

Women Entrepreneurship as a Catalyst for Social Harmony in Sri Lanka: A Systematic Literature Review Within Adaptive Digital Landscapes

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Abstract

Social cohesion and national unity are critical foundations for sustainable development in culturally diverse and post-conflict societies such as Sri Lanka. In recent years, women entrepreneurship has gained increasing attention not only for its economic contributions but also for its potential role in fostering social harmony and inclusive development. Simultaneously, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has reshaped entrepreneurial ecosystems, creating adaptive digital landscapes that enable broader participation and cross-community interaction. In response, this study conducts a PRISMA-guided Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize empirical and conceptual evidence on women entrepreneurship, digital adaptation, and social cohesion. A total of 25 studies, published between 2000 and 2025, were selected from major academic databases following rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria. The thematic analysis mapped the reviewed studies into interconnected dimensions of economic empowerment, community integration, digital adaptation, socio-cultural resilience, and social harmony outcomes. The findings reveal that women entrepreneurship contributes significantly to economic empowerment, community embeddedness, and social inclusion. Importantly, adaptive digital landscapes emerge as a critical mediating mechanism that amplifies the social impact of women-led enterprises. Through digital engagement, women entrepreneurs overcome socio-cultural constraints, facilitate inter-community interaction, and contribute to reconciliation, resilience, and social harmony. This review concludes by positioning women entrepreneurship as a social cohesion mechanism, rather than a purely economic activity, and highlights key research gaps and future directions. The study offers valuable implications for policymakers, development agencies, and practitioners seeking to foster unity and social cohesion through digitally inclusive women-entrepreneurship strategies.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship; Social Cohesion; Digital Adaptation

Introduction

Social cohesion and national unity are increasingly recognized as essential foundations for sustainable development, particularly in culturally diverse and post-conflict societies. Social cohesion refers to the extent of trust, inclusion, participation, and shared values within a society, enabling individuals and groups to coexist peacefully and work collectively toward common goals Chan, To, and Chan (2006). In countries such as Sri Lanka, where ethnic, religious, and regional diversity intersects with historical conflict and economic disparities, fostering unity and social harmony re-

mains a critical development priority Goodhand (2012).

Entrepreneurship has been widely acknowledged as a driver of economic growth and social transformation. Beyond its economic contribution, entrepreneurship plays a significant social role by generating employment, empowering marginalized populations, and strengthening community networks Acs, Audretsch, and Lehmann (2013). In this regard, women entrepreneurship has attracted increasing scholarly and policy attention due to its dual impact on economic advancement and social well-being Carter and Shaw (2006); Henry, Foss, and Ahl (2016); Minniti



(2010). Women entrepreneurs often reinvest income in families and communities, promote inclusive decision-making, and facilitate social integration at the grassroots level Brush, de Bruin, and Welter (2009).

In the Sri Lankan context, women entrepreneurship holds particular relevance for social harmony. Women-led enterprises frequently operate within local and community-based settings, engaging across ethnic and cultural boundaries through cooperative production, shared markets, and informal support networks Al-Dajani and Marlow (2013); Ranasinghe (2012); Surangi (2022b). Studies suggest that women entrepreneurs contribute to post-conflict recovery and reconciliation by rebuilding livelihoods, fostering inter-community collaboration, and strengthening social trust De Mel, McKenzie, and Woodruff (2014). As such, women entrepreneurship can be viewed not merely as an economic activity, but as a social mechanism that supports cohesion and unity.

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has further reshaped entrepreneurial ecosystems Minniti, Arenius, and Langowitz (2005); Ratten (2022). Adaptive digital landscapes comprising social media platforms, e-commerce systems, mobile technologies, and digital financial services have reduced structural barriers traditionally faced by women entrepreneurs, such as limited mobility, restricted market access, and socio-cultural constraints Nambisan (2017). In Sri Lanka, increased access to mobile internet and digital platforms has enabled women entrepreneurs to connect with diverse customer bases, collaborate beyond geographical and ethnic boundaries, and participate more actively in the national economy World Bank (2021).

Moreover, digital entrepreneurship facilitates social interaction and knowledge exchange across communities, thereby strengthening social cohesion. Online platforms create spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and mutual understanding that are essential for fostering unity in pluralistic societies United Nations Development Programme (2020). For women entrepreneurs, these adaptive digital environments provide opportunities to challenge traditional gender norms while simultaneously contributing to inclusive and socially harmonious development.

Despite the growing body of literature on women

entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and social development, research in Sri Lanka remains fragmented. Existing studies are dispersed across disciplines and often focus narrowly on economic outcomes, with limited synthesis of how women entrepreneurship contributes to social harmony, particularly within digital contexts. Moreover, few studies systematically integrate women entrepreneurship with concepts of social cohesion and adaptive digital landscapes.

In response to this gap, the current study undertakes a systematic literature review to critically synthesize existing research on women entrepreneurship, with a specific focus on its role in fostering social harmony through adaptive digital landscapes. By consolidating empirical and conceptual insights, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how women-led entrepreneurial initiatives contribute to unity and social cohesion.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this systematic literature review is to critically synthesize existing scholarly work on women entrepreneurship in relation to social harmony and digital transformation. The specific objectives are:

- To examine how women entrepreneurship contributes to social harmony and social cohesion.
- To identify the role of adaptive digital landscapes in enabling and strengthening women-led entrepreneurial activities.
- To explore barriers and enablers affecting women entrepreneurs within digital and socio-cultural contexts.
- To identify gaps in the existing literature and suggest directions for future research aligned with unity and social cohesion.

Significance of the Study

On one hand, by systematically reviewing and synthesizing prior studies, this paper advances conceptual clarity on how women-led enterprises function as agents of social harmony. It also

extends entrepreneurship theories by situating women entrepreneurship within adaptive digital landscapes, an area that remains underexplored in developing and post-conflict economies. On the other hand, this review provides context-specific insights into how women entrepreneurs navigate these dynamics while contributing to unity and social cohesion. The findings will help consolidate dispersed empirical evidence and highlight patterns relevant to developing, multi-ethnic societies. Moreover, this systematic literature review offers evidence-based insights for policymakers, development agencies, and non-governmental organizations involved in women empowerment, digital inclusion, and social development. Understanding how adaptive digital landscapes support women entrepreneurship can inform the design of inclusive policies, digital training programs, and entrepreneurship support mechanisms aimed at fostering social harmony and national unity.

Methodology

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to synthesize existing scholarly evidence on women entrepreneurship and its contribution to social cohesion through adaptive digital landscapes in Sri Lanka. An SLR was selected due to its ability to provide a transparent, replicable, and comprehensive synthesis of fragmented literature across multiple disciplines Akter, Rahman, and Radicic (2022); Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, and Altman (2009); Page et al. (2021). The review follows the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, ensuring methodological rigor in identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies.

A comprehensive search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar to ensure broad disciplinary coverage. These databases were selected due to their strong coverage of entrepreneurship, gender studies, development studies, and digital transformation research. The search strategy employed Boolean operators and keyword combinations, including: (“women entrepreneurship” OR “female entrepreneurship”) AND (“digitalization” OR “digital platforms” OR “ICT” OR “e-commerce” OR “social media”) AND (“social cohesion” OR “social harmony” OR “social inclu-

sion” OR “community development”). Backward citation chaining was also undertaken by reviewing reference lists of selected articles to identify additional studies.

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure relevance, quality, and alignment with the study objectives.

Inclusion Criteria

- Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, authoritative institutional reports, relevant books, and book chapters.
- Studies focusing on women entrepreneurship or female-led enterprises.
- Studies examining digital adaptation, digital tools, or digital platforms.
- Studies addressing social cohesion, social harmony, inclusion, or community-level outcomes.
- Studies conducted in Sri Lanka or comparable developing/post-conflict societies.
- Empirical, conceptual, or review studies
- published in English language
- Studies published from 2000 to 2025

Exclusion Criteria

- Studies focusing exclusively on male entrepreneurship.
- Articles with no reference to digitalization or social outcomes.
- Opinion pieces, editorials, dissertations, theses, and unpublished manuscripts.
- Studies lacking methodological clarity or empirical grounding.
- Studies published other than English
- Duplicate records across databases.

The initial database search yielded 312 records. After removing 74 duplicate records, 238 studies remained for title and abstract screening. During

this phase, 168 studies were excluded due to irrelevance to women entrepreneurship, digital adaptation, or social cohesion. A total of 70 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Following full-text review, 45 articles were excluded for reasons including insufficient focus on developing/post-conflict societies, lack of digital context, or absence of social cohesion dimensions. Finally, 25 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the systematic review and thematic synthesis.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

A structured data extraction template developed in MS Excel was used to capture the following information from each included study. According to the recommendations of Braun and Clarke Braun and Clarke (2006), the extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis, as depicted in Table 1.

- Study context and methodology.
- Focus on women entrepreneurship.
- Type of digital adaptation.
- Reported social cohesion/social harmony outcomes and implications.
- Prevailing research gaps.
- Directions for future studies.

Findings

The systematic review of 25 selected studies reveals converging evidence on the role of women entrepreneurship in fostering social cohesion in Sri Lanka, particularly when enabled through adaptive digital landscapes. As depicted in Table 1, the findings can be organized into five main thematic dimensions, reflecting economic, digital, and socio-cultural outcomes, ensuring the achievement of the first three specific objectives stated in this review paper.

As depicted in Table 1, key findings of this systematic literature review indicate that women entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka contributes to both economic development and social cohesion Sumanasiri and Chandrarathna (2021); Verheul and Thurik (2001); digital adaptation acts as

a critical mediator that enhances inclusion, interaction, and community integration Illandage and Kodituwakku (2024); Ratten (2022); women-led enterprises play a meaningful role in fostering unity, particularly in diverse and post-conflict social contexts Illandage and Kodituwakku (2023); Surangi (2022a); and digital spaces act as neutral platforms fostering cross-cultural interaction, which is a strong conceptual claim about neutrality and cohesion Nambisan (2017); Ratten (2022); United Nations Development Programme (2020). These findings provide a strong empirical and conceptual foundation and emphasize the significance of women entrepreneurship as a strategic pathway for fostering social cohesion in a country like Sri Lanka.

Research Gaps Identified

Despite a growing body of research on women entrepreneurship, the systematic review reveals several theoretical, methodological, and contextual gaps. These gaps limit a holistic understanding of how women entrepreneurship contributes to social cohesion. Table 2 depicts the research gaps identified in the extant literature.

The most prominent gap identified is the lack of theoretical integration. While women entrepreneurship is widely studied, few studies explicitly situate it within broader social cohesion or unity frameworks Brush et al. (2009); Chan et al. (2006). Consequently, entrepreneurship is often conceptualized as an economic activity rather than a socio-relational process contributing to social harmony. This limitation reinforces earlier calls to move beyond growth-centric views of women entrepreneurship toward socially embedded perspectives Brush, Carter, Gatewood, Greene, and Hart (2006); Henry et al. (2016). Another critical gap concerns the under-theorization of digital adaptation. Although many studies acknowledge the use of social media or digital platforms, these technologies are rarely examined as transformative mechanisms shaping social interaction, inclusion, and trust Nambisan (2017). This limits understanding of how adaptive digital landscapes amplify the social impact of women entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, the review highlights a measurement gap related to social cohesion. Concepts

Table 1: Synthesis of Key Findings

Theme	Key Focus in Literature	Findings	Implications for Social Cohesion
Economic Empowerment	Income generation, self-employment, and financial independence	Women entrepreneurship enhances household income, reduces poverty, and increases women's decision-making power within families and communities	Economic stability strengthens social inclusion and reduces structural inequalities
Community Empowerment	Local networks, trust-building, and cooperative practices	Women entrepreneurs operate within strong community ties and informal networks across ethnic and social groups	Encourages trust, reciprocity, and inter-community cooperation
Digital Adaptation and Technology Use	Social media, e-commerce, mobile banking, and digital platforms	Digital tools enable market access, flexible work arrangements, and business continuity	Digital spaces act as neutral platforms fostering cross-cultural interaction
Overcoming Socio-Cultural Barriers	Gender norms, mobility constraints, and work-family balance	Digital entrepreneurship mitigates restrictions related to mobility and social norms; however, women entrepreneurs continue to face work-family balance challenges	Enhances participation of women from marginalized and conflict-affected regions
Social Cohesion and Harmony Outcomes	Inclusion, trust, resilience, post-conflict recovery, and post-disaster recovery	Women-led enterprises contribute to reconciliation, social integration, and collective resilience	Entrepreneurship becomes a mechanism for unity and social harmony
<i>Source: Author (2025)</i>			

such as trust, inclusion, and inter-community relations are frequently discussed in narrative terms without systematic operationalization or empirical validation United Nations Development Programme (2020). This weakens the evidence base linking entrepreneurship to unity. Contextually, the literature remains skewed toward urban and economically active regions, with insufficient representation of rural, estate-sector, and post-conflict communities, where social cohesion challenges are most pronounced Goodhand (2012).

Methodologically, the absence of longitudinal and mixed-method studies further constrains deeper insight into long-term social cohesion outcomes Darshani and Perera (2025); De Silva, Perera, and Gunawardane (2025).

Future Research Directions

Building on the identified gaps, this study proposes several future research directions to advance scholarship at the intersection of women

Table 2: Research Gaps Identified

Area	Identified Gap	Evidence from Literature	Implications
Theoretical Integration	Limited integration of entrepreneurship, digitalization, and social cohesion theories	Most studies focus on economic outcomes without linking social cohesion constructs	Weak conceptual understanding of entrepreneurship as a social cohesion mechanism
Digital Focus	Digital adaptation has not been treated as a main or outcome variable	Digital tools are discussed descriptively rather than analytically	Underestimation of the mediating and/or moderating roles of digital landscapes
Social Cohesion Outcomes	Social harmony is rarely operationalized and measured explicitly	Social cohesion outcomes are often implied rather than empirically examined	Lack of robust evidence on unity and harmony outcomes
Contextual Depth	Overrepresentation of urban and Western Province studies, especially in Sri Lanka	Limited attention to rural, estate, and conflict-affected regions	Contextual bias reduces generalizability
Methodological Rigor	Dominance of small-scale qualitative and/or descriptive studies	Few mixed-method or longitudinal designs	Limited causal and process-oriented insights
Intersectionality	Insufficient attention to ethnicity, class, and regional diversity	Women are treated as a homogeneous group	Overlooks differential impacts on social cohesion
<i>Source: Author (2025)</i>			

entrepreneurship, digital transformation, and social cohesion.

Future research should move beyond descriptive accounts and prioritize theory-driven empirical investigations. Integrating social cohesion theories with digital entrepreneurship frameworks would enable a deeper understanding of how women entrepreneurs function as agents of unity and inclusion Chan et al. (2006); Nambisan (2017). Similarly, there is a strong need to conceptualize digital adaptation as a mediating mechanism, rather than a background condition or control variable. Empirical testing of mediation pathways could provide robust evidence on how digital platforms enhance inter-community interaction and trust Akter et al. (2022); Henry et al. (2016). Additionally, scholars should develop contextually grounded measures of social cohesion applicable to entrepreneurship research in developing economies like Sri Lanka. Intersectional and region-specific studies are particularly important

in Sri Lanka’s multi-ethnic and post-conflict context.

Taken together, Table 4 depicts the alignment between reviewed studies and emergent themes.

Conclusion

This study conducted a PRISMA-guided systematic literature review to examine how women entrepreneurship contributes to social cohesion through adaptive digital landscapes. Synthesizing evidence from 25 selected sources, the review demonstrates that women entrepreneurship extends beyond economic empowerment to play a significant role in fostering social harmony, inclusion, and community resilience. The findings reveal that digital adaptation amplifies the social impact of women entrepreneurship, enabling women to overcome structural and socio-cultural barriers while engaging in cross-community economic and social interactions.

Table 3: Future Research Directions

Focus Area	Suggested Research Direction	Methodological Approach
Theory Development	Develop integrative models linking entrepreneurship, digital adaptation, and social cohesion	Conceptual and theory-building studies
Digital Mediation	Examine digital adaptation as a mediating or moderating variable	Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and mixed-method studies
Measurement of Social Cohesion	Operationalize and validate social cohesion constructs in entrepreneurship contexts	Scale development and scale validation across diverse samples
Context-Specific Studies	Focus on rural, estate, and conflict-affected regions	Comparative case studies
Intersectional Analysis	Explore ethnicity, class, and regional identity among women entrepreneurs	Qualitative and intersectional frameworks
Longitudinal Impact	Assess long-term effects of women entrepreneurship on unity and cohesion	Longitudinal and panel studies
<i>Source: Author (2025)</i>		

Table 4: Alignment Between Reviewed Studies and Emergent Themes

Theme	Representative Studies	Key Contribution
Economic Empowerment	Verheul and Thurik (2001); Sumanasiri and Chandrarathna (2021)	Demonstrated how women entrepreneurship enhances household income, financial independence, and social inclusion
Community Empowerment	Surangi (2022a); Al-Dajani and Marlow (2013)	Highlighted trust-building, social capital formation, and inter-community collaboration
Digital Adaptation	Nambisan (2017); Ratten (2022); World Bank (2021)	Explained how digital platforms improve market access, networking, and entrepreneurial resilience
Overcoming Socio-Cultural Barriers	Brush et al. (2009); Henry et al. (2016)	Identified how women entrepreneurs navigate gender norms and structural constraints
Social Harmony Outcomes	Goodhand (2012); UNDP (2020); Surangi (2022b)	Linked entrepreneurship with reconciliation, inclusion, resilience, and post-conflict social cohesion
<i>Source: Author (2025)</i>		

Implications

The systematic literature review contributes theoretically by positioning women entrepreneurship as a social cohesion mechanism rather than

a purely economic phenomenon. The identified future research directions extend digital entrepreneurship theory by highlighting the mediating role of adaptive digital landscapes in generating social harmony. This integration addresses a

significant gap in entrepreneurship and development literature, particularly within post-conflict and developing country contexts.

According to the findings of the current review, development agencies, NGOs, and entrepreneurship support organizations can leverage women entrepreneurship as a strategic tool for social integration. Facilitating women's access to digital platforms and cross-community networks can enhance trust, cooperation, and collective resilience, contributing to long-term social harmony, especially in a developing country like Sri Lanka. Further, for policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of digitally inclusive entrepreneurship policies. Targeted digital literacy programs, access to digital finance, and women-centric entrepreneurship support initiatives can simultaneously promote economic growth and social cohesion. Policies should prioritize marginalized and conflict-affected regions to strengthen unity and inclusive development.

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