project may be possible, Mama Maryan raises a great concern over staff ID cards for new recruits to access the compound. "Acquiring ID cards for access into the compound for the potential new recruits is one of my worries in the extension project. Otherwise, all other aspects of the project may be possible and successful."

5. Conclusion

The current study discussed the role of women's small-scale entrepreneurship in the context of Somalia. Using the success case method (SCM), the study explored through a narrative account of a bush restaurant, a woman-owned small-scale food service enterprise in Mogadishu's Halane Compound. It provided a detailed structure of the overall operation of the outlet, including the type of cuisine prepared

in the restaurant, the method of receiving supplies, management, and the challenges facing the business growth. More importantly, the study contributes to the literature that critically observes the reality of the new dynamics that unsettle the patriarchal role of Somali men as the main providers for the family. In addition, the study shows how women can depend on small-scale businesses by simply using their cooking and kitchen skills acquired during childhood.

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