

CHALLENGES CONFRONTED BY WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS: POST-COVID OUTLOOK OF SRI LANKA

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Abstract

This research examines the challenges encountered by female entrepreneurs in post-COVID era Sri Lanka. The pandemic dramatically exacerbated the gender-based issues encountered by female business owners all around the world. The situation in Sri Lanka, with its growing entrepreneurial landscape, adds complications to those challenges. The study included 25 members and used the NVivo program to analyze data. Results revealed a profusion of barriers, which included limited digital proficiency, the disruption of supply chains, and gender prejudice. Adaptability, resilience, and innovative approaches have been fundamental in post-pandemic times. Still, difficulties remain, such as the lack of empowerment and support from external forces. The research suggests specialized interventions, the upgrade of digital literacy, gender-considerate fiscal measures, and mentorship programs as solutions. The conclusions drawn from this research can be beneficial for elevating the level of policy and practice while creating a sustaining environment for female entrepreneurs during Sri Lanka's recovery attempts.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurs, Post-COVID Challenges, Sri Lanka.

1. Introduction

The worldwide effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been far-reaching, bringing about new challenges and prospects around various industries (Dharmarajah, 2021). Among the areas that have been heavily impacted are those dealing with women entrepreneurs, who now have to contend with issues that have been exacerbated by the pandemic (Dharmarajah, 2021). The idea of female entrepreneurship in burgeoning economies is multifaceted, usually defined by economic structures, social assumptions, and cultural mores (Adikaram, 2022). The problem of the 'femininity penalty' is deeply entrenched in these businesses, where the female gender identity intersects with their business pursuits, resulting in discrimination and inequality (Adikaram, 2022).

The post-pandemic world has been rife with studies looking into the effects of the pandemic on women-owned businesses (Torres, 2021). Many of these companies are concentrated in fields such as retail and hospitality, which have been hit particularly hard by the economic shocks of COVID-19 (Torres, 2021). Finding capital and adjusting to the altered business landscape have been tough for these women to accomplish (Adikaram, 2022).

Sri Lanka has a vibrant entrepreneurial culture, yet women here still encounter many struggles in their quest to lead businesses. Rajapaksha (2019) and Selvarajan and Thayani (2022) both identify hindrances in this enterprise, such as customary gender roles, insufficient access to finance, and limited backing systems (Rajapaksha, 2019). The pandemic has added another layer of complexity to these issues, with upheavals to the usual supply chains, consumer behavior, and market mechanics (Wang, 2021). Bridging the so-called digital divide in a climate where entrance to technology remains unbalanced might prove particularly tough for women entrepreneurs (Wang, 2021).

This paper aims to contribute to the current body of knowledge by zeroing in on the challenges that women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka go through in the post-COVID era. By researching the combined effects of gender problems and the pandemic's specific influence, the paper will supply useful analysis that can inform policy and action to support female business operators in their venture to revive and flourish. By means of a thorough examination of available literature and empirical evidence, this research strives to bring to light tactics that could help these women surmount hindrances and fruitfully enhance economic growth and stability in Sri Lanka.

1.1. Research Problem

The part of women in entrepreneurship has been progressively receiving recognition as a key factor for economic development and gender equality (Mustafa, 2021). Nevertheless, despite this acknowledgement, female business owners still face multifarious difficulties that obstruct their prosperity and growth capability (Mustafa, 2021). This research difficulty aims to go into the roadblocks and influences impacting female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka (Mustafa, 2021). While existing research has given advantageous insights into the difficulties confronted by female entrepreneurs in these territories, there remains a need for an exhaustive comprehension of the particular elements that add to or obstacle their prosperity (Mustafa, 2021).

The broader gendered consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the security of women in Nepal and Sri Lanka illuminate the intricacies of female roles and troubles in these conditions (Luna K C, 2022). Nevertheless, a more focused inquiry is necessary to explore the intricate dynamics affecting women's entrepreneurship, particularly post-pandemic (Luna & Whetstone, 2022). Moreover, Selvarajan and Thayani (2022) bring to light the challenges confronted by female entrepreneurs in the Jaffna region of Sri Lanka. However, their exploration does not sufficiently address the changing post-pandemic scene and its effect on women entrepreneurs (Selvarajan, 2022).

Furthermore, it accentuates the job of business improvement services in advancing women entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka (Attygalle, 2014)). However, this examination does not delve into the particular difficulties experienced by female entrepreneurs in the Western Province, which is a zone of monetary importance (Attygalle, 2014)). Likewise, the research by Thilakarathne (2022) centers on achievement factors for women entrepreneurs in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, giving profitable bits of knowledge about their successes (Thilakarathne, 2022). In any case, a complete comprehension of the barricades and challenges that these ladies confront remains essential (Thilakarathne, 2022).

“This research problem focuses on understanding the challenges confronting women entrepreneurs in the post-covid era of Sri Lanka.”

2. Literature Review

2.1. Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Entrepreneurs

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented dilemmas to worldwide economies, and particularly vulnerable were women entrepreneurs (Mustafa, 2021). Considerable research has highlighted the pandemic's gender-specific repercussions on women-owned businesses. Mustafa (2021) investigated the pandemic's effects on female entrepreneurs in Pakistan, identifying disruptions stemming from lockdowns, supply chain stoppages, and decreased consumer demand. Furthermore, being largely represented in industries such as retail and hospitality, women entrepreneurs were uniquely exposed to the crisis (Mustafa, 2021).

Likewise, Henri, Beharry, and Mashau (2023) systematically investigated the pandemic's repercussions for female entrepreneurs. They illustrated how restrictions of markets, capital, and resources combined with amplified caretaking responsibilities disproportionately affected them, thus causing additional strain and a hindrance to their business's progression (Henri, 2023).

The crisis was not limited to Pakistan; Monnaf and Rahman (2022) explored the socio-economic consequences on women entrepreneurs in the Rangpur City Corporation of Bangladesh. They spotlighted the difficulties encountered by entrepreneurs in the informal sector, such as decreased economic activity, confined access to credit, and interruptions in supply chains (Monnaf, 2022).

Despite this, the pandemic has incited a display of resiliency and flexibility from women entrepreneurs. Numerous took to digital platforms as physical storefronts faced limitations. Notwithstanding, this digitation was not without problems, mostly correlated to limited digital know-how and technology access (Henri, 2023).

2.2. Evolving Landscape of Women's Entrepreneurship in Post-Pandemic Sri Lanka

The transforming portrait of female entrepreneurship in post-COVID Sri Lanka reflects a vibrant exchange of dilemmas, reactions, and openings affected by the unparalleled disturbances generated by the pandemic (Roar, 2021). As the pandemic completely overhauled the global business sector, women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka were forced to maneuver through unfamiliar territories to guarantee the sustainability of their businesses.

The pandemic's effects on women-owned companies have been manifold, ranging from supply chain stoppages to changes in shopper habits (Torres,

2021). In a country where the digital gap and modern technology access are still unresolved issues (Wang, 2021), female entrepreneurs additionally had to conform to the digital requirements of the post-pandemic age. This adjustment was notably central as digital channels became vital for commerce continuity and consumer communication.

While the pandemic accentuated doubts, it also provoked women entrepreneurs to display their versatility and malleability. The story of female entrepreneurs in the Jaffna locus emphasized the value of tutorship and reinforcement networks in overcoming barriers (Selvarajan, 2022)). Their recipes for negotiating the post-pandemic landscape provide insight into the job of cooperative initiatives and training communities.

Likewise, the Western Province's women executives, who had displayed profitability determinants to the pandemic (Thilakarathne, 2022), likely adjusted these determinants to the varying circumstances. Their adventures furnish acumen into the shifty temperament of these victorious factors and how they contribute to post-pandemic revival.

As Sri Lanka's economy re-energizes in the post-pandemic age, the updating scene of female entrepreneurship has far-reaching consequences. The tactics employed by women executives to conquer tribulations, modify their companies, and make the most of new openings add to economic recuperation and advancement. Gauging their experiences gives important comprehension for decision-makers, bodies, and support organizations to do interventions that create a promoting atmosphere for women entrepreneurs.

2.3. Barriers and Opportunities for Post-Pandemic Recovery

The upcoming renewal period presents a one-of-a-kind atmosphere of both barriers and opportunities for women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. Looking at the wider conversations surrounding difficulties and openings in the post-COVID-19 era (WEF, 2020), this section will explore the aspects that constrain female business owners' revival and growth potential and the potential paths for overcoming these issues.

Hinders to Post-Pandemic Recovery: The commotions instigated by the pandemic have magnified pre-existing blocks that impede the evolution of women entrepreneurs. These hindrances include restricted access to financing, deficient backing systems, and public gender maxims (Rajapaksha, 2019). The snags distinguished by Selvarajan and Thayani (2022) additionally emphasize the need for mentorship and aid nets for women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. The post-pandemic recovery might confront battles in re-building these webs and

tending to the durable gender predispositions that obstruct women's access to assets and opportunities.

Chances for Post-Pandemic Recovery: The changing landscape also carries forth several openings for women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. The digital transformation motivated by the pandemic has cleared roads for digital businesses, e-commerce, and digital promotion (Wang, 2021)). Female business owners can exploit these chances to access a larger audience and tap into novel markets. The alteration into ecological and circular supply chains (Alva Ferrari, 2023) synchronizes with the advancing tendency towards eco-aware customer conduct, providing room for women entrepreneurs to be inventive and add to more responsible business practices. The shifting craft characteristics and the expanding significance of distant and adaptable working preparations also present possibilities for women entrepreneurs to match their business assignments with other engagements (WEF, 2020).

3. Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach to thoroughly explore the obstacles encountered by female entrepreneurs in the post-COVID period in Sri Lanka. Interviews were chosen as the data collection approach, affording a platform for immediate interaction with the individuals, allowing for the capture of their stories in a genuine way. Twenty-five female entrepreneurs were deliberately chosen as participants to guarantee diversity in business divisions, sizes, and geographic areas within Sri Lanka. The sampling strategy sought to represent a comprehensive array of the issues confronted by female entrepreneurs. Participants were identified using networking events, sector associations, and online platforms applicable to women entrepreneurs. Semi-structured interviews were done with each individual to aid an extensive evaluation of their ordeals. The interview guide was formulated carefully to encompass a wide range of issues, including the problems experienced during the pandemic, approaches applied for restoration, and variations made to address the changing business climate. The discussions were conducted physically or virtually, depending on participants' choices and operational limitations. Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for picking out and decoding regularities within qualitative data. NVivo software was employed to facilitate the organization and administration of the broad interview transcripts. The analysis course of action was iterative, necessitating multiple interconnected steps. Themes were then defined and named, giving a lucid and concise description of the designs observed within the data. The analysis incorporated direct quotes from the interview transcripts to authorize the identified themes, raising the dependability of the outcomes. To assure the legitimacy of the research, member checking was done, allowing

participants to assess the summary of their interviews for precision and harmony with their lives. Peer debriefing was also held, engaging colleagues accustomed to qualitative research methodologies to investigate the research approach and results thoroughly.

4. Findings

4.1. Challenges in Post Covid-19

Table 17: Challenges in Post Covid-19

Theme	Description
Empowerment and Progress	Women encountered obstacles to empowerment within their communities, requiring more support and mentorship.
Support Networks	Juggling family responsibilities hindered accessing support networks like women's chambers of commerce.
Cultural Barriers	Cultural norms restricted independent business engagement, with gender-based violence limiting growth.
Access to Finance	Gender bias in financial institutions made financing difficult, compounded by collateral requirements.
Marketing Challenges	Slashed budgets affected PR and marketing services, necessitating convincing businesses to invest under constraints.
Shift in Consumer Preferences	Post-pandemic consumer preferences challenged businesses focused on sustainable or handmade products.
Supply Chain Disruptions	Disrupted supply chains led to production delays and increased costs due to restrictions and lockdowns.
Economic Downturn	The economic downturn affected consumer spending, demanding business strategy adjustments for constrained clients.

Worker Availability	Migrated workers and movement restrictions caused production delays and workforce challenges.
Client Satisfaction	Budget constraints demanded high-quality service with lower costs, testing businesses' ability to satisfy clients.
Digital Transformation	Adapting in-person interactions to virtual methods, like online meetings and digital marketing, posed challenges.
Lack of Access to Material	Restrictions and high prices hindered entrepreneurs from procuring necessary materials.
Global Economic Crisis	Clients' changed spending habits, resulting from the global economic crisis, impacted product and service demand.

Source: Compiled by Author

Women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka encountered a panoply of challenges in post-Covid-19. These challenges were too often intertwined with community ethics, economic circumstances, and industry-based elements. Challenges included difficulties in growth and development inside communities, hindrances in using assistance networks due to family roles and. These ethnic walls limited independent commercial engagement and predicaments in procuring funding due to gender inequality. Slashed marketing budgets affected public relations and marketing services, while variations in customer tendencies and supply chain interferences added to the complexities. Financial slumps impacted purchaser expenses, demanding businesses' capacity to adjust. The need for revolutionary tactics to manipulate virtual connections and access to supplies further contributed to these multifaceted tribulations.

Women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka faced significant obstacles in their quest for empowerment within their communities. Many participants expressed for needing more support and mentorship to overcome these hurdles. One participant stated, "In our communities, there is still a prevailing mindset that women should stick to traditional roles. It is breaking free from these norms and pursuing our entrepreneurial dreams is challenging." Whom Several others echoed this sentiment, highlighting the importance of empowering women to challenge societal expectations was a recurring concern, emphasizing the need for programs and initiatives that build self-esteem and provide role models for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Another crucial challenge identified was accessing support networks, such as women's chambers of commerce. Participants pointed out that juggling family responsibilities often hindered their ability to engage with these networks effectively. A participant shared, "I want to tap into the resources and opportunities provided by women's chambers, but it is challenging with my family duties. I often find myself torn between my business and my family." This conflict between family responsibilities and entrepreneurial aspirations created barriers for many women entrepreneurs, limiting their access to essential resources, guidance, and networking opportunities.

Many women entrepreneurs encountered difficulties marketing their businesses due to slashed budgets resulting from the economic impact of the pandemic. A participant noted, "The pandemic forced us to cut down on our marketing expenses, which made it harder to promote our products and services effectively. Convincing businesses to invest in marketing under these constraints became a constant struggle." This constraint hindered their ability to reach a wider audience and grow their enterprises, highlighting the need for innovative and cost-effective marketing strategies tailored to the post-COVID landscape.

The post-pandemic era witnessed a significant shift in consumer preferences, posing challenges for businesses focused on sustainable or handmade products. One participant mentioned, "Consumers started prioritizing safety and convenience over sustainability, which was a blow to our business built around eco-friendly products." This shift required women entrepreneurs to adapt their offerings and marketing strategies to align with the changing consumer mindset, emphasizing the importance of agility and adaptability in the face of evolving market dynamics.

Disrupted supply chains emerged as a critical challenge for women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka, leading to production delays and increased costs due to COVID-19-related restrictions and lockdowns. A participant shared, "restrictions. Lockdowns and transportation restrictions severely affected our supply chain. We struggled to source raw materials and deliver products on time, which hurt our reputation and profitability." The vulnerability of supply chains highlighted the need for contingency planning and diversification of suppliers to mitigate the impact of future disruptions.

The economic downturn brought about by the pandemic significantly affected consumer spending patterns, which in turn demanded strategic adjustments for businesses, particularly those catering to constrained clients. One participant expressed, "Our clients had tighter budgets post-COVID, which meant we had to reevaluate our pricing strategies and find innovative ways to provide value while keeping costs low." This economic uncertainty posed a formidable

challenge, forcing women entrepreneurs to rethink their business models and adapt to the evolving financial landscape.

The migration of workers and movement restrictions imposed during the pandemic caused severe disruptions in workforce availability, leading to production delays and workforce challenges. A participant shared, "Many of our workers had to leave for their hometowns during lockdowns and getting them back was a logistical nightmare. It affected our production schedules and output." This issue underscored the importance of having flexible workforce strategies to manage the unpredictability of the post-COVID era and ensure business continuity.

The economic downturn and budget constraints in the post-COVID era demanded high-quality service delivery with lower costs, testing businesses' ability to satisfy their clients effectively. A participant emphasized, "Our clients wanted more for less, which was a tough balance. We had to maintain quality while being mindful of cost control." This challenge highlighted the need for creative problem-solving and the development of cost-efficient service delivery models that could meet client expectations and maintain business competitiveness.

The shift from in-person interactions to virtual methods, such as online meetings and digital marketing, presented a significant challenge for women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. One participant commented, "Adapting to digital platforms was a steep learning curve. We had to invest time and resources to transition from our traditional in-person business model to the online world." This transition highlighted the importance of digital literacy and the need for support in embracing technology to remain competitive in the post-COVID era.

Many women entrepreneurs' difficulties needed help in procuring necessary materials due to restrictions and high prices. A participant said, "Supply chain disruptions and rising material costs made it challenging to maintain our production levels. Sometimes, we had to compromise on the quality of materials due to budget constraints." Access to essential materials would have helped them meet customer demands and maintain the quality of their products and services.

The changed spending habits of clients resulting from the global economic crisis significantly impacted the demand for products and services offered by women entrepreneurs. One participant noted, "Our clients became more cautious with their spending, which affected our business. We had to pivot and find ways to offer more affordable solutions to meet their needs." This shift in client behavior underscored the importance of adaptability and the need to diversify product or service offerings to cater to evolving market demands.

Post-pandemic funding and financing posed diversified obstacles for entrepreneurs. Uncontrollable inflation, high-interest rates, and gender gaps within the financial industry blocked access to funding and backing. Numerous businessmen and women experienced difficulties in obtaining loans, causing them to turn to options like private financiers and NGOs. They multiplied endeavors and meagre data on assistive resources rendered it tough to acquire essential aid. Economic recession anticipated business shutters, lessened by family financial assistance. Tactics of reinvesting profits, morphing enterprise operations, and sourcing substitute capital were used to remain entrepreneurial. Industriousness shone through alteration, digital mediums, and family reinforcement, making certain businesses endurance against economic problems.

Entrepreneurial challenges deriving from skill and knowledge disparities reflect diverse experiences. Sectors that necessitate specialized capabilities manifested the of need for access to the necessary knowledge, particularly in contexts such as Sri Lanka. Looking for specialist aid became key for filling the gaps in knowledge. Business owners highlighted the need for digital proficiency and proficiency with e-commerce, addressing shortcomings among SMEs and emphasizing the development potential digital platforms provide. The constant study gained importance and encompassed remote practice, trend adoption, and tertiary learning. The job force highlighted a disparity between formal knowledge and job preparedness. Social and cultural obstacles hindered female entrepreneurs, who managed to surmount them with the help of supportive communities and harnessing personal benefits.

5. Discussion

The research findings from thematic analysis shed light on the multifaceted challenges confronting women entrepreneurs in post-COVID Sri Lanka. For women entrepreneurs, the pursuit of empowerment and progress is beset by impediments within their local societies, necessitating additional support and tutelage (Adikaram, 2022). Acquiring access to support groups, like women's chambers of commerce, is complicated by domestic duties (Selvarajan et al., 2022). The predominance of traditional values throttles the independent business activity women can participate in, and gender-oriented violence additionally hinders the probable growth of such businesses (Henri, 2023). Furthermore, the gender inequity in financial institutions, in union with exacting collateral conditions, makes it hard for female entrepreneurs to secure backing (Rajapaksha, 2019). The pandemic has, by and large decreased promotional budgets, which has adversely affected the accessibility of PR and marketing amenities for women entrepreneurs (Roar, 2021). Moreover, the transition consumer preferences towards formulations that are eco-friendly or

crafted by hand has created additional challenges (Roar, 2021). The interruption of the conventional supply chain induced a financial crash, and the differentiations caused by the wandering of labors, have extended the duration of production and reared expenditure (Luna & C, 2022). The obligatory customer pleasure, enforced by budget constraints, puts pressure on businesses to fabricate cost-effective quality services (Dharmarajah, 2021). Some women entrepreneurs are challenged to adapt to digital alteration, e.g., virtual summits and electronic advertisements (Wang, 2021). Moreover, the non-availability of components due to limitations and inflated prices impedes their processes (Thilakarathne, 2022). The global economic setback has engendered a movement of spending practices in consumers, which has in turn influenced the demand for the products and services of women entrepreneurs (WEF, 2020).

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this research illuminates the manifold predicaments by female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka after and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Post-pandemic challenges included impediments with digital marketing, technology incorporation, supply chain disruptions, factory closures, and deficient access to finance, gender disparities, difficulty reconciling work and life, and a scarcity of training openings. These difficulties underscore the necessity of comprehensive systems of assistance and policy amendments to enhance women's participation and prosperity in entrepreneurship. The impact of the pandemic moreover amplified the strength and flexibility of women entrepreneurs in light of adversity. Companies begin during the pandemic evinced agility by utilizing online platforms. Strength, flexibility, and original tactics emerged as essential components for steering the pandemic-related issues. Suggestions for legislator's bolster associations and stakeholders incorporate objective innovations to tackle particular difficulties. Bolstering digital literacy programs, facilitating access to finance through gender-sensitive regulations, and establishing comprehensive records of aid and support can assist female entrepreneurs in overcoming preexisting and pandemic-prompted restrainers. Future research should examine the long-term effects of the pandemic on women-owned companies, evaluating their recuperation tactics and perpetual progression. Investigating the efficacy of particular interventions and policy amendments in alleviating gender disparities and social roadblocks is critical. Additionally, digging into the responsibility of guidance, networks, and family backing in female entrepreneurs' accomplishments can grant beneficial understandings in forming an encouraging environment. Women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka showed startling resilience and adaptability while confronting diverse crises. Addressing these troubles necessitates collaborative endeavors from various stakeholders, encouraging inclusive procedures, reinforcing digital abilities, and providing specific support to foster their engagement and victory

in the business realm. The learning drawn from these clinches and the tactics employed by women entrepreneurs are advantageous insights for constructing a more decent and supportive entrepreneurial milieu in Sri Lanka.

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