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Empowerment and Entrepreneurship on WeChat: A Focus on Shared Stories of Muslim Women Entrepreneurs in China

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ABSTRACT

New media entrepreneurship has become the most popular business model today. This study demonstrates the motivations and strategies of Muslim women entrepreneurship on WeChat. Using a qualitative approach, data were obtained from eight female entrepreneurs in Yiwu, China, through indepth interviews to enable the women to voluntarily and earnestly express their stories and experiences in entrepreneurial activities. The interview results were then analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that Muslim women's motivations for venturing into WeChat business entrepreneurship were mainly attributed to increasing family income, following their entrepreneurial education background, and the idea that it is a simple operation and involves low investment, making it an accessible and potentially lucrative business model. Other findings include how they promote the products mainly through relationship building and friendship. Challenges in doing business were also shared and explained in the findings. By showing the actual situation of Muslim women entrepreneurship in China and how WeChat enables these women to be empowered and form relationships to strengthen their business activities, this study provides deep insights for practitioners and academics.

Keywords

New media entrepreneurship, women entrepreneur, Muslim women, friendship, relationship

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Women's Report 2018/19 (GEM, 2019), 111 million of the 163 million women entrepreneurs in 74 economies around the world have established businesses in older companies in recent years. Globally, the TEA (Total Entrepreneurial Activity) rate for women in 2019 was 10.2%, and studies around the world have confirmed positive growth in female entrepreneurs, including developing economies in the Middle East, Africa and Asia (Cuberes & Teignier, 2015; Lewis et al., 2014; Hailemariam and Kroon, 2019). For China, the economy currently has the largest population in the world, 1.4 billion people, 48.7% of whom are women (World Bank, 2019). The business environment in China is mostly poorly understood,

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mainly due to cultural barriers and male-centric dominance (Lai, 2017). In the past decade, the world has provided more employment opportunities for women than ever before. The development and prevalence of this situation has changed the status of men as the main heads of household earning and women as housewives (Tambunan, 2018). At the same time, many rules were broken and restrictions on women were changed (De Silva et al. 2021). Modern women are influenced by a variety of factors, their desire for financial independence improves their quality of life, helps more people through entrepreneurial activities, and expects more social recognition (Sorokhaibam & Laishram, 2011).

The use of digital technologies or digital entrepreneurship is a major driver of innovation and entrepreneurial activity (Leong, Tan, Tan & Faisal, 2020). Information technology offers a wide range of opportunities for developing women. Applying for digital technology innovation throughout the COVID-19 outbreak has become even more important for women-led businesses. Social media entrepreneurship is one of the current business development channels that is growing rapidly. In China, the rapid development of e-commerce platforms such as JD.com, Taobao, and Tmall (Zhou, Gao, & Chimhowu, 2019) has attracted many entrepreneurs to take advantage of new technologies and online marketing. Today, the combination of social platform and business has formed a new situation of WeChat business marketing. The operation of doing business with mobile phones has been recognized by many entrepreneurs (Townsend, Wallace, Smart, & Norman, 2016; Kapinga, Suero Montero, & Mbise, 2019).

Judging from the interpretation of WeChat data in 2021, WeChat is now the most used communication software in Asia. Its apps are diverse, very convenient, and it's called a better WhatsApp. WeChat is comprehensive, covering all aspects of life activities in China, especially in recent years (Gao, & Zhang, 2013). This even includes small merchants who need to collect payments through WeChat; during the epidemic, no media software can replace the use of WeChat. WeChat is a social media software, but it's not just for communication. Marketers discovered a new way to market products and attract customers by following and exploring WeChat Moments. The Chinese network is very powerful. People are more willing to share and accept products recommended by acquaintances (Chen, 2017), while acquaintance Moments are just nodes connected to the acquaintance network, you can not only monitor your products, but also recommend them (Chen, Chen, Guo, & Luo, 2018) to boost sales by receiving updates and photos from friends. Many Chinese businessmen take advantage of new media methods to run their businesses (Xue & Yu (2017). This also includes Muslim women. Many Muslim women entrepreneurs are actively involved in changing business channels, especially the popularity of WeChat businesses. Muslim women's employment coincides with Islamic advocacy and conducts business activities within religious constraints (Bouzari, Salamzadeh, Soleimani, & Ebrahimi, 2021). Muslim women face both entrepreneurial opportunities and challenges, such as psychological issues, human capital, social capital, and more (Bouzari, Salamzadeh, Soleimani, & Ebrahimi, 2021). Chinese Muslim women are infiltrated by multiple cultures. On one hand, they are educated by Chinese traditional culture, and on the other hand, they receive the baptism of religious belief. They are influenced by traditional culture and western culture, and at the same time regulate and restrain themselves in their religious beliefs. Chinese Muslim women are also seeking a path in a secular society, and this process is also challenging. For example, it is difficult for Muslim women to find employment in China while wearing hijabs, and it is difficult for Muslim women to maintain religious behavior-worship in public. Most Muslims will choose to do business to make a living, and in recent years Muslim women have become the main force of the local business industry.

In Islam, entrepreneurship is part of the way of life, and entrepreneurial activities are intertwined with religion. Guidance for Islamic entrepreneurs to start a business based on the Quran and Hadith. Muslim women use the WeChat function for business activities, and it has become an option for Muslim women to survive.

Women Entrepreneurship and Social Media

Female entrepreneurship was introduced into an academic issue in the early 1980s (Pettersson et al., 2017). A survey shows that women entrepreneurs vary widely around the world (Gimenez-Jimenez, Calabro & Urbano, 2020). Research on women entrepreneurs is still lacking. Women

entreprenuers face more challenges in it is representation of social capital, access to information, or family barriers (Özsungur, 2019; Dheer & Treviño, 2019). There are also studies that look at women's occupational and family-related research (Afiouni, & Karam, 2019, Bennett, Hennekam, Macarthur, Hope, & Goh, 2019). There were also researchers such as Startiene, & Remeikiene, (2008), Ribes-Giner, Moya-Clemente, Cervelló-Royo, & Perello-Marin (2018) who describe about gender in entreprenership. Moreover there were also studies that focus on female entrepreneurship (See Chreim, Spence, Crick, & Liao, 2018). Other researchers focus on financial issues and leadership when studied about women entrepreneurship found that financial issues (Naegels, Mori, & Espallier, 2021) and leadership (Hashim, Naldi, and Markowska, 2021) were highlighted. However, research on muslim women entrepreneurs are less as compared women entrepreneurs in general.

The digital environment has flourished in public media in recent years (Dy, Marlow & Martin, 2017; Bradić-Martinović, Zdravković & Mišić, 2020). Diverse digital media types, including webbased services, mobile applications, and social media, have created new entrepreneurial businesses and traditional growth models to provide services and products to new customers (Ebrahimi, et al., 2019). Digital media can present more tools and channels for entrepreneurs to expand social interactions and maintain those relationships (Reid & Wu, 2020). Digital entrepreneurs are involved in creating and delivering major business undertakings and tasks, including production, marketing, distribution and stakeholder management, using information and communication technology (ICT) (Ngoasong, 2018).

Social media and other digital applications have an impact on perceived low-status and disadvantaged groups, including women with limited access to resources (Kawamorita et al., 2020). It is speculated that digital entrepreneurship facilitates the development and change of groups of women, such as the participation and practice of online platforms (McAdam, Crowley & Harrison, 2019). The impact of digital technology innovation on female entrepreneurship has been studied in many previous articles. In fact, ICT brings enormous benefits to society, such as changing cultural activities, society, and economy, while increasing productivity, expanding customer base, and being able to access partnership opportunities to help others increase sales and revenue (Ojokoh, Zhang, Oluwadare. & Akintola, 2013). Furthermore, Jalil, Mohd, Man, Ali and Muhamad (2019) explain on the rights of rural women to become entrepreneurs through ICT media. It is noted that through social media platforms, the use of ICT by women entrepreneurs in rural areas provides good employment opportunities and development strategies and creates good business opportunities (Ukpere, Slabbert & Ukpere, 2014; Caputo, Mehtap, Pellegrini & Alrefai,2016). Social media also provides opportunities for women entrepreneurs in urban Bangladesh and encourages Kenya, Indonesia, Nigeria, Egypt and South Africa (Cesaroni, Demartini, & Paoloni, 2017).

Women can use the information of the new media to speak for women, and through digital media women can enjoy the rights of economy, success, and empowerment. Madra-Sawicka et al. (2020) study whether Taiwanese social technology can be a source of empowerment. To determine the impact of digital technology on empowerment through online surveys of different feedbacks from men and women using social media, including Google+, YouTube, Linkedin, and Facebook. Women are responsible for using tools and information in social research to find their voices, build networks, and help people enjoy empowerment, success, and economic equality (Mason & Smith, 2020). In recent years, attention has been paid to the factors and influence of women in family empowerment (Abreha, Walelign, & Zereyesus, 2020).

Women Entrepreneurship and WeChat

Articles related to WeChat and women discuss mostly on women's health topics such as: the feasibility of WeChat to improve infant and young child feeding in rural China (Wu, Huang, Helena van Velthoven, Wang, W., Chang, & Zhang, 2021)., access to human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine information through the WeChat platform (Su, 2020) and social media Weight Management Program (WeChat) (Chang, Chattopadhyay, Li, Xu, & Li, 2021). Other articles focus on the influence of WeChat, such as the relationship between WeChat voting and canvassing (Zhou, Yu, Chen, & Zhou, 2020)., but research on female entrepreneurship and WeChat is lacking, such as Chinese immigrant women entrepreneurship on WeChat (Zani, 2019) and many more.

Muslim Women and Business

Many Muslims around the world are successful entrepreneurs, and their Islamic teachings urge their followers to engage in innovative and entrepreneurial endeavors (Tri Ramdhani & Anggadwita, 2016). Gender and economic empowerment have received much research attention. Most are based on politics and sociology, while others focus more on economics, development and the regulatory environment (Asad Sadie & Alghazali, 2010; Mackintosh and Islam, 2010). In Islam, entrepreneurship is defined as an individual's behavioral resources to seize opportunities by optimizing available opportunities, in line with religiously mandated work ethics (Hammawa & Norashidah, 2016). In Islam, economic activity is not only for prosperity and profit, it also increases the faith and piety of the believer. The success of Muslim entrepreneurs can be achieved by demonstrating personal integrity at work; this will help the individual meet any challenges while protecting them from prohibited business practices that violate Sharia (Anggadwita et al., 2017). In short, Islam encourages believers to engage in entrepreneurship (Machmud & Hidayat, 2020).

The study will answer three research questions:

- I. What are the factors motivating the Muslim women to get into online business?
- 2. What are some of the approaches they use to market their products on WeChat?
- 3. What are the challenges that they face when starting and sustaining their online business?

METHOD

The qualitative research method is used in this study. YiWu is one of the six strongest cities in mainland China and the largest small commodity distribution center in the world (Belguidoum, & Pliez, 2015). The history of YiWu did not mention the introduction of Islam. After the reform and opening up, with the formation and expansion of China's small commodity market, more and more domestic and foreign Muslims interacted and started to do business with YiWu muslim merchants. And Muslims from all over the country do business in YiWu. In this environment, foreign trade and domestic purchasing products are even more popular. The daily necessities of Muslims all over the country basically come from the Yiwu market. There are more Muslim women doing business here, and selling Muslim products through multimedia platforms is relatively popular. WeChat business is quickly developing in Yiwu.

In-depth qualitative interviews were used in this research where according to Edward and Holland(2020), in-depth interviews can provide in-depth understanding of an event and at the same time provide interviewees with a voice so that they can express their own opinions, which reduces the opportunity for researchers to impose their own opinions. Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within ("themes") of qualitative data(Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012)

The authors conducted in-depth interviews with 8 respondents from Lanzhou, Ningxia, Xinjiang and Yunnan. The respondents were aged 26-39 and had been engaged in WeChat business for 5-9 years. The interview method used by the author is mostly a 30-50 minute interview in a coffee shop. The authors use the methods of notes and audio recordings to records and writes codes. When coding the text, the author uses the subject headings and subject phrases of the text as the code names, and contains the second-level code and the third-level code under it.

Interviewee	Age	Origin	Occupation	Years in business	Education
	39	LanZhou	"Tianfang Lisa" Entrepreneurs	9	High school
2	35	NingXia	WeChat Brand Entrepreneurs	9	No formal education Ningxia Islamic Institute
3	33	YunNan	Muslim product Entrepreneurs	5	Undergraduate
4	26	NingXia	"Xiuying Figo" Muslim Hijab	6	Primary school Ningxia Islamic Institute
5	34	XinJiang	Barbie rabbit slimming	5	High school Linxia Arabic School
6	38	NingXia	Maxcare-Diapers-Mother and Baby Products	5	Middle school Xian Arabic School
7	26	NingXia	Muslim hijab	8	Middle school

Table I. Interviewees' Backg

					Ningxia Islamic Institute
8	28	YunNan	Bird's nest	5	Master of International
					University of Malaysia
					Source: Author's research

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes three aspects of the research questions: QI - What are the factors motivating the women to become online entrepreneurs? Q2 - What are some of the approaches they use to market their products? Q3 - What are the challenges they face when starting and sustaining their business?

Factors Motivating the Muslim Women

Motivational factors for Muslim women to start a business can be roughly divided into several factors: increasing family income, access to entrepreneurial education opportunities, simplicity and low investment.

To Increase Family Income

Making money is the main motivation for women to start a business. Women increase household income by earning money. These similar reasons are shared by majority of the respondents especially respondents 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15

11: I have been in business since graduation, and contacting WeChat is to follow the trend. For entrepreneurs, it is possible to create wealth by seizing a good opportunity.

12: I am a businessman and a mother of three children. I have been doing business online before. WeChat business was very popular at the time. I saw that this platform was more profitable, so I came into contact with this new type of sales method.

13: Compared to my previous job, micro-businesses make more money. My profit from selling products is at least 30-50 yuan. Single item price is high. Profits will be higher. Since I am currently engaged in WeChat business, it is the main business.

14: Doing WeChat business is to make money. The ability of women to earn money is really important for family change. Women change step by step, even if they earn 1,000 or 2,000 yuan. I still want women to work and do the best they can.

15: Our slimming products are very profitable on WeChat. When I was choosing a product, I thought it was a good product and I could make money. I am now making a million a year.

Experiences in Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship experience and education are reasons as to why they have ventured into business. These were agreed by respondents I2, I4 and I5 about how they needed this particular experience to increase their skills and experiences.

12: Knowledge is lacking for me, and I have learned a lot of areas that were completely blank before my entrepreneurial journey.

14: My primary school education level, it can be said that there is no culture. I started out as a part-time catering worker, and then worked in a kindergarten for a while. Later, I started my own business, but in this process, I deeply realized that I have to learn too much, and it is difficult for us to compare with those who learn fast. Even though I'm smart, I haven't even established basic knowledge, and I'm lacking in thinking and logic. What I lack most now is knowledge.

15: I graduated high school with no higher education. For me, there is a lack of access to education. Starting a business on WeChat allows me to learn product knowledge and sales skills. This is important to me.

Easy Access and Low Initial Investment

WeChat entrepreneurship satisfies two major conditions for female entrepreneurship, one is simple and easy to operate; the other is low initial investment. Muslim women entreprenuers interviewed agreed that these are what attracted them to use WeChat to start their businesses. 11: We have first-hand sources. It used to be a Muslim hijab, but now it is mainly a Muslim long skirt. It is very convenient for us to use WeChat, and we have products to send to Moments. Hair ties are promotions and customers will consult you.

12: The investment in agency micro-business products is tiered. Just started as a primary agent for 3,000 yuan, and later decided to be promoted to general agent.

15: WeChat business threshold is very low, anyone can do it. You can advertise on your <u>Moments</u>. Different levels can be proxy, that is, how much profit. You can start with a small agency and make a little money.

16: Micro-business investment is not high. Our agent is several thousand yuan, and the total generation is also 20,000 yuan. It's not really high, but it's a career.

18: I planned to make bird's nest when I was studying. Find micro-business channels. I only invested 20,000 yuan, and I sold it on WeChat, and I got my principal back in a month.

Strategies to Market Their Products

The WeChat strategies they used were mainly focusing on the support of their friends, by giving free samples for customer to try their products, through online business training and relationship with other entrepreneurs.

Relying on Their Circle of Friends for Business Support

Relying on their circle of friends for support is one of the most important way for WeChat merchants to sell.

11: This brand was founded by me. When I advertise in the circle of friends, many people will come over and ask if they want an agency. In this way, everyone sells my products in their own circles. I now have new Muslim dresses, Muslim crafts and prayer rugs all posted to Moments for sale.

12: Post on Moments on time every day, 9am, 1pm, 4pm, and 8pm. Because there are more people watching the circle of friends during this time. When customers see that I have posted products on Moments, they will come to me for wholesale.

15: Send products, comparison charts and your experience to the circle of friends every day. Everyone will see and they will reach out to you if the need arises.

16: Sharing products and life is my main selling method. You send product information and feedback to the circle of friends, and more people will know about your product.

Sending Free Trial Package

In the process of selling products, many merchants will choose target customers to send trial packages, so that customers can reflect on the product and then consider whether to buy it. This sales method brings a lot of customers and agents to the micro-business.

14: I have a new style of my product, I will give it to my friends, and they will introduce their friends to buy.

15: I am very fat after giving birth. I tried this product when I saw it. It is really good. I just decided to resell this product. Now that I think about it, it's really worth it, and our sales are okay.

16: At first the Maxcare brand was useless to me. A saleswoman gave me a trial pack, which I didn't intend to use at all. The promotion girl called and urged me many times before I used it. It was only later that I found out that it was really good. Probably for this reason, I sent this product to the circle of friends. On the one hand, I became a small agent, I used it at a lower price, and then I considered selling it. I didn't expect many friends to come to buy the product.

Wechat Online Business Training

Online tutoring offers a new form of support for women's entrepreneurship. Women entrepreneurs can gain knowledge and professional skills regardless of space and time.

Learning the system and new information on WeChat is important because it helps them learn about business and sales techniques.

12: The company is very formal, the agent training is comprehensive, and the price is standard. Women's private goods talk about pathological knowledge such as cervical erosion, gynecological inflammation, and

health knowledge. For me, these trainings are very necessary, not only for the job but also for my knowledge. Now with these lessons, I know a lot and it's very beneficial for kids and families.

Relationships and Emotional Support with Other Entrepreneurs

Close relationships and good leadership with other businesswomen are crucial for business success and harmony says a majority of the women entrepreneurs. They also learn through each other and the build relationships, on new strategies to build their business.

15: I am mainly responsible for leading the team. The agents headed by me include Qinghai, Xinjiang, Zhejiang, Henan, Ningxia, and Yunnan. These teams have team leaders. The focus of my daily work is to communicate with the team leaders and give them some ways to deal with problems and solve problems in the team. My main purpose is to bring the whole team well. If we have a big team, we have a WeChat group. I will notify you of major events in the group. For details, I will communicate with the high-level president, and then copy it layer by layer. My agents are cohesive and take things seriously. A large part of it is I. Really make money. Staying at home with nothing to do, no income, now you can make money in this way. This is the maximum stickiness. 2. In fact, for many women, emotional value may be more urgent. In this group, they have found a way to make up for their previous confusion. Such groups generally have relatively low levels of education and low cognition.

16: Maintain good relationships and closeness with agents. Because you are their role model, you can say that her sales are related to you, and at the same time, you should also care about her life and emotional problems. Women need to speak and resolve. As a leader, I am often a good listener. They will give me feedback and feel very comfortable after chatting with me. I think it's not just partnership but sisterhood.

Challenges of Running A Wechat Business

These women entrepreneurs face some challenges, such balancing between managing their business and the relationship between family and work, improving women's self-awareness and persistence.

Balance Between Family and Work Relationships

Balancing family and work are a challenge for women entrepreneurs.

The women all agreed that it is a difficult feat to balance between work and family but they agreed that these challenges have made them have better relationships with their family in the end despite having a rather difficult start. Some even attributed to a higher regard by the family because of them owning a business.

12: I work with my youngest son. He is only 5 months old. I pack, ship, shoot videos, etc. while taking the kids every day. If the child is good today, I will have more time. If the child is not feeling well today, then I focus on taking care of the child.

13: WeChat is the way to make money for my main business. But family is the center of my life. When you take care of your family, try to take care of your family, and do a micro-business when you have time. I think it's a balance, but that balance is also important.

16: I feel like I'm trying to balance the relationship, but actually have regrets. The years we started were too busy. I don't have time to take care of my eldest daughter. When you grow up, you find that your child will be impatient. Now I'm gradually letting go of work and focusing on my three children. Making money is important, but family is always a woman's focus. In the process of accompanying the child, the mother cannot be absent. Otherwise the impact on the child is huge.

17: It is difficult to balance family and work. My child is still young and I can't do anything when I am sick. There's still a lot going on, and sometimes it takes days to process.

Requires Patience and Persistence

Doing business requires patience and persistent decisions, which are important for WeChat business operations.

12: WeChat business is actually easy to do, but not many people persist. Mainly, many people are anxious because they think that they have worked for a few months and have not made any money. Or feel that you are not capable enough. But to be honest, those who persevere have actually made money.

15: There are actually a lot of people who gave up WeChat business, and many people can't wait for the opportunity to make money. No patience. In the process of starting a business, even if you open a store, it

takes time to accumulate, but many agents of WeChat business are too anxious. There are very few agents like me who started from the product and now have it. But we did make money.

16: The most important thing in an industry is persistence. Some agents think that they don't seem to make much money in a year, and they want to give up. Many times, others are observing your circle of friends, maybe they are trying to buy and find that you are not doing it.

Discussion

From the perspective of Muslim women's entrepreneurial motivation, women's participation in WeChat business activities is not only a factor, but many women are affected by 2-3 direct factors. The most immediate motivation for most women is to increase household income to create wealth. This findings are similar with..... In the context of women's inability to access higher education, the desire for new skills and information are also crucial. WeChat's easy access and low initial investment are important factors in attracting female entrepreneurs.

One of the main strategies used to sell products on WeChat is to use the support of friends to help them start their business. They also used advertising to attract in-demand customers as well as offering products trial to lure new customers. By learning new sales skills and methods offered by WeChat, they can sustain their businesses better. The role of fostering good relationships with other agents and entrepreners also play an important part in their business development.

The researchers found from women's entrepreneurial motivation and sales strategies can help boost there motivation to succeed and actively to seek solution to their issues. These women have the courage to change and innovate, which increases their self-efficacy. The learning of entrepreneurial knowledge cultivates their entrepreneurial knowledge and self-efficacy. Eventually sparked their interest in starting their own business. The knowledge gained from these entrepreneurship courses essentially improves their ability to identify opportunities. At the same time, the entrepreneur has teamwork spirit and professionalism, which is reflected in the attention and concern of the superior agent to the sales and psychological problems of the inferior agent. This close partnership creates a strong sense of teamwork. Agents can gain knowledge and energy in such a concentration. Women gain leadership advancement through such teams, enhancing the drive and determination of women to start a business.

Regarding the challenges faced by women's entrepreneurship, the authors believe that they can both a challenge and an opportunity. The issue of family and work balance for women entrepreneurs has always been a conflicting one. But for Muslim women, the role of family and mother is paramount. Women can start a business, but if the two conflict, women will choose a family because of the influence of Islamic culture. While this is a tangled phenomenon for the general public, it is an instinctive choice for Muslim women. Entrepreneurship also places higher demands on women's self-awareness. Women need to seek the development of entrepreneurship and market trends to be successful. At the same time, women also need to pay attention to their own thoughts and make their own decisions. Women also shoulder the responsibility of family and childcare, and the excellence of women affects the excellence of a family. The challenges faced by women have also inspired women's entrepreneurial courage, and the improvement of women's awareness is very beneficial to the family and even the nation. Entrepreneurship is a process, not a short-term obvious benefit. This is especially true of WeChat entrepreneurship. Many entrepreneurs mentioned that entrepreneurship requires women's patience and persistence. This is critical to entrepreneurial success.

CONCLUSION

This article analyzes women's entrepreneurial motivation, sales methods and challenges based on the research of Muslim women's entrepreneurship in WeChat. Although women's entrepreneurship has encountered many difficulties and obstacles, women have never given up the courage and persistence to continue entrepreneurship. Chinese Muslim women have tenacious fighting spirit and keen insight, and are able to grasp market drivers and trends. At the same time, many outstanding Muslim women expect more women to change themselves through entrepreneurship, and believe that cultivating a good woman is cultivating a good family.

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