

Heavy Wings of Journey: Exploring the Gendered Challenges and Resilience among Women Entrepreneurs in Vavuniya

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Abstract:

Women's participation in entrepreneurship is gradually increasing in many patriarchal societies as well. However, this growing presence should not simplify or romanticize the entrepreneurial journeys of women. Rather, there is a need to critically explore the gendered challenges that women entrepreneurs have to face within the journey and the forms of resilience women develop while navigating them. Vavuniya, a prominent district in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, represents a socio-culturally conservative space where traditional gender roles and gender narratives strongly regulate the social mobility and employment of women. Although women entrepreneurs are increasingly emerging in Vavuniya, once a venture becomes successful, such success is often interpreted as a form of 'healing' for the hardships endured. The previous studies in this area often consider challenges from a general perspective and fail to give priority to gendered nature. Accordingly, this study aims to uncover the common yet often unnoticed gendered challenges faced by women entrepreneurs and to explore how resilience is built through their experiences. This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach and employs narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of five aspiring women entrepreneurs from Vavuniya. Thematic analysis was undertaken, with the collected transcripts coded using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, resulting in 71 initial codes that were categorized into two key themes: influence of gender roles & gender narratives and everyday practices of resilience. Further sub-themes were added for each main theme to ensure clarity and readability. The findings reveal that women entrepreneurs' journeys are heavily shaped by socially assigned gender roles, where the women's primary responsibility lies in domestic labor. It cannot be omitted but can be replaced by another woman in the family. This study also identifies dominant gender narratives that normalize discrimination against women and question the competence of women as entrepreneurs, denying entrepreneurship as a profession for women.

Also, it was found that a social narrative exists suggesting that entrepreneurial spaces are not dignified places for women, indirectly restricting them to engage in entrepreneurship. In response to these challenges, women showed resilience through everyday practices. First, it was found that solidarity and networking among women have been a pillar of success. Secondly, women entrepreneurs have leveraged the nature of women and the social barriers they face as strategies and motivators for their entrepreneurial journey. Thirdly, such entrepreneurs have undertaken critical decisions while being aware of the broader implications for women's entrepreneurship as a movement. Beyond its empirical contributions, this study offers practical and critical implications. First, it highlights the necessity of broader social change; if that is a long-term objective, at minimum the study identifies that solidarity among women entrepreneurs provides a critical source of support and resilience to withstand and navigate gendered challenges. Overall, this study recommends an entrepreneurial ecosystem with more equal and equitable spaces for women's entrepreneurship.

Keywords: *Gendered Challenges, Gender Roles, Resilience, Vavuniya, Women Entrepreneurship*