

EXPLORING MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRY OF SRI LANKA

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Abstract

This study investigates the motivations and challenges of female entrepreneurs in the creative industry of Sri Lanka. This industry has attracted limited academic attention in previous Sri Lankan studies, particularly in view of gender based entrepreneurial experiences. Purposive sampling was used to identify 19 female entrepreneurs for the qualitative study, and data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that these entrepreneurs are motivated by a need for creative expression, financial independence, and the support of their social networks, which include family and friends. Resilience, preserving cultures, and social impact fuel their business endeavours. However, they face significant challenges such as financial and resource limits, societal expectations, gender biases, and issues integrating their business and artistic identities with personal and familial obligations. The study highlights the need to eliminate structural challenges and enhance support structures to help entrepreneurs succeed. This study provides new empirical evidence on how Sri Lankan female entrepreneurs manage creativity, resilience, and gendered limitations, providing theoretical implications for entrepreneurship and creative industry development.

Key Words: Challenges, creative industry, female entrepreneurship, motivations

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship is an essential key to economic growth, innovation, and social development, especially in emerging economies like Sri Lanka. (Perera, 2019). Entrepreneurship offers individuals the ability to reach their full potential, contribute to national goals, and respond to socioeconomic issues by creating self-sufficiency and increasing job possibilities. Sri Lanka has steadily pushed private sector-led development since economic liberalisation in 1977, seeing entrepreneurship as a means of reducing impoverishment, creating jobs, and supporting balanced growth (Pathirannehelage & Rajapaksha, 2018). In recent years, the country has experienced an increase in entrepreneurial activity, with an increasing number of women entering the field. (Jayawardane, 2016). This development is influenced by several factors, including increased access to education, shifting gender roles, and technical improvements that allow for flexible and remote company operations. (Fauzi et al., 2020). Despite these advancements, women's engagement in the formal economy remains low, at approximately 35% (Mallika et al., 2023). This low participation highlights the necessity of entrepreneurship as a second option to economic participation and development for females. The creative industry is an especially important sector for female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. The creative industry, which includes fashion, crafts, media, and design, places a high value on personal skill, innovation, and cultural heritage. (Herawaty & Raharja, 2018). Creative businesses allow women to balance economic needs with personal expression and societal purpose. (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2016). As stated by Rudenko et al., entrepreneurship in the creative industry generates both cultural and economic value, contributing to a nation's power of influence and export potential. (Rudenko et al., 2022) Important instances in Sri Lanka include sustainable fashion brands and culturally infused craft enterprises led by female entrepreneurs. (Babović & De Santo, 2023). However, women in the creative industry often face various types of challenges. Limited access to finance, underdeveloped support systems, societal expectations about gender roles, and difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities are some of these. (Pathirannehelage & Rajapaksha, 2018; Soomro et al., 2022). Furthermore, the combination of artistic identity and business management presents unique conflicts, with many struggling to expand operations while maintaining creative authenticity. (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2016). Although women's entrepreneurship has been thoroughly researched, there hasn't been much empirical research done in Sri Lanka on women entrepreneurs in the creative industry. Recent studies from Sri Lanka (Jayawardane, 2016; Lakmal, 2023) Also shows that there is a major understanding gap in this field due to the lack of gender-focused studies. Various theories have influenced this research. Self-Efficacy Theory emphasises the impact of believed capability on entrepreneurial behaviour; Adaptive Expertise Theory supports awareness of how entrepreneurs adapt to situational challenges, and the Social Entrepreneurship Theory explains the combination of creative and social and social value creation (Bandura,1986; Dees, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2004) . Despite these challenges, there is limited research that investigates the motivations and challenges of female entrepreneurs in the creative industry in the Sri Lankan context. This study fulfils this gap by investigating the lived experiences of 19 female entrepreneurs engaging in several types of creative sectors. This research uses qualitative methodology and thematic analysis to provide perspectives about female entrepreneurs' motivations, challenges, and adaptive strategies contributing to both theoretical and practical understanding in the sector

Literature Review

Entrepreneurship motivation and challenges

Entrepreneurship is widely recognised as a driver of innovations, economic growth, and social transformation (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2024). Entrepreneurs can be identified by the ability to recognise opportunities, take reasonable risks, and create innovations that benefit both society and the market (Schulte- Holthaus, 2018). Independence, inventiveness, inner sense of management, and Strategic thinking are all characteristics that are usually connected with business success (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2016). The motivational factors for entrepreneurial enterprises are different from each other. While some are motivated by necessity, such as lack of job opportunities, others are motivated by intrinsic objectives like independence, commitment, or community service. (Rangarajan & Lakshmi, 2013). Bandura's Social Learning Theory adds to the argument that people are driven by seeing the actions and accomplishments of others (Bandura, 1986). Furthermore, according to the Resource-Based View (RBV), entrepreneurs who take advantage of internal resources such as creativity, knowledge, and networks can gain long term competitive advantages (Barney, 1991). And according to Dees' Social Entrepreneurship Theory, entrepreneurs are motivated by more than simply creativity when they address social issues through creative, ethical, and sustainable economic solutions (Dees, 1998).Despite these motivations, entrepreneurs face various challenges, such as a lack of money, regulatory issues, and human resource difficulties (Ardiana, 2020). Environmental factors like access to market, infrastructure, and institutional support have a considerable impact on entrepreneurial success, particularly in developing countries

Female entrepreneurship

Female entrepreneurship is receiving global attention as a significant factor of economic growth and gender empowerment (Jayawardane, 2019). Although females represent an increasing number of ownership of businesses worldwide, there are significant gaps concerning access to capital, decision-making authority, and market opportunities (Bruin et al., 2006). Also, women in many economies continue to be undervalued due to the lack of societal support and resources (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2024). In Sri Lanka, females represent over half of the population, but they still participate in economic activities at a low rate. (Mallika et al., 2023). Female entrepreneurs in the country usually depend on informal support structures like family and community networks to manage their business operations (Surangi, 2022). According to the research, Sri Lankan females adopt a combination of social and task-oriented decision-making and leadership strategies, which is often needed due to institutional and cultural limitations (Illandaraage & Kodituwakku, 2023). Female-led businesses prefer to reinvest their earnings in family wellbeing, education, and improving the community, which increases their socio-economic impact. (Jayawardane, 2016). However, studies highlight the necessity for specific region research to understand how culture, policy, and informal institutions influence female entrepreneurship (Sarfaraz et al., 2014; Simoes et al., 2016). Recent local studies (Jayawardane, 2019; Lakmal, 2023) show less attention to female entrepreneurship in creative industries, even though some research in Sri Lanka has focused on women in traditional sectors (Almeida, 2014; Sarfaraz et al., 2014). This confirms the limited empirical evidence within this context.

Motivations and challenges of female entrepreneurs

It is essential to understand that what are the motivations and challenges faced by female entrepreneurs to develop a diverse and effective support system. Female entrepreneurs are motivated by a variety of internal and external reasons, including autonomy, creativity, financial necessity, and a desire to create a positive social effect (Almeida, 2014; Kraja & Berberi, 2023). In the Sri Lankan context, motives include a lack of career possibilities, family flexibility, and the desire for independence (Lakmal, 2023). Family support and networking connections increase motivation and confidence (Mustapha & Subramaniam, 2016; Pasha et al., 2023). According to Vallerand's Passion Theory, having a healthy passion boosts long-term drive and creativity. (Vallerand, 2012). Additionally, human and social capital, like financial literacy, entrepreneurial education, and institutional access, directly impact motivations and outcomes (Martin et al., 2020). Gender Theory in Entrepreneurship shows that cultural values impact women's views, which often limit their business opportunities. (Ahl, 2006). Despite increasing support, women still face structural and cultural challenges, such as limited financial access, fear of failure, and common gender stereotypes (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2024; Verheul et al., 2006). Social Capital Theory includes women's separation from crucial connections, as well as problems such as a lack of digital awareness (Jayawardane, 2019)

Creative entrepreneurship

Creative entrepreneurship combines both business activities and cultural expression with highlighting innovation, uniqueness, and identity (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2016). The creative industry includes sectors such as arts, crafts, design, animation, media, and fashion. What are the areas where female entrepreneurs often succeed due to aesthetic sensitivity and cultural foundation (Babović & De Santo, 2023). Studies separate creative entrepreneurs based on their unique motivational behaviours, such as passion, independence, and cultural significance (Černevičiūtė, 2011; Cnossen et al., 2019). Compared to traditional ventures, creative firms can involve balancing personal vision with market demands, which results in conflict that results in both opportunity and exhaustion (Moreno-Gavara & Jiménez-Zarco, 2019).

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative methodology to investigate the motivations and challenges of female entrepreneurs in the creative industry of Sri Lanka. An interpretivist research paradigm was used, focusing on the subjective interpretations that participants allocated to their entrepreneurial motives and challenges. The qualitative approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of individual narratives, making it particularly suited for a dependent context and descriptive study of this nature. The sample included 19 female entrepreneurs engaged in various creative industries, including fashion design, event organising, cosmetics, batik, and other art-related companies. The sample size was determined using the data saturation principle, which indicates that no new themes or insights occurred during the final stage of data collection. Snowball sampling assisted in identifying more entrepreneurs through personal and professional networks, increasing diversity across industries and reaching those hard to reach through formal methods. Purposive sampling was used to collect information-rich cases of women directly involved in creative industries. Primary data were gathered using semi-structured interviews in both Sinhala and English, allowing participants to communicate easily and express complex thoughts

in their chosen language. Thematic analysis was utilised to identify common patterns and topics throughout the entire collection. The procedure included open coding, classification, and theme building. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured with pseudonyms and secure handling of interview transcripts. The study utilised credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria to ensure trustworthiness, with member verification, gathering of data, peer review, and detailed documentation for transparency.

Findings and Discussion

This study investigated the motivations and challenges of 19 female entrepreneurs engaging in the creative industry of Sri Lanka. The thematic analysis could identify 8 main themes and 4 main sub-themes from both motivations and challenges. These findings highlighted the complex relationship of internal desires, external support, institutional limitations, and personal resilience that shape females' entrepreneurial journey in the creative industry. These results are in line with other studies that emphasise the interaction of creativity, gender, and resource limitations (Bruin et al., 2006; Bujor & Avasilcai, 2016). However, this study shows how cultural expectations affect entrepreneurial resilience by applying such ideas to the Sri Lankan context.

Motivations of female entrepreneurs in the creative industry of Sri Lanka

Intrinsic drive for creative expression

A strong desire for creative work emerged as a primary motivator. Many participants stated that their entrepreneurial journey started not as a business idea but to express their creativity and identity.

'I enjoyed painting and design since I was in school. I started creating things just for fun, then it slowly became a business.' (participant 13)

'I would do this even if I didn't earn much. This is who I am.' (participant 7)

Such narratives align with studies that identify intrinsic passion as an essential characteristic of creative entrepreneurs and passion theory (Černevičiūtė, 2011; Vallerand, 2012). This inner motivation gave participants a sense of purpose and emotional fulfilment, which often exceeded strictly economic motives.

Financial independence & stability

The desire for financial independence, which is frequently influenced by cultural expectations and a lack of job options, was essential for maintaining their firms and gaining security for themselves and their families, even if most entrepreneurial journeys started with creative fulfilment.

'I don't want to depend on my husband for everything. I want to stand on my own feet.' (Participant 4)

'After my marriage ended, I had no choice; I had to support my children somehow. This saved me.' (Participant 10).

These findings align with the observations of Lakmal, who observed that this economic necessity is an essential motivator among females with limited career opportunities in the South Asian context (Lakmal, 2023).

Social support & Influence

Family encouragement and support

Family played a significant role in encouraging confidence and providing resources, especially during the initial stage. *'My mother gave me money to buy the first batch of materials.'* (Participant 15)

'Even when I doubted myself, my husband kept pushing me to continue.' (Participant 3)

This confirms Mustapha & Subramaniam's statement that family support serves as an emotional and practical support for female entrepreneurial development (Mustapha & Subramaniam, 2016).

Influence of role models and peer networks

Peer influence and inspiration from successful females, especially through social media, proved to be a powerful motivator.

'When I saw others succeeding on Instagram, I thought, Why can't I?' (Participant 9)

'My friend introduced me to the handcrafted jewellery. She guided me in the beginning.' (Participant 6)

These relationships increased self-efficacy and provided opportunities for learning and cooperation, confirming Coleman's concept of social capital as a foundation for opportunity, as in social capital theory (Coleman, 1988). Also, this is consistent with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which holds that individuals learn and are motivated by seeing others' actions, successes, and outcomes (Bandura, 1986.).

Resilient growth with cultural and social purpose

Resilience and growth mindset

Despite failures and hardships, many women handled problems with a growth mentality, interpreting failure as a learning experience.

'I failed twice before. But I never give up. "I learned and improved.' (Participant 1)

'Even when customers rejected my designs, I kept going. I assured myself, 'Next time will be better.' (P12)

These experiences align with Ardiana's discussion on resilience, which emphasises flexibility as a fundamental attribute in sustainable business (Ardiana, 2020). and align with Adaptive Expertise Theory, which emphasises adapting and utilising new abilities to address developing challenges (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

Commitment to cultural representation and social impact

Several females expressed a great desire to present Sri Lankan heritage through their ventures and encourage others in their communities.

'Batik is a part of our identity. I want to keep it alive and take it globally.' (Participant 2)

'I trained young females in my village. They are also earning money now. It makes me proud.' (Participant 17)

This dual purpose of economic and social is a unique feature of creative entrepreneurship (Bujor & Avasilcai, 2016). This proves the social entrepreneurship theory (Dees, 1998).

Challenges of female entrepreneurs in the creative industry of Sri Lanka

Financial and resource-related challenges

Lack of capital and resource limitations were the most stated challenges. Many females are unable to access bank loans due to limitations on equity and credit history.

'Three banks refused me. They stated I had no property and no consistent income.' (Participant 11)

'Materials are expensive. I can't always afford restocking after a successful month.' (Participant 14)

These findings support studies that highlight financial access as a gendered barrier (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2024).

Gender and societal challenges

Several participants reported their experiences of facing gender bias, cultural expectations, and mistrust from stakeholders, especially in male-dominated environments.

'They don't treat women seriously. Suppliers talk down to me, thinking I'm clueless.' (Participant 18)

'Some relatives still ask me when I'm going to 'get a real job'.' (Participant 8)

These difficulties are like those raised by Verheul et al., who emphasise the cultural burden that women in traditional nations must bear in entrepreneurial roles (Verheul et al., 2006). Also, this proved the Gender theory (Ahl, 2006.)

Challenges in business and artistic balance

Operational and competitive challenges

Entrepreneurs without proper business training noted issues with pricing, digital marketing, handling competition, logistics, etc.

'I create beautiful items, but I struggle with price. "I lose money without realising it.' (Participant 5).

'My designs are copied by other stores and sold at lower prices. "I can't compete like that.' (Participant 19). This reflects the findings of Dsouza and Panakaje (2023), who underline the need for business literacy among creative entrepreneurs (Dsouza & Panakaje, 2023).

Balancing entrepreneurial and artistic identities

The pressure to prioritise sales over authenticity challenged participants' creative freedom.

'I enjoy creating new designs, but clients want the same old ones. 'It is boring.' (Participant 16)

'Sometimes I feel I'm losing myself in what sells.' (Participant 07)

This internal tension is deeply documented in the literature on creative entrepreneurship, where identity maintenance often conflicts with market demand (Moreno-Gavara & Jiménez-Zarco, 2019).

Balancing personal and family dynamics

Work-life balance

Participants recognised their difficulties of balancing many roles - mother, wife, and entrepreneur - without institutional or spousal assistance.

'I do housework in the morning, attend orders in the afternoon, and finish packing at night.' (Participant 10) *'I work constantly. I don't even have time for myself.'* (Participant 9)

Soomro et al. describe how such imbalances lead to exhaustion and prevent business development (Soomro et al., 2022). Also, this is consistent with work-life balance theory (Pattusamy & Jacob, 2017).

Emotional challenges & support systems

Emotional exhaustion, loneliness, and a lack of appreciation were common. Some participants felt alone throughout their entrepreneurial journey.

'Some days I feel invisible. Nobody sees the hard effort that went into this.' (Participant 13)

'When you don't have a team, you feel like giving up some days.' (Participant 06)

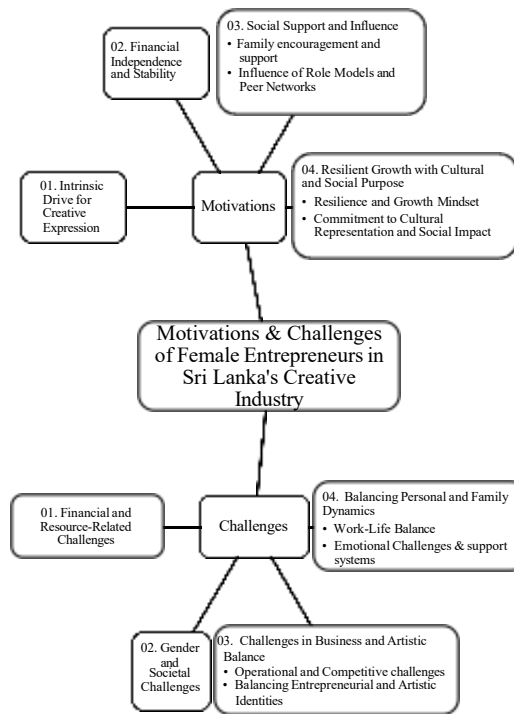
Emotional and mental health assistance is rarely included in entrepreneurship programs, despite its crucial role. (Martin et al., 2020) A significant result is that, while financial autonomy is frequently described as a main motivator in emerging countries, it was frequently subordinated to artistic expression and personal fulfilment in this environment. Many participants focused on continuing their profession even without financial compensation, highlighting a strong psychological attachment to their skill. This finding supports Černevičiūtė's perspective of creativity as an identity, not just an occupation (Černevičiūtė, 2011). Another surprising part was the intentional goal of cultural preservation. Several women were motivated not just to earn money, but also to promote national identity and inspire social change using their efforts. This charitable factor underlines a unique feature of female creative businesses in Sri Lanka. It combines personal success with societal cultural improvement. Furthermore, while digital platforms helped with transparency, they also increased emotional labour, particularly around comparison, self-presentation, and consumer feedback. This dual effect of digitalisation, enabling and psychologically draining, emerged as an understated but powerful topic. Finally, the emotional cost of invisible status, a lack of encouragement, and cultural misunderstanding indicate that entrepreneurial development needs to go beyond financial and skill development. Community recognition, psychological support, and cultural recognition are all essential for sustaining female-led creative businesses.

Proposed model

A conceptual model was created based on the thematic analysis to show how operational challenges, sociocultural factors, and inner and extrinsic motivators interact to shape the experiences of female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka's creative sector. The model provides an organised framework for further study and the creation of policies by incorporating viewpoints like passion, social learning, gendered restrictions, and social entrepreneurship.

Figure 01

Thematic framework of motivations and challenges among female creative entrepreneurs



(Source: Developed by authors based on literature (2025))

Conclusion and Implications

This research examined the motivations and challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka's creative industry. Based on the lived experiences of 19 women, the findings demonstrate a complex and dynamic relationship between personal desires, cultural identity, social institutions, and structural limitations. The study discovered that intrinsic motivation, particularly the need for creative expression, was a strong motivator of entrepreneurial activity. For many people, business was more than just a way to make money; it was a deeply personal journey of self-expression, cultural preservation, and societal responsibility. While participants were motivated by independence, resilience, and a development mentality, they also encountered ongoing problems such as limited financial access, gendered cultural expectations, and emotional exhaustion. The unique interaction between creative authenticity and economic needs developed as a recognised challenge for many. Despite these challenges, women displayed great adaptation, relying on family support, peer networks, and internet platforms to establish their businesses. The results emphasise the necessity of focused support systems, including training programs, mentorship, and microfinance, to encourage female entrepreneurs. To address the frequently neglected mental health needs of women in the creative sector, policymakers, educators, and support groups should incorporate the development of the creative industry into gender and entrepreneurship strategies. This will guarantee that women in the creative sector have access to funding, culturally appropriate mentorship, and emotional support.

By highlighting female representation in the creative industry and the necessity of diverse, culturally grounded entrepreneurial ecosystems, this study adds to the expanding body of research on gendered entrepreneurship in South Asia. It identifies areas for future research, including comparative studies across regions or sub-sectors, quantitative approaches for wider applicability, and examination of long-term impacts, digital transformation, and various socioeconomic challenges faced by female entrepreneurs, despite being constrained by a small qualitative sample restricted to urban creative businesses.

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