

Chapter 10

Becoming an African Hair Salon Entrepreneur in the United States of America

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ABSTRACT

African beauty salons are important institutions within the African and African American community and can be found in nearly every city and community where African immigrants have settled. This study utilizes content review and a single case study to explore the pathways to African women's entrepreneurship and business sustainability within the care industry of hair braiding. The authors applied the push and pull theory to illuminate the "non-choice" of salon entrepreneurship for educated African immigrant women. In general, the study shows the efforts of one entrepreneur to fit the unique exigencies of (African) hair braiding to local (western) business requirements. The study identifies how better accommodation of those exigencies would less inhibit this form of African women's entrepreneurship in general and thus benefit local communities at large through more sustainable service delivery, increased revenue flow, and infrastructural support for immigrants in general.

INTRODUCTION

The chapter contextualized the engagement of African immigrant in entrepreneurship using the push and pull theory (Achua & Lussier, 2014). Following their male counterparts, a third of the world's entrepreneurial activity is driven by women but not much is known about female immigrant entrepreneurs (Halkias & Caracatsanis, 2016). Reasons for this entrepreneurship include desires for achievement, autonomy, and flexibility that self-employment offers (Bowen & Hisrich, 1986). However, minorities also often become business owners because they are hemmed in for other professions (Bates, Jackson

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& Johnson, 2007) and take up businesses that serve their own ethnic communities for instance African hair braiders in the United States mostly serve African or African community members.

While research on women's entrepreneurship in the United States and Canada is abundant, research into the experiences of immigrants, specifically African immigrant female entrepreneurs, is very sparse (Charles & Gherman, 2013). Halkias and Caracatsanis (2011) long articulated the need for understanding female immigrant entrepreneurs along the intersections of ethnicity, class and generation. Further, not much is known about the experiences of African hair braiders, in her fiction novel by Americanah, Adichie Chimamanda describes the lives of these women, their relationships with their clients and their work environment.

Entrepreneurship has served as a pathway to economic inclusion for marginalized people. It is therefore imperative to study minority experience to further this inclusion. As such, this chapter: 1) applies push-pull theory to identify the directional factors influence immigrant African female entrepreneur (IAFE) experiences, 2) connects push and pull factors to policy and practice, 3) outlines a guideline using a hair braiding business as an exemplary model, and 4) discusses the findings, recommendations, and implications of this study.

African women are among the most recent newcomer immigrants to the United States, for instance, are immigrants who arrived after the 1960s, and comprise one of the fastest growing groups of business owners in the United States (Pearce, 2005). While African immigrant women can be found in almost every work sector of the United States economy, these women join other minority women, particularly African American women, working mostly in the service and care industry as certified nurse assistants, cooks, janitors, and cashiers (Harvey, 2005). In contrast, for African women, braiding salons comprise not only sites of entrepreneurial activity, but also social spaces where alter-arriving Africans immigrants who have less access to employment due to a lack of required skills and language barriers can generate an income. Working at a braiding salon, then, they are able to make a living while learning English, pursuing further education, or simply waiting to get another job.

Hair braiding is an art with a diverse history and meaning for different communities across Africa. Babou (2008) described how hair braiding in Senegal is a skill performed by specific members of society but later became a common practice due to economic pressure in the 1980s. Currently, women in Africa generally access hair-braiding in professional salons, in markets, and in homes. In general, hair braiding is an intergenerational skill, passed from mother to daughter. According to Babou (2008), African hair salons in the United States were first introduced by Senegalese women immigrants in the early 1980s as a means to earn an income from what was a predominantly domestic activity while also allowing women to socialize. This increase of African immigration in the 1980s emerged as part of the wider sociodemographic immigration context around the world. That is, in the 1980s and early 1990s, most African women arrived as spouses to join their husbands due to the Amnesty Law of 1986. *The United States Refugee Act of 1980* also enabled refugees to flee politically instigated unrest, insecurity, ethnic genocides, and other political threats in their nations of origin. Some Africans entered the US as asylees, which requires demonstrating reasonable proof of fear of persecution in their home country due to their race, religious belief, and political views. Asylees differ from "economic" refugees, who are otherwise generally attracted to the United States by the prospects of education or better economic opportunities. Refugees and asylees, by contrast, tend to have more disadvantaged backgrounds since they often experience a great and rushed push to leave their countries for a neighboring one prior to moving to the US or elsewhere. As such, they arrive highly displaced and often ill-prepared for life in the US. All permanent

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