

CONSTRAINTS FACED BY RURAL FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS IN SRI LANKA: A STUDY BASED ON NUWARA ELIYA DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Female entrepreneurship is the driving force and substance for a country's economy, particularly developing countries. Female business startup activities are increasing year by year. However, regardless of the growth of female entrepreneurship each year, the achievement of female entrepreneurs' businesses is still not up to expectations. Additionally, female entrepreneurs also face challenges to continuing in long-term business. Researchers construct knowledge on female entrepreneurship through various aspects. However, most contributions to the literature on women entrepreneurs came from developed countries, and the results can not be generalized. Thus, the study explores female entrepreneurs' traditional constraints in Nuwara Eliya District, Sri Lanka. The study adopts a qualitative approach, specifically narrative design. The data were obtained from eight respondents purposively. The struggle to balance the family and the business, gender discrimination, culture, human capital, and acquiring business knowledge were the main findings. In addition, the Easter attack and the Covid 19 pandemic worsened female entrepreneurs' constraints. The constraints that emerged from the analysis resulted in the development of a new and comprehensive model. The findings provide theoretical and practical implications for the female entrepreneurship area.

Keywords: Constraints, Female Entrepreneurs, Rural, qualitative, social constructionist approach, narrative

1. Introduction

Under women empowerment, women entrepreneurship has become a much more important topic (Ahl, 2006). In developing nations, encouraging women's entrepreneurship contributes to economic growth, gives women a means of self-expression and fulfilment, and empowers them as people (Panda, 2018; Dissanayake, 2018). Regarding contributing to economic progress, modern women in the twenty-first century go beyond the traditional role of homemakers as a source of domestic innovation and know-how (Roomi and Parrott 2008). However, research shows that women's employment is significantly less than males globally (Roomi and Parrott, 2008). For example, it is estimated that in 2018 women's worldwide labour force participation rate was 28.5% lower than that of males (Yaqoob, 2020).

Furthermore, women's labour force participation rates in various Asian nations are consistently lower than men's, highlighting the wide gender disparity in the labour force participation rates across Asian countries in 2017 (Yaqoob, 2020). Still, in the role of entrepreneur, it appears that women confront different obstacles than males (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011). Also, previous research has found that women are generally underperformed and less successful than male-owned businesses on various measures such as revenue (sales), assets value, profit, number of years in business, and growth. Also, female entrepreneurs' discontinuance (failure) rates are always higher than males' (Marlow and McAdam, 2011). The literature related to female entrepreneurship consistently highlighted that entrepreneurial women face many problems in common with one another (Ahl, 2006). However, very few researchers have wanted to understand why entrepreneurial women are challenged with such major barriers to success in business activities, and this is especially true in the Asian context. Moreover, limited research has been conducted on female entrepreneurship in Sri Lankan context. There is a considerable need to identify any unknown challenges specific to a particular context.

Even though rural Sri Lanka has a higher proportion of women workers than urban areas, the question remains as to whether female entrepreneurs in the rural sector still face these traditional constraints, making it difficult for them to achieve tremendous success in their entrepreneurial endeavours or to reduce the high failure rates of their businesses. Little consideration has been given to female entrepreneurs' difficulties in Nuwara Eliya District. These women must be recognized as the district with the highest percentage of economically active women and female participation in the labour force. Therefore, traditional constraints experienced by women entrepreneurs in Nuwara Eliya District, Sri Lanka, are the basis for the study's focus on this considerable gender disparity and the high failure rate of female entrepreneurs, despite this district's highest female labour force participation in Sri Lanka. For these reasons, this study seeks to identify traditional obstacles experienced by female entrepreneurs in Rural Sri Lanka as a study centred on the Nuwara Eliya District.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Female Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship development in developing nations is presently a major concern for economic growth. Most people feel that the relative economic backwardness of these nations is due mainly to a lack of entrepreneurship, money, trained labour, and technological advancement. Female entrepreneurship is critical in continuous attempts to reduce poverty in emerging nations (Jennings & Brush 2013). Poverty eradication will be significantly aided if women can participate in economic activity, whether as well-paid workers or successful entrepreneurs. Increasing women's entrepreneurship in developing countries, as in other regions globally, has immense potential to empower women and affect society (Ahl, 2006; Roomi & Parrott, 2008). Unfortunately, many countries, particularly those with low GDP per capita and industrialization levels, have not yet reached their full potential in realizing this potential.

According to Brush and Hisrich (1999), an internationally acknowledged researcher on female entrepreneurship, female entrepreneurs are underrepresented in academic entrepreneurship articles. Scholastically, entrepreneurship-related studies have not considered female entrepreneurs as a separate group of people until relatively recently, though in developed countries, many studies based on the psychological traits and leadership skills of female entrepreneurs started to appear in the mid-1970s (Watson and Robinson, 2003). However, this was an under-research area of study until the early 1990s due to the women's low participation in entrepreneurial activities. Furthermore, the authors criticized this research since it relied mainly on studies that focused on the experiences and characteristics of males rather than females, which may have left out vital and distinctive components of the female entrepreneurial perspective (Brush and Hisrich,1999).

On the other hand, researchers asserted that if male and female entrepreneurs carry out their entrepreneurial activities in the same way and with the same resources, gender would be of little significance to scholars studying entrepreneurship (Desai, 2018). However, several studies have found that women small-business operators confront obstacles unlike men (Roomi and Parrott, 2008; Sivashanker, 2020). In the role of entrepreneur, it appears that women confront different obstacles than males (Desai, 2018). The disparity may be due to sexist views toward women, family duties, cultural hurdles, and lack of ,business experience and education.

2.2 Constraints Faced by Female Entrepreneurs

According to the literature, all possible constraints female entrepreneurs face in developed and developing countries can be extracted and listed under traditional constraints.

Table 1: Traditional Constraints Derived from Literature

Aggregated constraints (themes)	Constraints Faced by Female Entrepreneurs
Gender Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gender wage gap - Subordinate role under a male family member - Lack of networking - Cultural values, norms and religious beliefs - Bad perception of women - weak negotiating positions - sexual harassment
Work-family conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Role conflict - giving priority to the family over - Being a good mother and dutiful wife - Stress - Time

Financial constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of assets and collateral - restricted debt/loan availability - lack of awareness of funding alternatives (e.g. crowdfunding, venture capital, business angels) - credit history void - lenders' mistrust and prejudice of female entrepreneurs - starting a company with family savings - absence of permanent banker ties - women's debt awareness
Lack of infrastructural support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - high office rent - market exclusion - Lack of access to good roads - Absence of technology - minimal daycare options - shortage of market research and feasibility study firms - absence of female entrepreneurship incentives - shortage of transport and power
Unfavorable BEP environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - competition - Tax - Political stability - male-biased regulations - corruption - bureaucracy and red tapes - economic stagnancy and recession - lack of intellectual property rights - unclear legal structure - few opportunities for growth
Lack of entrepreneurship training and education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of proper training and development - Lack of resources - lack of support from the supporting organizations in terms of business information and counselling - Less of education - lack of industry experience - not aware of the up-to-date information
Personality based constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of self-confidence - Lack of leadership skills - feelings of loneliness and isolation - entrepreneurial burnout - Few role models

2.3 Theoretical Background

We use two theoretical views aligned with Holmquist & Sundin to explain the systematic variations in why females lack growth intention (2002). First, when it comes to adapting to the many levels of growth goals, women are different, according to theories of social and liberal feminism. The liberal feminist theory stresses that women have the same position and possibilities as men and are equal (Fischer et al., 1993). Restrictions on resources and educational opportunities are examples of discriminatory hurdles and systematic prejudices women face that must be eliminated. Progressive liberalism has

arisen from the liberal feminist worldview, which has served as the foundation for several critical legislative reforms to increase equality for women.

According to the Social Feminism idea, men and women are different, and they should be treated differently (Ahl, 2006). Social feminism highlights differences in socialisation practices as they examine the world for males and females differently (Fischer et al., 1993). This is because women's socialization profoundly affects their outlook on life and their choices in the workplace (Brush, 2006). As a result, women tend to consider their businesses part of their families rather than independent economic entities. Feminist theory is widely used in the sociology area, however, few researchers focus on how feminist values are played through the new venture creation and management process to progress the position of women in society.

3. Methodology

As this qualitative study focuses on the traditional constraints female entrepreneurs face as a social phenomenon, a social constructionist approach has been adopted. A qualitative research approach has been selected to carry out this study since the qualitative approach is investigative and provides rich, in-depth information on the study; the researcher can uncover a target audience's behaviour and examine its connection to the complex research problem, and since the researcher has to deal with the feelings, emotions, behaviours, and relationships among the rural females. The Narrative research type was used in this study since the study focuses on women's stories. This research used three main types of purposive sampling: Snowball sampling, the maximum variation sampling method, and the extreme deviant case sampling method. The sample of eight female entrepreneurs represents entrepreneurs from all age groups, all educational levels, married and single females, and successful and struggling start-up female entrepreneurs. This study is based on the Nuwara Eliya District, Sri Lanka, with the highest female economically active population and female labour force participation rate in 2018. Eight In-depth interviews were conducted to get the qualitative data for the study.

The data analysis was performed through thematic analysis. First, interview transcripts were reread and reviewed several times, noting down initial ideas. Next, the researcher generated initial codes, searched for, reviewed, defined, and named the themes related to the coded extracts to finalize themes. This qualitative study was conducted adhering to the criteria stated by Lincoln, Guba & Pilotta (1985) with credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability to assure the study's validity. Moreover, the ethical procedure was applied throughout the research process, including informed consent, confidentiality, and no harm for participating in the study.

4. Findings and Discussion

All the constraints mentioned by the interview participants, which can be categorized under eight key constraint themes identified and listed in Table 01 are elaborately described in this section. Further, the sub-themes derived from this study will be analyzed and discussed under these eight major themes. (1) Gender discrimination (2) Business-

Family Conflict (3) Financial problems(4) Lack of infrastructural support (5) Unfavorable business environment (6) Lack of entrepreneurship training and education (7) personality based constraints (8) Lack of networks and social connections.

4.1 Gender Discrimination

Although the world acknowledges that significant victories have been achieved over recent decades regarding gender equality, the gender inequalities targeting women by denying them opportunities to access education, gain new experiences, access financial services, and start new businesses have increased. Still, there is a significant gender gap globally, which is even wider in developing countries. Considering the interviewees' responses, several sub-themes could be derived regarding the gender discrimination they experienced throughout their entrepreneurial journey.

4.2 Lack of support from family members and the spouse

Where women are married, their husbands' support is crucial to their business's success. However, unfortunately, most of the female entrepreneurs in rural villages are not supported by their husbands financially or through guidance and advice when they fail.

"During this Covid pandemic, I was helpless where; I badly needed my husband's support to continue my business. However, he did not bother to help me out. I did not expect him to fund my business. I knew that he did not have his savings. Nevertheless, he did not even try his best to find me a source of funding, which was possible. At least his guidance or advice might have helped me a lot during that crisis. I did not receive his support at all. So, I tried hard to defeat the crisis I was facing." (FE 03)

Some women who enter entrepreneurship without the necessary skills to start and run a business end up losing control of the business. Some stated that during maternity leave, their businesses suffer because they often remain without adequate management in their absence of them.

"During my pregnancy, I made sure not to work hard and to take care of my health since it was my first pregnancy. While resting, I had to bear many losses in my restaurant. There was no one to manage my business. I had no one to give me the responsibility to continue the business. Even my husband was busy with his job. The restaurant was closed for nearly 03 months. I lost several customers during that period." (FE 02)

Women, especially in patriarchal societies, can not run businesses alone without the help of their spouses because their traditional division of labour and role identity in the family structure obstructs entrepreneurship (ILO, 1986). Further, female entrepreneurs depend on their spouse's support; first, women lack the freedom to socialize with men; second, women have more family responsibilities; third, women often have less self-confidence in running a business and fourth, financial institutions are not supportive to the

idea of assisting women (ILO, 1986). When their husbands are not in favour of them independently running a business, they abandon the business to 'keep peace at home.

4.3 Social Norms and Culture

Patrilocality is a cultural convention that mandates that newlyweds live with or close to their husband's families. Relocating away from one's family of origin does not restrict one's freedom of movement, but it might impair one's social support, networking possibilities, and social position. In addition to limiting women's access to school and employment, cultural norms that encourage early marriage and childbirth can also cause health issues that negatively impact their productivity (Kantor, 2002).

"Despite his support for my business venture, my spouse was adamant that I not work with other men. It was in our religious nature to do so. It is a part of who we are. So, in any case, I was not allowed to work with male customers alone. I could not secure the services of a male employee for my salon since my spouse would not allow it. I have lost a significant number of customers as a result of these restrictions. Because no male-only salons exist in our region, I would have extended my services to include male clients." (FE 04)

In many cultures, women's duties are determined by their caretaking roles in the home and family. Therefore, community and family members react negatively when mothers leave their children at home to work on their enterprises, especially in rural Sri Lanka, where such conventions are popular. As a result, women often feel guilty when pursuing entrepreneurial endeavours because they have internalized cultural role expectations (Jamali, 2009).

4.4 Work-family Conflict

In most modern civilisations, caring for one's family and home falls disproportionately on women. Balance is critical for every entrepreneur, especially women who are anticipated to balance business and family matters. Several women also expressed normative pressures from traditional attitudes of a conservative society where women are expected first and foremost to fulfil their family duties and responsibilities.

"From the beginning of my business, my family did not support me, and I was discouraged by my extended family, e.g. husband, parents, in-laws, sisters and cousins – who thought it was inappropriate for any woman to neglect their kids for business ." (FE 03)

The domestic activities and extra family care burden directly affect female entrepreneurial performance and outcomes. For example, Williams (2004) found a negative relationship between the time spent caring for children and self-employment. In addition, Hundley (2001) argued that having small children and many hours of housework harm female earnings.

Women entrepreneurs were surveyed to learn how much time they devote to their businesses each week and how they balance work and the family. Only one of the respondents (FE 01, a 25-year-old single woman) devotes seven days a week to her business, whilst the others devote fewer than five days a week to their endeavours. This shows that if women had more time to dedicate to their business initiatives, their economic outcomes would have been significantly better, and their enterprises would have attained more success than the male-owned operations, which would have been more profitable.

The societal pressure to redistribute is greater and more intense for poor rural women entrepreneurs, especially those who own home-based companies. The local community may take advantage of the businesswoman, asking her for favours .

"I sometimes feel obliged to do free haircuts and dressings (hairdos and makeups) for my close friends and relatives when they come to my salon. I could not charge them the exact charges. Most of the time, I had to make losses." (FE 04)

Some women entrepreneurs have been able to overcome the challenge of finding a work-life balance, even though they must put in long hours. For example, they close their stores early on weekends and public holidays to spend more time with their families.

4.5 Financial Constraints

Women entrepreneurs are more likely to get informal financing than formal external funding. At the same time, it isn't immediately clear if financial institutions discriminate against women or if women themselves make the decisions that lead to this result. Sabarwal and Terrell (2008), Coleman (2007), and Fletschner & Kenney (2011) found that rural female entrepreneurs are less likely to utilize external funding than male entrepreneurs in seven out of the nine nations they studied.

4.6 Less Access to Capital and Credit

For female entrepreneurs in rural areas of developing nations, access to financing is frequently cited as a major roadblock to success. However, among the women entrepreneurs, it was evident that less access to various financial sources and under-capitalization were the main issues. As a result, they couldn't generate enough money to acquire the essentials required to run the firm daily.

"For me, money is the major problem. My pane is to move this business into another location, but I don't have enough money to do that requirement." (FE 02)

Even though they had a successful sales and profitability track record, the women interviewed said they were treated differently than their male colleagues because they were considered riskier and less credit eligible. Some banks have a preconceived notion that women entrepreneurs cannot repay a loan (Brush 1997; Mijid 2015). Female entrepreneurs generally use their savings and informal funding sources more than men. A small

percentage of female entrepreneurs used family or personal funds as a source of funding, while others enlisted the help of their spouses, siblings, or dads.

"The initial funding came from my pocket, but that was a small amount, so I had to purchase the premises for the grocery store, and I did this through an instalment plan given by the shop owner, whom my father also introduced. Therefore, I did not need to consider bank financing then." (FE 06).

According to Haynes and Haynes (1999), borrowing from family and friends was a major source of finance for women's businesses, even in the United States. For example, in Singapore, most women use their savings and obtain loans from family to start their new ventures (Maysami and Goby, 1999).

4.7 Reluctance to seek credit

Social attitudes discourage women from applying for bank loans. Second, because of their responsibilities in the home, childbirth, and raising children, women's access to banking has been hampered by distance and scheduling issues (Fleischner, 2009). In order to meet their business's financial demands, female entrepreneurs turn to various sources, including government and commercial banks, other financial organizations, and private money lenders. Most respondents were unwilling to use conventional financial institutions. Thus they opted to use informal means instead. Kon and Storey (2003) describe these entrepreneurs as "discouraged borrowers" who operate successful businesses but avoid applying for bank loans because they believe they would be rejected.

The absence of collateral, a lack of business registration, or an inadequate educational background deterred female entrepreneurs from requesting loans more often than men (Garwe and Fatoki, 2012).

"Our biggest challenge is obtaining guarantors and collateral. Additionally, at least one of the guarantors must be employed by the government. The application process also was very confusing" (FE 07)

It noted that women entrepreneurs were concerned about loan affordability and repayment challenges. It is difficult for them to get a loan because of their tiny enterprises, limited business revenue, and the seasonality of their incomes. In addition, because external borrowing is riskier than relying on one's savings, women are considered more risk-averse than males, which is why they have a lower demand for and usage of business financing (Marlow, 2013; Carter and Shaw, 2006).

4.8 Lack of Infrastructural Support

Female entrepreneurs face obstacles such as a lack of energy and water access, telecommunications and inadequate road conditions, and access to technology and auxiliary services.

"At the beginning of my business, due to the lack of infrastructure facilities, the post-harvest delays were increasing, and I had to face lots of losses." (FE 03)

4.9 Difficulties in accessing the markets

Female entrepreneurs have difficulty getting their products to customers and staying on top of industry trends worldwide. When starting a business and manufacturing products, many women do not know what their customers want or need to succeed in business.

"I was unaware of the market demand for Strawberry cultivations when I started this business. So, it was challenging for me to compete with the business competitors." (FE 07)

Failure to grasp the market's intricacies is a sure way to doom any new venture. Sadly, many female entrepreneurs are hindered by a lack of marketing skills. As a result, their products are of low quality and are hampered by subpar production and quality control processes. Another drawback is the lack of delivery, distribution, and networking. As a result, their products aren't well-positioned in the market or adequately promoted. They also fail to make improvements better to meet the demands of a continuously shifting industry landscape.

4.10 Lack of access to quality Road Network

Entrepreneurs must be able to quickly and easily distribute their products to customers to succeed. However, most of the respondents in Nuwara Eliya stated that transportation was a major impediment to their operation.

"When the vegetables should be transported to Dambulla Economic Centre, I hired a lorry. However, it could not reach my vegetable cultivation field. I had to bring the vegetables to the minor road through the footpath. Then the vegetables were loaded into the lorry and transported to Dambulla. The journey was also difficult because most roads have been renovated lately." (FE 03)

Those who identified transportation as a business restriction cited Road quality as the most significant issue, followed by easy access to roads and a lack of readily available transportation. In addition, the female businesses voiced their displeasure with the ongoing road construction.

"Since my cultivation fields are very far away from the main road, it costs me more money to carry the production to the market. This caused to increase in the distance between my consumers and me." (FE 03)

A bad road network costs firms a great deal of money. For example, the 175-kilometre distance between Nuwara Eliya and Colombo means that getting there might take up to five hours or more. In addition, because certain agricultural products degrade before they reach the market due to slow transport rates, there is much waste. Another significant issue

is the state of the roads. In Asia, Sri Lanka has the most significant number of traffic deaths per capita.

5. Unfavorable BEP Environments

5.1 Economic Stagnancy and Recession

Since Sri Lanka's key tourism sector, which provides work for many, was decimated by fatal suicide attacks on Easter Sunday of this year, that aim seems less feasible. As a result of a 30 per cent decline in tourist arrivals, the tourism sector is expected to lose \$1.5 billion in earnings. As the island nation struggled to emerge from a political turmoil that halted foreign investment in 2018, the terrorist assault came at a poor moment. Soaring inflation and a 16 per cent decline in the US dollar were two consequences of this unrest. The foreign reserves needed to cover four months' worth of imports have fallen below the threshold. COVID-19 was not merely a public health crisis; it would have long-lasting economic and social repercussions. After the Covid 19 outbreak, the Sri Lankan economy fell into its greatest recession since its independence in 2020.

"After the Easter attack, I had to close my restaurant for several days as zero tourists were coming to visit Nuwara Eliya. Later, the Covid 19 pandemic was a serious issue for us and almost destroyed our lives. We borrowed money from moneylenders and still had difficulty running our business" (FE 02).

Local and international limitations on movement and other containment measures aimed at avoiding the spread of COVID-19 hindered genuine economic activity in many areas of society. Industrial operations contracted sharply this year due to a considerable slowdown in both building and manufacturing. Due to the pandemic-induced slowdown in transportation, other personal services, lodging, food, and beverage services, services activities also saw a significant contraction. Agriculture was also not exempt from the downturn, with a notable decline. In 2020, the pandemic harmed male and female' labour force participation rates, leading to a higher unemployment rate.

6. Lack of Entrepreneurship Training and Education

Most women entrepreneurs lack formal education and industry experience compared to male entrepreneurs. Allen and Truman (1993) found gender differences in the formal education of entrepreneurs in developed and developing economies.

6.1 Low level of education and lack of access to training

In many developing countries, a gender gap exists in education. As per the interviewees' responses, their families often invested less money in their daughters than their son's education, which has restricted the skilful human capital. As a result, most female entrepreneurs have less survival rate compared to male entrepreneurs.

"However, I am running a beauty salon. However, if I do not develop my dressing style, the customers will not be happy with my service. So I need to learn to make them look prettier. I have to learn how to blend in with modern fashion trends. For

that, the training opportunities will be very much useful for me. So, I try not to miss any of the training programs organized in Nuwara Eliya. I need more knowledge and training on my business, technical advancements, market strategies, and market information." (FE 04)

Entrepreneurial learning has never given an early start to develop entrepreneurship skills in young girls in Nuwara Eliya, according to their needs and interests. Learning has not provided common and equal opportunities, regardless of gender, to engage in employment, succeed in any economic sector, and run a business. Prejudiced and discriminative attitudes towards women in business or leadership positions have remained unchanged. Still, dedicated policies or education programs focusing on developing self-efficacy among women entrepreneurs have not been introduced.

6.2 Lack of mentoring and guidance

The favourable impacts of mentorship and coaching on company startup survival and the ability to create confidence among women entrepreneurs are highly regarded by many female entrepreneurs. It has been reported that women entrepreneurs benefit from the counsel and guidance of mentors who share their knowledge and experience in the business world, according to Sullivan (2000).

"A mentor would have been invaluable in helping me talk through and work through some of the more difficult aspects of my professional life. As a mentor, she could help me improve my leadership and management abilities, aid with strategy and company planning, and enhance my self-confidence and determination to achieve." (FE 3)

Not every female entrepreneur has access to a trusted advisor who can offer guidance on challenging issues like raising capital, taking calculated risks, and expanding her business. As a result, these female entrepreneurs lack a role model and a network of peers to learn from and grow. Because of the absence of mentors, women entrepreneurs have missed out on the opportunity to grow as both business owners and strong persons and learn to be more objective while in a leadership role at their companies.

6.3. Lack of information

At each point in the company cycle, from startup to survival to expansion, having ready access to pertinent information is critical. Regardless of gender, an entrepreneur needs access to information about the market, intellectual capital, solutions to technology-related difficulties, design, government rules and regulations. For all these reasons, female entrepreneurs lag considerably behind their male counterparts. Access to technical and economic information, critical to maintaining a competitive edge, was reported to be challenging for the respondents. A lack of time and expertise prevents women from accessing this information. The lower level of technical knowledge and less access to appropriate technologies have also been labelled as significant issues facing women

entrepreneurs in the SME sector in most developing countries (Buame, 2000: Steel and Webster, 1990).

7. Personality Based constraints

The main themes among respondents were psychological issues such as poor self-confidence and a lack of willingness to take risks because of their lack of educational attainment, work experience, and training.

7.1. Low self-confidence and self-perception

Women in their businesses tend to have poor self-confidence and independence when they have only a high school diploma. Women's lack of self-assurance, willpower and an optimistic view of life contributes to their anxiety over making errors at work. Entrepreneurship involves more than just good intentions and a good sense of opportunity; it also necessitates self-belief and the willingness to face the prospect of failure that comes with every new company endeavour.

Self-assessment of financial ability is usually lower among women than men (Hisrich and Brush, 1984; Chaganti, 1986). Similarly, regarding financial decision-making and investing, women tend to have less confidence than males (Powell and Ansic, 1997). According to Shragg, Yacuk, and Glass(1992), harmful self-perceptions were the most crucial gender-based obstacle.

*"We were one day in an accident while bringing veggies to Dambulla Economic Center. I was unable to walk since my leg had been seriously wounded. The physicians recommended that I stay in bed for at least three to four months. Concerned for my welfare, my loved ones were distraught. Even my hubby wants me to give up my business ventures. As a result, my priorities switched almost immediately. I experienced a fresh concentration on my health and fitness –a great consequence of my quick recovery but also presented an unanticipated mental issue that was entirely new to me: Lack of self-confidence and a sense of failure at business. I lost my dream, self-belief, and resiliency due to my financial collapse."
(FE 3)*

Entrepreneurial women must ensure that they reinterpret the meaning of failure and turn it into a learning opportunity rather than a setback. In addition, women must constantly remind themselves that it is only through taking measured risks that they may build their self-confidence.

7.1.1. Fear of Failure

One of the most frequent fears, especially among young female entrepreneurs, is the fear of failing. This is understandable, given the stakes. Approximately 56% of the world's population suffers from this apprehension (GEM, 2020/21).

"I know how to start a new business, but initially, I did not want to start my own business for the fear I had that it might fail" (FE 07)

It is common for successful businesses to attribute much of their success to their failures in the past. However, their most outstanding achievement came from the lessons they learned and the chances they were given due to their initial failure. In many cases, failure gives entrepreneurs a fresh perspective on the problem, which may eventually lead to their most tremendous success. Giving up is what defines someone as a failure, not failing.

7.1.2. Fear of Uncertainty

When a business starts, women entrepreneurs must take risks to grow or even just get started. However, unfortunately, there is much uncertainty when taking a leap of faith, and the conclusion is not always guaranteed success. Thus it can be overwhelming or even frightening.

"COVID-19 pandemic frightened me more than anything else could have. As a result of the Easter assault, my financial condition was precarious. I was terrified of losing everything and jeopardizing our financial well-being. Running a struggling business while caring for sick family members has taken its toll. I feared my firm might be shut down forever, not just for a short period. Everything about the future was up in the air." (FE 02)

Many businesswomen feel increased anxiety due to the constant flux in the COVID-19 pandemic landscape, which they have been navigating for over two years. With no idea how long supply chains will remain intact or if customers can continue to purchase products and services, it is impossible to plan and establish an effective strategy. As a result, there is a great deal of apprehension.

7.1.3. Fear of Rejection

Female entrepreneurs naturally expect people around them to share their enthusiasm for new concepts or opportunities. However, what if you present your business proposal to a potential customer, and they scoff?

"I'm frightened of being rejected. That's my biggest fear. Starting a company with my family was daunting since it required me to put myself out there and share my opinions." (FE 05)

Women in business confront additional challenges, including a pervasive fear of rejection, making it more difficult to obtain funding and other essentials. Of course, we all worry about whether or not our hard-earned goods and services will find a market, but the worst-case scenario is that our company concept is rejected. That can be frightening and threatening to others.

7.1.4. Fear of Falling Short

*"There were instances where I faced so many difficulties. Sometimes I doubted myself. I was afraid whether I am capable of continuing this business successfully."
(FE 07)*

Women entrepreneurs often self-sabotage their success by being their own harshest critics because of a persistent sense of uncertainty in their achievements or skills. Unfortunately, doubt may affect even the most confident and booming businesswomen, especially in times of uncertainty, and losses can be considerably more painful to those who already question their ability.

8. Lack of networks and social connections

Building a business network through networking events is a terrific way to get your company's name out there and attract new customers. The OECD (2004) and UNCTAD (2014) have published reports on female entrepreneurship pointing to the lack of social standing and support networks hampers women's entrepreneurship. Empirical research suggests that women entrepreneurs most often seek input on their concepts from spouses and close friends, especially if they are concerned about the feasibility and use of those concepts.

Women's networks have been shown to differ from men's (Bird 1989; Brush 1992; Rosa & Hamilton 1994) in size, composition, formation, and management. Several factors could be explored that hinder female entrepreneurs from having and utilizing wider weak-ties networks; the types of networks with members the entrepreneur does not have a close personal relationship and those characterized by a shorter duration (Aldrich & Sakano, 1995).

It has been shown that lack of time is the most common obstacle for female entrepreneurs in building a larger network.

"Most of the time, I was confined to the house, completing domestic tasks and caring for my ageing parents. Because of this, I am unable to expand my social circles."(FE 07)

Studies by Munch et al. (1997) and Hunt (1983) indicated that women are less likely than males to leave the house, leaving them with less time to build larger social networks. This is reasonable since it's impossible to actively participate in growing their networks of weak connections when women must take care of their children and the rest of the family while running a company. The inability to identify groups of like-minded individuals is the second cause of smaller networks. Interviews revealed that the participants valued having contact with those who shared their beliefs, profession, experiences, aspirations, and objectives, as well as those who could be readily contacted or met as a result of the research.

9. Conclusion and Future Research Agenda

Based on the experiences of eight female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka's Nuwara Eliya District, this study sought to discover what obstacles women business owners encounter in the area. Interview findings show that female entrepreneurs encounter a wide range of problems in the business sector, nearly identical to those found in the substantial literature research on the subject matter. In many cases, women business owners are concerned that the hurdles they confront stifle their capacity to grow and make money. It has framed the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in eight key areas, namely (1) Gender Discrimination (2) work–family Conflict (3) Financial Constraints (4) Lack of infrastructural support (5) Unfavorable BEP environments (6) Lack of entrepreneurship training and education (7) Personality based constraints (8) Lack of networks and social connections and several subcategories under each key area. Based on the research findings, a practical framework for the key constraint areas and the relevant sub-constraints faced by rural female entrepreneurs can be presented as follows.

The findings of this study have contributed to the liberal feminist theory since it emphasizes the existence of discriminatory barriers and systematic biases facing women (for example, restricted access to resources, education, and business experience), which must be eliminated. Moreover, the study findings have also contributed to the social feminism theory.

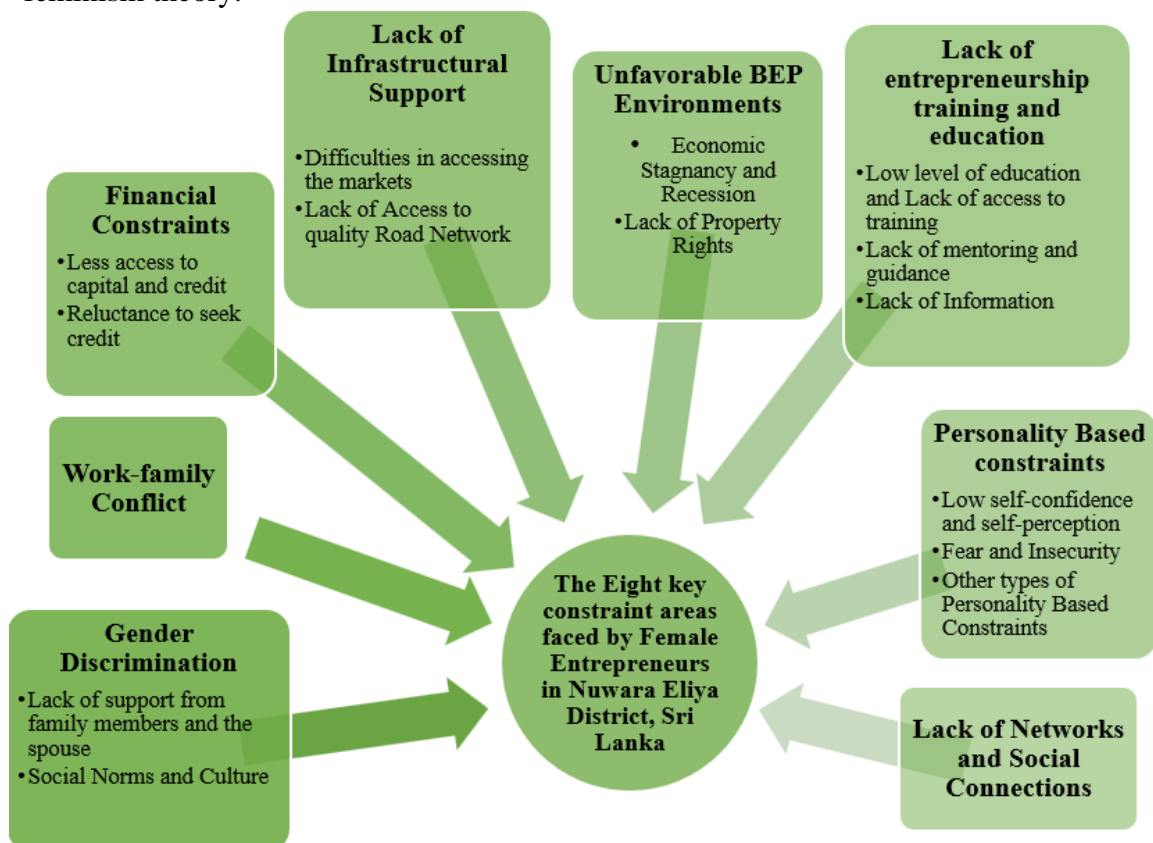


Figure 1: The Eight key constraint areas faced by Female Entrepreneurs in Nuwara Eliya District, Sri Lanka

In conclusion, the study suggests that women, if given equal access to the opportunities available to men, such as education, work experience and other resources, would equally grow their businesses.

According to the findings, the government should put more effort into helping female entrepreneurs, especially those just starting, by giving financial aid, better infrastructure, and support for information and communication technology (ICT). In addition, the findings should spur business support organizations to establish gender-specific training programs to meet the unique requirements of women entrepreneurs, especially in light of the growing interest in and activity around female entrepreneurship development. It also proposes that organizations that assist small businesses should broaden their networks to include people from a variety of backgrounds in order to help women entrepreneurs better. The conclusions may be more subjective because the in-depth interviews were conducted with the selected female entrepreneurs one-on-one. To better understand rural female entrepreneurs' challenges, it would be beneficial to interview the women's families and neighbours as well as their business associates, such as their spouses and children. Because of this, the study's conclusions would have been confirmed, enhancing the study's credibility. It is recommended that future studies interview the spouse, children, family members, neighbours, and banking experts from the commercial banks and other officials from the government and private institutions with whom the female entrepreneurs are frequently in contact to understand their lives better. This study was cross-sectional research, meaning that data collected at a given moment, such as during the interviews, was utilized to collect information. Researchers should conduct a longitudinal study to avoid this drawback, which would allow future researchers to keep an eye out for any changes that could occur in the restrictions experienced by rural female entrepreneurs over time. It is also possible to urge future academics to do an action research project to examine rural female entrepreneurs' challenges in Sri Lanka and assist in overcoming those challenges.

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