

# Strategies Adopted by Male and Female Entrepreneurs in Italy to Face the Economic Crisis

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## **Abstract**

The current economic and financial crisis has had a profound impact on the Italian economy, and has put Italian companies into great difficulty; however statistical data shows that businesses owned by women seem to have resisted the economic crisis more effectively than those owned by men. This paper seeks to describe the ways in which Italian businesses have responded to the economic crisis and adopted strategies to deal with it. The study also compares the attitudes and behaviors of male and female entrepreneurs, in order to gain insight into their respective ways of dealing with the recession. The literature review shows that firms have faced the economic crisis by adopting either an offensive or defensive approach, and by externally- or internally- directed action. Four main types of strategy were identified: restructuring, resizing, reorganization and innovation/development. Drawing from a questionnaire survey given to a sample of 300 (150 men and 150 women) owners of micro-enterprises located in the Marche region of Central Italy, the findings suggest that firms adopted mainly a defensive approach characterized by both restructuring and resizing strategies aimed to improve efficiency and refocus the core business. An offensive approach – involving innovation, development or reorganization strategies – was less common.

A comparison between men and women shows that female entrepreneurs had a lower propensity towards investment, innovation, development and growth. Consequently, they

were significantly less oriented toward innovation/development strategies than men. Results suggest that under the same external conditions, men and women entrepreneurs adopted different strategies in responding to the economic crisis.

Results from this research provide significant contributions, both in the field of scientific research, and in the field of the real economy. From the scientific point of view, data from this investigation contribute to the development of the debate on the influence of gender in explaining behaviors and attitudes of men and women entrepreneurs. Data from this investigation allow us to get important information about the importance of entrepreneurs' subjective variables in explaining the way in which they react to economic crisis and choose the strategies to be adopted to face it. Our analysis in fact shows that, under the same external conditions, gender sometimes influences strategies implemented by Italian entrepreneurs to respond to the economic crisis. According to Cliff (1998), Carter, Shaw (2006) and Pelger (2012) women showed a lower propensity towards investments, innovation, development and growth. Such a defensive strategic approach can be considered positive in the short-term as it aims at guaranteeing the survival of the business. In fact, women entrepreneurs showed better resistance towards the economic crisis. However, in the long-term, such an approach should undermine the ability to seize new opportunities and to innovate the business, and consequently weaken business's competitiveness.

Results from this research are also useful to understand which economic policy measures might be useful to help men and women entrepreneurs to address the crisis and ensure the survival of their businesses. Policymakers who want to support female entrepreneurship should consider these aspects and identify tools and policies which can encourage women entrepreneurs to invest in innovation, training and the qualification of human resources and the business in general. In this way, women-owned businesses will not only resist the crisis more effectively, but also seize new market opportunities when they arise.

**Keywords:** economic crisis, recession, strategies, gender.

### **Debating points**

- 1) Apart from gender, which other factors (related to entrepreneurs and/or businesses) can explain differences in strategies Italian entrepreneurs adopted to face the economic recession?
- 2) Strategies adopted by men and women entrepreneurs can explain differences in birth and mortality rates between men- and women-owned firms in Italy during the recent economic crisis?
- 3) Which factors can explain differences in strategies adopted by men and women entrepreneurs to face the economic recession?

## **Introduction**

The global economic and financial crisis that began in the USA between 2005 and 2006 spilled over to other economies and triggered a global recession, causing an economic downturn in Italy too. Between 2007 and 2013, two-thirds of the main sectors of national economy declined by more than 20% and in the period 2011-2013 national sales decreased by about 17% (Istat, 2014).

This recession has had a considerable impact on Italian businesses. Company mortality rate, the number of bankruptcies and non-bankruptcy insolvency proceedings has continued growing relentlessly (Cerved, 2014). However at a national level, company birth and mortality rates have consistently shown that female-owned enterprises fare better. For instance, in the period 2011-2012 the stock of Italian enterprises decreased by 0.49%, while the number of women-owned businesses showed only a very slight reduction (-0.04%) (Unioncamere, 2013). Women entrepreneurs seem to have resisted the economic crisis better.

Within this context, it is essential to further investigate strategies adopted by Italian firms to overcome the recession. Possible strategies include restructuring, resizing, reorganization and innovation/development (Kitching et al. 2009; Sternad, 2012). Several studies claim that significant differences exist between men and women entrepreneurs in terms of attitude, approach and strategic behaviours (e.g. Cliff, 1998). Could such differences have influenced the way in which male and female entrepreneurs faced the crisis? Empirical research often provides data on how businesses respond to economic crisis but ignores the issue of gender.

This paper aims first of all, to look at the ways in which Italian sole-proprietors have responded to the economic crisis and the strategies they have adopted to deal with it; secondly, it aims to compare the respective behaviours of male and female entrepreneurs, in an attempt to determine whether they have adopted different strategies in facing up to the recession.

The empirical research is based on a questionnaire survey given to a sample of 300 sole-proprietors, (150 men and 150 women), owners of micro-enterprises located in the Marche region in central Italy. The data was collected during October-November 2013 and questions refer to the previous 5 years. The Marche region has one of the highest concentrations of micro and small enterprises in Italy. The impact of the economic crisis has been particularly harsh. For instance, in 2009 the regional GDP declined by 5,4% (Istat) and the mortality rate of joint-stock companies was the highest in Italy (7,5%) (Cerved, 2014). The regional feminization rate (24,3%) is slightly higher than the national average (23,6%) and even in this region women-owned companies have resisted the crisis more effectively (Unioncamere, 2013). For all these reasons, the Marche region is ideally suited to such a study.

The paper is structured in four parts. In the first part, the main literature is presented on the response of companies to the economic crisis. Next, the methodology employed in the empirical research is illustrated. Finally, the key results of the study are discussed and the main conclusions are drawn.

## **1. Literature review**

There are few studies specifically addressing the strategies that companies adopted to face the recent economic crisis (Latham, 2009; Papaoikonomou et al., 2012). Therefore the literature review was extended to include research dealing with business crisis and business turnaround.

Generally, economic downturns present a “dilemma” for businesses: whether to cut costs to improve efficiency and protect revenues and profit margins or to make investments in new products and processes and pursue revenue growth in a key market segment (Deans et al., 2009). The first choice is a defensive one intended to guarantee the survival of the business in the short-term, whereas the second is an offensive choice aimed at creating opportunities for long-term value creation (Deans et al., 2009). From another perspective, firms may face an economic crisis by adopting externally-directed actions (actions directed towards the market and oriented to change marketing strategies, pricing strategies, international orientation, etc.) or internally-directed actions (actions directed towards the firm and oriented to changing structures, processes, systems or resources used) (Chattopadhyay et al. 2001; Sternad, 2012).

In this wide range of possibilities, four main strategies may be identified to explain how firms may respond to an economic crisis: restructuring strategies; resizing strategies; reorganization strategies; innovation strategies (Kitching et al., 2009; Papaoikonomou et al., 2012; Sternad, 2012).

Restructuring strategies are internally-directed actions that involve cutting costs in order to improve efficiency. Such strategies relate to traditional product/market combinations and do not involve significant dimensional variations. Firms try to improve efficiency by improving productivity and reducing expenditure on a wide range of activities. Resizing strategies are external-directed actions oriented to refocusing the core business and disinvesting non-core assets. The disinvestment of products/product lines, withdrawing from markets, selling parts of the business, closure of plants or production sites are examples of resizing actions (Latham, 2009; Sternad, 2012).

Both restructuring and resizing strategies are defensive in nature (Deans et al., 2009) and they are the most common approaches adopted by firms to deal with recession conditions, especially in the short-term (Sharma, 2000; Kitching et al., 2009), and this has been true in Italy (Istat, 2014). As regards restructuring and resizing strategies, or “retrenchment strategies” (Kitching et al., 2009), authors point out that recession provides a stimulus for firms to re-examine their portfolios, focus on their core activities and increase efficiency. On the other hand, cost- and asset- cutting can weaken the business’s competitiveness.

Reorganization strategies are internally-directed actions focused on improving organizational aspects, for instance by redefining responsibilities, enhancing information system controls, investing in human resources and so on. Such strategies aim to requalify the firm and improve its organizational structure. Some authors assert that investments in human resources (Papaoikonomou et al., 2012) and employee benefits are useful to maintain commitment during an economic downturn (Brenner, 2009).

Innovation strategies are external-directed actions concerned with the competitive position of businesses. Such strategies adopt an offensive approach (Deans et al., 2009) and examples include investment into new markets, new product development, business diversification, increased marketing spending (Kitching et al., 2009; Papaoikonomou et al.,

2012; Sternad, 2012). Some firms perceive economic crisis as “opportunities to invest, innovate and expand into new market in order to achieve or extend a competitive advantage during the recession and beyond” (Kitching et al., 2009). However, such strategies are risky and require resources in terms of finance, managerial competences and technical expertises (Kitching et al., 2009).

Finally, several authors argue the existence of “ambidextrous” strategies (Kitching et al., 2009), that combine both efficiency improvements and strategic investments (Sternad, 2012).

Factors that can influence the choice of a strategy for dealing with economic crisis are company size (Latham, 2009), the perception of crisis (Sharma, 2000) and cultural differences between countries (Sternad, 2012).

Empirical studies specifically addressing the responses of companies to the economic crisis often ignore the issue of gender. However, it is widely accepted that business decisions are influenced by an entrepreneur’s skills and competencies, as well as by his/her personal characteristics (e.g. preference for risk, innovativeness and propensity to invest) and several studies show the existence of significant differences between men and women entrepreneurs. Research on this subject shows that women have on average a lower risk propensity than men (Byrnes et al., 1999; Watson, Robinson, 2003; Croson, Gneezy, 2009), have lower self-confidence, especially in investment decisions (Pelger, 2012) and show a more cautious attitude toward business growth than men (Cliff, 1998; Carter, Shaw, 2006). According to Cliff (1998), “this more cautious approach toward business expansion may result in ventures that are able to out-survive those headed by entrepreneurs pursuing more risky, high-growth strategies”. Pelger (2012) says that women entrepreneurs are less inclined to invest and they are less likely than men to name sales increases, innovation, R&D and implementation of new products as their investment goals. For this reason, women entrepreneurs may have had a lower propensity towards innovation/development strategies, which would have required new investments and the willingness to accept risks associated with them.

To sum up, firms may implement a variety of strategies under recession conditions, and differences between men and women entrepreneurs may have influenced the way they have faced the crisis. In this paper, we have investigated these topics.

## **2. Data and methodology**

The study presented in this paper is based on a questionnaire survey involving a sample of 300 men and women sole-proprietors (hereafter M and W), owners of micro enterprises located in the Marche Region, in Italy. The survey aims to compare M and W’s behavior during the economic crisis and to identify strategies they adopted to face the crisis.

A non-proportional stratified sample, with the same number of M and W, was selected using the list of members of one of the main regional business associations. Starting from a list of 1.627 sole-proprietors (429 W and 1198 M) a sample of 300 sole-proprietors (150 M e 150 W) was randomly extracted.

The decision to involve only sole-proprietors in the survey was motivated by several reasons: 1) in companies with members of both genders it is not easy to determine whether the strategic decisions are actually taken by a man or a woman; 2) in Italy sole proprietorships represent a very high percentage of the total number of female enterprises

(61% in 2010); 3) in the case of companies or partnerships, information about the gender of shareholders, partners and directors is not always available.

Entrepreneurs selected this way took part in a telephone questionnaire between October and November 2013 and were asked questions regarding actions implemented to face the crisis. Entrepreneurs included in the sample were given a list of 16 strategic actions devised from prevailing literature on this subject (Table 1) and were asked the following question: “In the last 5 years did you carry out any of the listed actions in order to deal with the crisis?”. They were also asked to give a point according to the Likert 5 point scale, in which 1=Definitely not; 5=Definitely. The survey enabled us to obtain 218 fully completed questionnaires. Women compiled 110 and men 108 questionnaires. The response rate was particularly high, standing at 73% and substantially similar for entrepreneurs of both genders (M: 72%; W: 73,3%).

The information gathered through the questionnaire has been used to:

- Identify the most frequently used actions undertaken by entrepreneurs to deal with the crisis;
- Identify several typical strategic profiles adopted by M and W: to this end the answers supplied by the entrepreneurs were submitted to factor and cluster analysis, and respondents grouped on the basis of strategic behaviour adopted during the crisis. Subsequently, the presence of men and women within the clusters was analysed.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Strategic actions undertaken by men and women entrepreneurs**

The strategic actions most frequently adopted by men and women were identified on the basis of points given to each of the actions listed in the questionnaire (Table 1).

**Table 1: Strategic actions to face the crisis. Frequency distribution (%)**

	1		2		3		4		5		Total		Total
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	
Reduction of waste and costs	1,4	1,4	2,8	0,9	4,1	4,6	13,8	14,7	27,5	28,9	49,5	50,5	100
Reduction of labour costs	1,8	2,8	6,0	2,3	10,1	7,3	21,6	11,9	10,1	26,2	49,5	50,5	100
Deferment of investments	5,1	11,0	9,2	6,4	13,3	12,8	13,3	3,2	8,7	17,0	49,5	50,5	100
Reduction of production volumes	14,7	24,3	13,3	10,1	12,8	6,9	6,0	2,8	2,8	6,4	49,5	50,5	100
Lowering of prices	5,5	25,7	9,2	4,6	8,3	11,5	19,7	0,9	6,9	7,8	49,5	50,5	100
Improvement of production processes and products	24,3	45,9	14,7	4,6	6,0	0,0	3,2	0,0	1,4	0,0	49,5	50,5	100
Organisat. or technological innovation	30,3	47,7	13,8	2,3	3,7	0,5	1,4	0,0	0,5	0,0	49,5	50,5	100
New products/ services	33,5	38,5	10,6	3,7	3,2	5,5	1,8	0,9	0,5	1,8	49,5	50,5	100
Search for new clients	23,9	39,9	13,3	3,2	8,7	5,5	2,3	0,0	1,4	1,8	49,5	50,5	100
Commun. and advertising	25,7	37,2	11,9	4,1	10,1	7,8	1,4	0,5	0,5	0,9	49,5	48,2	100
Interfirms collaboration	37,2	50,5	9,2	0,0	1,8	0,0	0,5	0,0	0,9	0,0	49,5	50,5	100
More qualified personnel	41,7	50,5	6,4	0,0	1,4	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	49,5	50,5	100
Training of staff	40,8	46,3	6,4	0,5	1,8	2,8	0,5	0,5	0,0	0,5	49,5	50,5	100
Expansion of the activity	40,8	50,0	5,1	0,0	2,3	0,5	0,0	0,0	1,4	0,0	49,5	50,5	100
Price increase	41,3	50,5	6,4	0,0	0,9	0,0	0,9	0,0	0,0	0,0	49,5	50,5	100
New collaborators or partners	41,3	50,5	6,4	0,0	1,8	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	49,5	50,5	100

Data show that entrepreneurs dealt with the crisis through a primarily defensive approach. Strategic actions most frequently undertaken by men and women were in fact related to restructuring and resizing strategies. The most frequent actions were: reduction of waste

and costs, reduction of labour costs, deferment of investments. On the other hand, actions related to innovation, development or reorganization were less widely adopted. Only few entrepreneurs expanded the activity, invested in training projects, introduce innovations, made communication and advertising, improved production processes and/or products/services, introduced new products/services and sought for new clients. A significant percentage of entrepreneurs (35.3% gave a 4 or 5 score) lowered prices to increase sales. But much less women adopted this measure. Indeed, although the prevalence of a defensive approach is what men and women had in common, the data in Table 1 suggests that men adopted an offensive approach more frequently than women.

The answers given by men and women were also analysed by applying the t-test to the means corresponding to each of the strategic actions listed in the questionnaire. The results of the t-test (Table 2) show the statistical significance of differences between men and women concerning the means of some actions. Women in fact scored higher on defensive actions (in particular reduction of labour costs), whereas men gave higher values to a series of offensive actions (improvement of processes/products, organisational and technological renewal, the search for new clients and markets).

**Table 2: Differences between men and women's means. T-test results**

	Observations		Means		Means difference	Diff. S.E	t-test
	M	W	M	W			
Reduction of waste and costs	108	110	4,28	4,36	-,086	0,132	0,650
<b>Reduction of labour costs</b>	108	110	3,65	4,12	-,470	0,150	-3,138 ***
Deferment of investments	108	110	3,23	3,17	0,59	0,190	0,309
Reduction of production volumes	108	110	2,37	2,15	0,225	0,177	1,274
<b>Lowering of prices</b>	108	110	3,27	2,22	1,050	0,184	5,707 ***
<b>Improvement of production processes and products</b>	108	110	1,84	1,09	0,752	0,105	7,168 ***
<b>Organisational or technological innovation</b>	108	110	1,55	1,06	0,483	0,084	5,765 ***
New products/services	108	110	1,49	1,49	,000	0,127	-0,01
<b>Search for new clients</b>	108	110	1,87	1,43	0,443	0,135	3,278***
Communication and advertising	108	110	1,77	1,49	0,278	0,125	2,216
Interfirms collaboration	108	110	1,36	1,00	0,361	0,073	4,894
<b>More qualified personnel</b>	108	110	1,19	1,00	0,185	0,044	4,216 ***
Training of staff	108	110	1,23	1,18	0,050	0,082	0,604
<b>Expansion of the activity</b>	108	110	1,31	1,02	0,287	0,079	3,622 ***
<b>Price increase</b>	108	110	1,22	1,00	0,222	0,055	4,057 ***
<b>New collaborators or partners</b>	108	110	1,20	1,00	0,204	0,047	4,335 ***

Before calculating the t-test, Leven's Test F was calculated to verify the hypothesis of variance homogeneity among the groups and directly interpreted the correct version.

\*\*\* *p-value* < 0,05



## 4.2 Strategic profiles of men and women entrepreneurs

The following stage of analysis was carried out by submitting the 16 actions listed in the questionnaire to factor analysis. In this way we tried to more effectively outline the behaviour adopted by men and women during the crisis, and identified a more limited number of factors describing typical strategic profiles (Hair et al., 1998).

The strategic profiles extracted through the factor analysis were subsequently used to carry out a cluster analysis. This enabled us to extract several groups of entrepreneurs, different to each other yet characterised by a high degree of heterogeneity within the group, as they shared the same strategic behaviour when dealing with the crisis.

The aim of the factor analysis was not to confirm the validity of the pre-existing model, but to identify the variety of strategic behaviours manifested by the entrepreneurs during the crisis. Consequently a varimax orthogonal rotation analysis was carried out considering therefore a non-correlation among factors. The extraction of factors was carried out considering a method of parallel analysis (Zwick, Velicer, 1986). After having extracted 4 factors, the factor structure indicated in Table 3 was obtained. In this phase one of the strategic actions previously considered was eliminated (lowering of prices), as it had a factor coefficient lower than 0.5 (McCain, 1990).

The factors correspond to 4 different strategic profiles. To each of these profiles correspond the actions, which have resulted as the most significant to identify the strategic behaviour of each entrepreneur.

**Table 3: Factor analysis results. Strategic profiles matrix**

Strategic actions	Strategic profiles			
	F1	F2	F3	F4
More qualified personnel	0.816			
New collaborators or partners	0.807			
Price increase	0.791			
Training of staff	0.560			
Improvement of production processes and products		0.807		
Organisational or technological innovation		0.779		
Expansion of the activity		0.685		
Interfirms collaboration		0.519		
Deferment of investments			0.807	
Reduction of waste and costs			0.788	
Reduction of labour costs			0.783	
Reduction of production volumes			0.686	
Communication and advertising				0.849
search for new clients				0.754
New products/services				0.634
PERCENT EXPLAINED VARIANCE	17,457	16,404	16,366	13,210

Test Bartlett < 0,5 e KMO > 0,7.

Overall, the 4 factors explain 63.437% of the total percentage variance.

On the basis of the strategic profiles identified through the factor analysis, we grouped together entrepreneurs through the cluster analysis. The analysis was carried out through the K-Means method. Considering both the objectives of the research and the Pseudo-F, the 4 clusters solution was taken. In Table 4 the final centre values are listed.

**Table 4: Cluster analysis. Results**

Factors	Clusters			
	1	2	3	4
F1	<b>3,18200</b>	-,24502	-,43441	-,17529
F2	,66139	-,45756	<b>2,37131</b>	-,27477
F3	-,47055	,16160	,25439	<b>-,04823</b>
F4	,02814	<b>1,48191</b>	,40836	-,59334

Numbers in bold indicate the centres final, or the standardized mean of the segmentation variables.

The descriptive characteristics of each cluster are presented in Table 5. Each cluster has been labelled, in order to describe the strategic profile shared by entrepreneurs belonging to it.

The strategic profiles corresponding to each cluster are as follows.

**Cluster 1: Entrepreneurs oriented to the training of staff:** they interpreted the crisis as an opportunity to enrich their intangible assets and invested in particular in human resources. They employed more qualified personnel, looked for new collaborators and partners and participated in training courses in order to improve business' s qualification and skills. This strategic behaviour is based on the desire for diversification as opposed to competitors. Business requalification was followed by an increase in the cost of products and services, as clients should be willing to pay a premium price for products and services.

**Cluster 2: Entrepreneurs market-oriented:** they tried countering the crisis by carrying out actions aimed at resisting the negative trend of demand. They redefined their supply and sought new opportunities for expanding demand. The strategy adopted was mainly geared to the renewal of supply, introducing new products and services, exploring new markets and looking for new clients. Such actions were accompanied by initiatives of communication and advertising aimed at increasing the reputation of the business and improving its image.

**Cluster 3: Entrepreneurs oriented to development and growth:** they are similar to the previous group for having tried to counter the effects of the crisis by adopting offensive strategies aimed at turning around the negative trend of demand and increasing sales. In this case such an objective materialised in actions and investments aimed at reorganising the business and renewing its technology, in order to increase volume of production and sales and to improve processes and products. There are entrepreneurs in this group who started collaboration with other entrepreneurs to share the costs and realise joint projects.

**Cluster 4: Entrepreneurs oriented to downsizing:** they reacted to the crisis through a defensive approach. The initiatives adopted, in fact, included cost cutting measures, the elimination of waste, reduction of labour costs, deferment and/or cancellation of

investments and reduction of production volumes. Ultimately these entrepreneurs placed the priority on the survival of their businesses. Consistent with this purpose, they gave up making new investments, redefined their core business activities and tried to increase the efficiency of remaining activities.

**Table 5: Clusters description**

	Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3		Cluster 4	
Label	Training of staff		Market-orientation		Development and growth		Downsizing	
Dimension	14		48		21		135	
Percentage	6,4%		22%		9,6%		62%	
Gender $\chi^2(3) = 44,143$								
Men	14	100%	23	48%	21	100%	50	37%
Women	0	0%	25	52%	0	0%	85	63%

As can be seen in Table 5, the most numerous cluster concerns the adoption of defensive type strategy geared to downsizing. As a matter of fact 62% of entrepreneurs belongs to this group. Furthermore an analysis of the data in Table 5, reveals a marked contrast with regards to the presence of men and women. The latter in fact are completely absent from the group of entrepreneurs that adopted strategies of human resource training and strategies aimed at development and growth. By contrast, the presence of women is more marked in cluster 4, in which entrepreneurs who favoured downsizing come together. Therefore this data confirms what has already partially emerged from the analysis of values given by M and W to single strategic actions. W dealt with the crisis with a mainly defensive attitude and preferred downsizing their activities and increasing efficiency. To this end they reduced costs, cut unprofitable and marginal activities and focused on core business. Although such an attitude is rather widespread even among M, the latter dealt with the crisis in a more diversified way. As a matter of fact, the percentage of those adopting offensive strategies, aimed at requalifying human resources and at growth and development, has been markedly higher.

### Conclusions

This paper provides insight into the strategies that micro-entrepreneurs adopt to survive the recent economic crisis. It analyses differences between men and women entrepreneurs in order to understand if they adopt different strategies to face the crisis.

Findings suggest that entrepreneurs adopted mainly a defensive approach characterized by both restructuring and resizing strategies aimed to improve efficiency and refocus the core business. An offensive approach – realized by innovation, development or reorganization strategies – was less common. In this perspective, results are consistent with those of previous analyses (Sharma, 2000; Kitching et al., 2009; Istat, 2014). The defensive approach characterised both M and W, although the adoption of offensive strategies is more widespread among M. The cluster analysis has identified 4 groups of behaviour aimed, respectively, at the adoption of: strategies of human resource training (investment in intangible assets); strategies market-oriented (redefining supply and searching for new

opportunities); strategies of development and growth (focus on the increase of sales and improving product and process); strategies of downsizing (reduction of costs, elimination of waste and redefining of core business). This last cluster proved to be the most numerous, and W are completely absent in the clusters of human resource retraining and growth and development. It would seem possible therefore to claim that, in front of the same external economic conditions, M and W made different choice to face the crisis. According to Cliff (1998), Carter, Shaw (2006) and Pelger (2012) W showed a lower propensity towards investments, innovation, development and growth. Such a defensive strategic approach can be considered positive in the short-term as it aims at guaranteeing the survival of the business. In fact, as previously stated, women entrepreneurs showed better resistance towards the economic crisis (Unioncamere, 2013). However, in the long-term, such an approach should undermine the ability to seize new opportunities and to innovate the business, and consequently weaken business's competitiveness. Policymakers who want to support female entrepreneurship should consider these aspects and identify tools and policies that can encourage women entrepreneurs to invest in innovation, training and the qualification of human resources and the business in general. In this way, women-owned businesses will not only resist the crisis more effectively, but also seize new market opportunities when they arise.

The study has important limitations related to the type of business analysed (only sole proprietors) and to the limited geographical context. Subsequent research could extend the study to other types of business and widen the geographical context of reference. It's also important to check whether other variables, apart from gender, may have influenced businesses' strategic choices. In this paper we only considered differences in strategic profiles between men and women entrepreneurs. Further analyses should therefore investigate the role of other variables related to entrepreneurs (age, education, family conditions, etc.) and to firms (sector, employees, turnover, performances, etc.).

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