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Empowerment Through Women Entrepreneurship: A Case from the Beauty Salon Sector in Sri Lanka



Thilini De Silva¹

Sirkku Männikkö Barbutiu²

Stockholm University, Department of Computer and Systems Sciences, (DSV),
Kista, Sweden

Kutoma Wakunuma³

De Montfort University, Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility,
Leicester, United Kingdom

Gehan S. Dhameeth⁴

Wells College, Aurora, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study was to explore the conditions of empowerment among women entrepreneurs in the beauty salon sector in Sri Lanka by shedding light on the specific challenges faced by women when initiating and developing an enterprise. Focus group discussions were used to create a collaborative platform for businesswomen to meet and exchange experiences on being entrepreneurial women. Twelve women entrepreneurs who own beauty salons in the outskirts of the capital city of Sri Lanka participated in the workshop. Sen's capability approach and Kabeer's empowerment framework was used to interpret the findings. The women in the study face many challenges such as difficulties in maintaining a healthy work-life balance, double burden and tiresome

¹ Corresponding author, e-mail: thilini@nsbm.lk

² E-mail: sirkku@dsv.su.se

³ E-mail: kutoma@dmu.ac.uk

⁴ E-mail: gdhameeth@wells.edu

multi-tasking. Research suggests that women's choice to become an entrepreneur enables them to achieve their practical and strategic gender needs. Nevertheless, too much focus on fulfilling practical gender needs limits the ability of women to fulfil their strategic gender needs. However, entrepreneurial agency has changed their status through improving the wellbeing of women, increasing the actual economic contribution, strengthening the economic security, through the ability to exercise purchasing power to invest on children, sense of self-worth, value within their families and family welfare. The study will increase our understanding of women and their family ties and the challenges women face in multiple roles they play in a developing context like Sri Lanka.

KEY WORDS: *Women entrepreneurship, identity roles, self-perception, agency, resources, achievements, empowerment*

Introduction

Over half of the world's population are women, with approximately 252 million women heading entrepreneurial projects, at present (Elam et al., 2019, p. 2). In countries like the United States, New Zealand, Canada and Israel, the enterprises owned by women have grown faster than the economy of the country (Rusdianti et al., 2018). However, women entrepreneurship has a long way to exploit its full potential, particularly in the global South. As such, in a developing country like Sri Lanka where the economy is growing at 5.8% (2019a), discussion of women entrepreneurship in terms of a contributing economic indicator and as a medium to empower women is timely. According to the National Human Resource and Employment Policy of Sri Lanka (2018), there is a sizeable unexploited segment in the women population that could contribute to the development of the country. This extensive underutilisation among the potential women workforce is despite the equal opportunities given in education for women as men and also in a circumstance where the achievements of women in education are equal or sometimes more than men (Kailasapathy & Metz, 2012). Even according to Sen (1999), freedom of choice and opportunities for women to obtain employee or employer status are significant drivers that are increasing women labour force participation which may empower the women and benefit society as a whole.

During the last decade, women across the globe have been obtaining employment opportunities more than ever before, thereby breaking many rules and changing the limitations imposed on them (Drolet, 2011). Women

receiving more employability opportunities is a structural change, and it has also improved the freedom of choice of women in families (Madsen et al. 2008). Fostering the economic status of women through enterprise promotion has a positive impact on several areas such as unemployment, equality for women, eradication of poverty and improving quality of life (Carter & Jones - Evans, 2000). According to Shastri and Rao (2014), women entrepreneurship enhances economic growth and provides employment opportunities. In addition, it improves the social, educational and health status of women and their families as women invest more in education, health and wellbeing of the family. Small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) generate many enterprising opportunities for women entrepreneurs allowing various benefits to the economy and the society as a consequence. However, according to Tori and Martinez (2014), gender biases against women are common even in the SME sector.

Entrepreneurship is considered challenging for women due to structural barriers and gender-specific constraints (Madsen et al., 2008). Some of the main limitations a woman entrepreneur may face are lack of finances, business skills, mobility and networks to be able to run a successful business (Drolet, 2011). The concepts of production (business) and reproduction (family) are connected and co-dependent, hence, self-employment and family relationships become fundamental premises of the societal perspective of gender and gender ascribed roles (Al-Dajani et al., 2014). Many women struggle to balance their roles as a mother and a home-maker while participating in economic activities, though some women believe that entrepreneurship can offer them flexibility, independence and time for family (Moore & Buttner, 1997). A woman entrepreneur may face limitations imposed by individual preferences, institutional and structural barriers, yet self-perception, agency of women and structural changes in the society can unlock such barriers. Further, identity construction can be crucial in fostering women entrepreneurship (Haque, 2013).

The emergence of women entrepreneurs in a society depends to a great extent on the economic, social, religious, cultural, and psychological factors prevailing in the society (Carter & Jones – Evans, 2000). The family plays an essential role in women entrepreneurship. A family can provide the resources required to start a business, and help develop the entrepreneurial spirit in a woman (Pérez-Pérez & Avilés-Hernández, 2016). Sen and Drolet (2011;1999) have found that involvement in economic activity may empower women. According to Drolet (2011), women's empowerment is a

process which enhances self-determination, the decision making and agency to meet their practical and strategic needs. The examples of practical gender needs are childcare, family health, food provision and earning income through productive work and examples for strategic gender needs are financial security, individual dignity, respect, decision making power and recognition (Drolet, 2011). This process, therefore, enables women to achieve equal rights, power and resources on par with men in the society (Kabeer, 1999).

The current study is an exploration of the challenges of women entrepreneurship pertaining to the growing beauty salon sector, in order to assess how entrepreneurial activities may contribute to the empowerment of women. Similar studies have been conducted in Western countries, yet it is important to investigate the challenges women entrepreneurs face in the global South. Hence, the study was conducted in Sri Lanka. The women entrepreneurs in the beauty salon sector were selected for the investigation as this is one of the most popular and fast-growing industries in Sri Lanka (2019b). In the modern context, where women understand their significance within families and the society, it is of great interest to understand the new dynamics that emerge in the intersections of entrepreneurship and empowerment of everyday life of women in developing countries. Through the examples extracted from interviews and observations of women entrepreneurs in the beauty salon sector, the researchers attempt to understand the phenomenon of empowerment by addressing the following research questions: i) What are the challenges of women entrepreneurship? and ii) How do entrepreneurial activities empower women?

Notions of Women Entrepreneurship and Empowerment

This section provides a theoretical understanding of the notions of women entrepreneurship and empowerment. Also, the dimensions of Kabeer's empowerment framework - resources, agency and achievements - are elaborated. The essence of entrepreneurship is the exploitation of opportunities (Carter & Jones - Evans, 2000). There can be gender biases in the process of becoming an entrepreneur and continuing with the business successfully (De Carolis & Saporito, 2006). The identification of business opportunities is influenced by self-perceptions and the entrepreneurial intention of an individual. The personal perception and intention can be supported and shaped by the society, business environment and one's own

ability (Bird, 1989). In addition to the external barriers, a woman may not recognise business opportunities due to self-imposed barriers such as lack of confidence (De Bruin et al., 2007). Self-perceptions are closely related to the social environment. Traditionally, women are defined by the roles they play within the family and in terms of household responsibilities. In such societies, the normative support required for a woman to become an entrepreneur is not extended, as entrepreneurship is considered inappropriate for women (Bird, 1989). However, if the women are socialized in an unconventional environment, the women will look at the opportunities which control a woman's life and her experiences in a different way (Brush, 1992). Nevertheless, when a woman is trying to achieve an entrepreneurial identity, self-perception, institutional and structural barriers can jointly influence the process (Madsen et al., 2008). According to Pérez-Pérez and Avilés-Hernández (2016), when a woman identifies a business opportunity in order to start a business, personal characters, subjective perceptions and certain demographic factors influence the entire process. Such personal factors desire progress, autonomy and achievement. Subjective perceptions are self-confidence, and risk tolerance, whereas the demographic factors are age, education and qualifications. Antony (2012), highlights how social attribution of gender roles and gender differences create barriers specifically for women when they are approaching entrepreneurial opportunities in terms of access to resources, differences in educational opportunities and inequalities in household responsibilities. Many women are demotivated in every phase of developing entrepreneurship, and they have lower expectations related to entrepreneurial activities due to such barriers (Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015). Entrepreneurship is highly masculinized and to decrease the masculine stereotype, barriers for women, and to initiate and develop entrepreneurship, the self-efficacy of women requires improvement (Sweida & Reichard, 2013).

Women's entrepreneurship can foster women's economic growth, their wellbeing and social inclusion (De Bruin et al., 2007). It is vital that women try to break through the cultural and structural barriers they face in order to change the conditions of their life by making their own life choices through agency (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 2001). Sen (1999) sees the potential of entrepreneurship as empowering women. In this study, the definition of empowerment follows the ideas of Kabeer (1999), who draws on Sen's idea of expanding the freedom and capabilities of people. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life

choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them "(p.10)". The prominence here is the process of change or the process of agency, where agency is the capacity of an individual to make choices (1999). This perspective of empowerment highlights the expanding the capabilities of humans echoing Sen's (1999) capability approach, that views development as expanding the freedom of people to live the lives they value to the fullest.

According to Kabeer's (2001) conceptualisation, empowerment is a process made up of three dimensions; resources, agency and achievements (see Figure 1 for details). Resources are the preconditions where choices are made, agency is the main process where the choice is made, and achievements are the outcomes of the choice made. Sen (1999) describes the development as a process of removing the 'unfreedoms', which are the barriers and limitations to exercise agency and therefore, the choices of an individual. Women may use agency as the ability to make the strategic choices of life by controlling the resources and decisions which influence important outcomes of life. The agency is the core of empowerment (Sen 1999). Further, Sen (1999) discusses development, stating that freedom is considered central to the development process, and therefore, the achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people. Furthermore, according to Drolet (2011), women empowerment improves the ability to make choices and decisions regarding oneself (agency) and thus, improves self-determination to fulfil needs, allowing them to achieve equal rights, power and resources on par with men and in an economy.

The empowerment and agency of women can be interpreted as women getting the power to control their own lives over families, communities, societies or markets, in the business context (Jejeebhoy, 1998). Multiple demands placed on women align with the triple role framework, where women play three main roles in life; production, reproduction and community management (Moser, 1989). As described by Moser (Moser 1989), women working in their agency in order to achieve their strategic and practical gender needs. The strategic gender needs are the needs of women in subordination to men like the abolition of the sexual division of labour, the lessening of the burden of the domestic chores and childcare, removal of institutional discriminations such as women's right to own property or access to credit, political equality, freedom of choice over childbearing, measures for domestic violence and measures for men's control over women

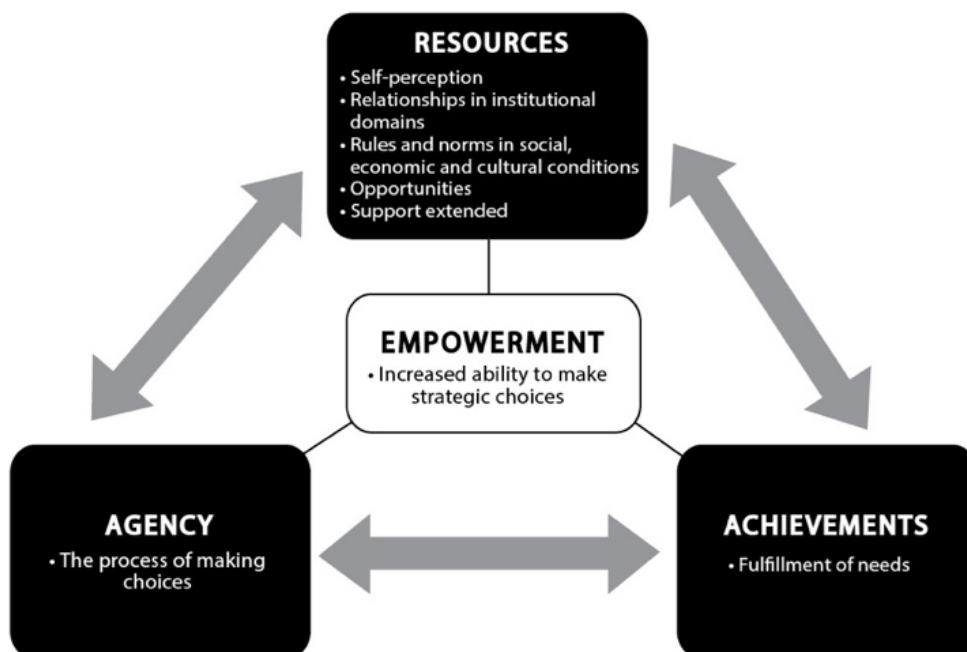
(Moser, 1993). The practical gender needs are conditions women experience on a daily basis, while fulfilling their triple roles of production, reproduction and community managing. However, most women have to sacrifice and compromise on fulfilling their strategic gender needs when they have to allocate more of their time and effort to achieving practical gender needs (Drolet, 2011).

Empowerment cannot be measured without the existence of women's agency. Women should not only be the recipients of change but also, agents of change. The environment or the society women belong to shape their agency in terms of the choices they make, their awareness and the strategies they use (Drolet, 2011). The agency of women is influenced by their cultural, geographical and familial contexts (Narayan, 2005). The context can support them, and also the same context can limit the options available to them. The women themselves need to make their life choices and decisions to change conditions for them, without waiting for the context or the conditions to change. A woman may face many structural and institutional limitations in the journey of empowerment. The primary demand of feminist movements was the freedom for women to make decisions and choices about their life, the power to exercise their agency (Sen, 1999). A woman plays different roles in life. Entrepreneurship or participating in economic activity is a productive role a woman would play (Moser, 1989). The financial independence such activity provides to a woman is a significant variable of women empowerment (Sen, 1999). Also, providing an opportunity for an economic role for a woman can have a significant impact on her status and can empower her (Bagathi, 2003). However, for a woman to decide to start and continue a business, is constrained by self-perception, institutional barriers and structural barriers.

Figure 1 illustrates the empowerment framework adapted from Kabeer (1999) as the conceptual framing for the current study. *Resources* are understood as the social, cultural and economic conditions prevailing as institutional and structural barriers for women; their self-perception; opportunities; and the support women have when initiating a business. Women are making choices within the barriers and limitations set in such conditions. *Agency* is defined as the process of making choices or decisions by women themselves. *Achievements* are understood as outcomes of the choices made; outcomes which are significant in terms of fulfilment of different needs such as practical gender needs and strategic gender needs of

a woman and her family. Empowerment can thus be reflected as the increased ability of a woman to make strategic life choices.

Figure 1: Empowerment Framework



Source: Adapted from Kabeer (Kabeer 1999)

This study aims to explore the conditions of empowerment among women entrepreneurs in the beauty salon sector in Sri Lanka via shedding light on the specific challenges women face when initiating and developing an enterprise.

Methodology

Strategy

As the researchers found it important to engage women entrepreneurs in open and reliable conversations which eventually could function as catalysts for a longer-term research and development collaboration facilitating support for women entrepreneurs, focus group discussion (Denscombe, 2017) within a workshop frame was considered as the most

suitable methodological choice. Summoning a group of women with a similar background and with the beauty salon business as the common denominator into a workshop would give them an opportunity to meet other women with similar experiences as they were also provided new information and knowledge. The researchers found it imperative to apply the principles of reciprocity in research and in addition to designing data collection methods, the researchers invited the women to participate in activities that would be beneficial to their businesses. The workshop activities were designed to shed light on women's self-perception, initiation of business, and challenges of entrepreneurship.

Participants

Twelve female beauty salon owners were invited to participate in the initial workshop. They were between the age of 21 and 42 and held a basic diploma in beauty culture. The participants were selected through convenient sampling method. The first participant researcher contacted, introduced other participants to the focus group discussion. All of them are located in the outskirts of the capital city (Colombo-Sri Jayewardenepura, Kotte) of Sri Lanka.

The researchers selected the beauty salon sector as it is a highly productive service industry in Sri Lanka which is dominated by women entrepreneurs (2019b). Beauty salons are mushrooming at a fast pace in the outskirts of Colombo. There are nearly seven to ten beauty salons in a radius of one kilometer. Hence, the researchers assumed it is best to select beauty salons located in the outskirts of Colombo. A group of twelve women entrepreneurs were chosen from the same locality to facilitate the convenience of transportation and thus securing the participation of these women. Among the participants, some had commenced business operations recently, more specifically, within the last year, while others had been in business for over ten years.

Data Collection Method

The focus group discussions were organized in a room, harbouring an informal setup, with the ability to facilitate group work, thereby, ensuring that the participants are comfortable to express their true feelings. Further, the seating arrangements facilitated group discussions. The participants were divided into groups of four. The three-hour discussion followed the

setup described in Table 1. An introduction on the research, the researchers involved, the workshop and future workshops, were provided. Informed consent and basic personal data were collected via forms in Sinhala and English. Once signed consent was received, the researchers placed an audio recorder on each table. Segment one was based on "Myself". The discussion was conducted to identify how these women perceived themselves. The second segment was based on "Being an entrepreneur". The objective of the second discussion was to identify why the participants wanted to be entrepreneurs, in addition to the challenges they face, as a result.

Table 1: Design of the focus group discussion

| Time Duration | Activity |
|----------------------|---|
| First 15 Minutes | Settling down Wear a name tag Distribution of multi-coloured hand bands for grouping |
| 25 Minutes | Introduction 1. Introduction to the research project 2. Ethical permissions from participants 3. Information sheet filled by participants (Name, Age, Civil status, No. of Kids, Location) |
| 60 Minutes | Discussion One: My Self <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Describe yourself as an entrepreneur (on a sticky note) ▪ Then discuss about it within the group and develop ▪ Summarise it to one sheet ▪ Present to the other groups what each group had been discussing (How do you see yourself as an entrepreneur, how do you see yourself, how you feel about being a woman entrepreneur) |
| 60 Minutes | Discussion Two: Being an Entrepreneur <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ List the challenges they have as entrepreneurs ▪ Then discuss within the group and list challenges from the most to the least. ▪ Summarise to one sheet ▪ Present to other groups |

Source: Authors

Data Analysis Method

The analysis is based on the recordings, materials produced by the participants during the workshop activities and the field notes taken by the principal researcher. All data in the Sinhala language were later translated and transcribed to English. The twelve participants are addressed with a single alphabetical letter, (the chosen letters are A to L), to ensure anonymity. All the collected data were transferred into an excel sheet and then analysed into phrases, sub-categories, categories and themes using colour codes. The researchers used an affinity diagram to derive codes, categories and then themes. Affinity diagrams reveal common issues and themes across all users and narrate a story which discusses all key elements of the respondents (Holtzblatt & Beyer 2017). The authors used the colour labels suggested in the affinity diagram in an excel sheet as it was less time consuming than preparing handmade colour labels. The workshop data consisted of two main segments covering the main research questions; i) What are the challenges of women entrepreneurship? and ii) How do entrepreneurial activities empower women? The main two activities of each group were analysed separately. The analysis was derived into three main themes, namely, barriers and opportunities when setting up a business, multiple roles of women, and changing status of women entrepreneurs.

Results

The analysis resulted in three overall themes, namely, barriers and opportunities when setting up a business, multiple roles of women and the changing status of a woman entrepreneur. These three themes are interpreted according to Kabeer's empowerment model (Fig. 1) and elaborated below.

Barriers and Opportunities When Setting Up a Business

According to the participants, setting up their business was not an easy task. They faced many barriers, however, the participants admitted to the existence of favourable conditions and support from numerous parities, as well. Most of the participants revealed that they doubted their capabilities, at the point of conceptualising their business plan. However, drawing from the success stories of women who had started businesses from their own

communities, they realised the extent to which a business can help improve the welfare of their respective children and families. Thus, this factor of improving their family's quality of life, became a significant motivator in the eventual establishment of their businesses.

J: I never thought I can set up my own business ever. I said to myself, no one will help me, and I am not capable to run a business.

Further, the interviews at the workshop indicated that society was not very supportive of the idea of women founding a business. It became evident that the negative feedback received from the public, had indirect implications on the entrepreneur, as it created repugnance and doubt among the entrepreneur's families, towards the potential business. Thus, the women faced difficulties in acquiring consent and approval from their immediate families in order to set up the business.

A: My neighbour told to my mother-in-law to find another bride to my husband as I will leave the family soon as I set up a business-like beauty salon."

Furthermore, many participants revealed that they did not have any prior knowledge on the process of setting up a business. According to them, they were unaware of the proceedings with regard to obtaining a business registration, developing rent agreements, obtaining loans, purchasing of agreements, dealing with suppliers or the technicalities of marketing and advertising. This lack of knowledge led to the rejection of their initial loan applications by numerous banks, which questioned their credit worthiness. The participants found that the banks were very discriminative.

D: The official at the bank humiliated me. He said this is not a place for donations."

The participants were requested to brainstorm and conduct a mini research on the types of businesses which are most convenient to setup, for women entrepreneurs. Beauty salons was a common answer. According to the participants, beauty culture courses are easily accessible, and could be completed at a relatively low cost. In addition, well-established salons offered numerous internship and trainee opportunities for amateur beauticians, in order to learn the tricks of the trade prior to starting their own salon. Furthermore, the participants disclosed that their innate love for

working with cosmetics and beauty products was another motivating factor to select the beauty salon sector.

A: I could complete my beauty salon course with a discount at a reputed institution. They allowed me to pay my fees in instalments; it was very helpful."

Moreover, the study found that many of the participants were supported by their husbands, parents, siblings and friends, to find the capital to start their businesses. Some husbands even sold their assets to provide finances to set up the business.

C: My husband sold a small rubber land inherited to him to set up my business".

In summation, the study revealed that the main barriers the participants faced when initiating the business, were societal constraints towards a woman founding a beauty salon, financial difficulties, initial dislike of husband and in-laws of the idea of a business, unawareness of the process of setting up a business, difficulties in obtaining a loan and lack of self-confidence. Nevertheless, once the women realised the benefits of such an economic activity, they became determined to initiate the business, and many husbands and families supported the women to set up their business. Further, it was evident that the beauty salon industry provides ample opportunity as it is an industry where many courses, diplomas and training programmes are easily accessible, in order for any novice to learn the ropes of the industry, and eventually set up a business.

Multiple Roles of Women

Though participants play different roles in their lives, the main roles they have identified are the roles of wife, mother and businesswoman. Initially, when starting the business, most women have thought that being a businesswoman will provide them with the freedom to play the role of mother comparatively better than working under someone else. In the role of a mother and wife, they act as the caretakers of children and husband. Their main goal in life is the wellbeing of the family.

A: As a wife, mother and a businesswoman, I support my family's needs and contribute to the betterment of my family."

For them, the most significant asset is their children. Many participants believe that their central role in life is to play the role of a mother; their responses do not highlight their role as a wife, daughter, sister or a daughter-in-law. According to them, the role of a mother requires much dedication. The study revealed that a few of the participants who had established salons early in their lives, married and had children while also developing their business. The participants claimed that they try to allocate ample time for their children, hence, wake up early and sleep late in order to complete other tasks. One participant who manages the home by herself keeps her children at the salon after school, and makes sure the children eat, complete their school homework and spend time with her, while she continues to work.

K: After school, the two kids come to the salon. I keep them there. They do homework in the salon."

The participants have identified a beauty salon as a profitable business which will support them to earn a decent income and balance their family and life as a woman. The majority of them are satisfied with their business. They love the fact that they make other women beautiful through their business.

F: It is my pleasure to make someone beautiful."

The participants emphasised that they are responsible citizens of the country. The reasons were the fact that they contribute to the economy of the country, they take care of their families well, and they are good examples to society.

I: I am a useful person to this country; I earn money and take care of my family. I think I act as a very responsible person in the society."

Further, the study revealed that the majority of the participants have support in playing her dual role, as a caregiver and an entrepreneur. The support is extended from the husbands, mothers, mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. The understanding husbands who support them in domestic tasks and childcare are considered as a blessing to them.

B: The support of my husband is a blessing."

Moreover, it is interesting to see that older women extend help to participants in household activities and in raising children. The participants believe that the support extended from their families is the main reason for

the success of their business. The fact that there is somebody responsible to take care of the children when they are away gives them the freedom and mental strength to focus more on their business activities.

E: I have a very good husband and a mother-in-law. I have two children. My mother-in-law does all the cooking and prepare children for school. Actually, I don't have to think anything about the home front. I think I am very lucky there. And that support is the main reason for my success."

However, participants encounter specific challenges as entrepreneurial women. One of the main challenges all the participants agreed on, is the difficulty in balancing work and life. They revealed that they do not have sufficient time to spend with their children. This issue arises, especially due to the fact that these women have to be away from home, when they oversee the work at the salon, in addition to being engaged in time consuming shifts, such as, bridal dressings which sometimes take the full day. Thus, inevitably leaving less quality time with their children. Furthermore, the participants have identified multi-tasking as a strength of women in general, and specifically a strength they harbour too, however, at the same time, they believe that multi-tasking is a challenge, as it consumes their energy, time and mental strength. They think their different roles as a mother, wife and a businesswoman led to exhaustion. According to them, their life is all about switching from one role to another and accomplishing tasks pertaining to that role. They do not have time for themselves at all. They do not get enough time to sleep or a time to eat peacefully or to have time for their personal pleasures. This makes them worried and unhappy at times. This is despite the support they receive from husbands or elderly females in their families.

G: My life is all about work, switching from one to another. I wonder sometimes when I will ever relax."

Subsequently, the study found a few participants who do not have any support from their husbands, family or any external party. Their life is more challenging as they have to do everything by themselves. Though they are very tired of how life treats them, they are still dedicated and do all the hard work because they love their children.

K: I have no one to help me like that. Because my kids are little big now, I can manage everything. But I need to sacrifice my sleep a lot. I get up very early in the morning and finish all cooking and domestic work. Then only I go to the salon. In the night we mainly eat from outside. After school my two kids come to the salon. I keep them there. They do homework in the salon."

Another challenge they face is the double burden of having to fulfil all household duties while looking after the business. When home and family demand them to fulfil domestic duties, they lack time to focus on business operations, to the extent that they may have to cancel client appointments or neglect work. This can negatively affect their business.

Therefore, the study displayed that the participants mainly play the roles of a mother, housewife, a businesswoman and a responsible citizen of the society. They perceive themselves as strong, independent women who serve their families and society through a dignified business. One of the main challenges participants face, is managing time between the different roles they play as a mother, wife and a businesswoman. The support they receive from family help them to manage the time and priorities the important tasks in a day. It is therefore apparent, that the choice they made to become an entrepreneur while playing other roles is not easy. There are many role conflicts which lead to challenges such as work and family life balance, exhaustion of playing multiple roles and double burden.

Changing the Status of a Woman Entrepreneur

The choice of the participants to become an entrepreneur has influenced them in many ways. They are very proud of their decision to become a businesswoman. The participants concede that their present entrepreneurial status has improved their lives economically and socially. However, their thoughts about their husbands and men in general vary. Some women think that their husbands are supportive. However, contradictorily, the women think they are too busy and tired of their lives, despite supportive husbands. All the participants think that they have gained a new status, a position and dignity in the family and society because they are entrepreneurs. Further, their views are considered very important in family decision making, and they make many decisions about family and kids. According to them the decisions about the education of children are taken by them.

G: Even my mother-in-law or anyone in the family cannot point me for anything, because I am doing better. And I think that is because of the business. I have got this position because of my business."

The business provides a reasonable and adequate income, making the women, economically independent. They have compared their earnings with others and are satisfied with their decision to start a business of their own. The entrepreneurial status has given the participants a purpose for life and the ability to meet many goals. Most of the participants believe that they can expand their business, and they can be more successful. Hence, they believe that they need to improve themselves continuously. In order to ensure continuous professional development, all of them attend workshops and training programmes to improve and update their beauty culture skills. Some of them possess postgraduate qualifications, in order to develop their managerial skills as business owners. All the participants use digital platforms, such as YouTube to keep updated on the latest trends in beauty culture, on a daily basis. They believe that learning and education can make them successful.

F: I think we actually try to learn about the profession at the same time we work. We go to one day, two days workshops to learn new things. Because this industry has new trends all the time."

The participants believe that they are contributing to the economy in the country by generating an income and subsequently, providing employment opportunities and paying tax. The study revealed that three participants, are the primary income providers of their families. The income of the business covers domestic expenses, and expenses pertaining to their children, including their education, and investments for the betterment of the family. On the hand, the study found that a few participants, are equal contributors to their family income, while another group of participants are secondary income providers of the family. The participants use the money they earn from the business, mainly on family affairs, and they are very proud of it. Therefore, via their independently generated income, it is evident that the participants strive to improve the living condition of their families, provide education to their children, save for the future and also, make lucrative investments.

J: I am a very satisfied businesswoman who contributes largely to my home, family and children activities through my income."

The women believe in themselves, and they have a positive attitude about their capabilities. They believe that they are stronger due to the business. According to them, the business has improved their capacity as individuals. They believe that they are strong enough to take care of the family and children, even without the support of their husbands. The women think that they have the capability of multi-tasking and capable of handling tasks on an equal footing to a man. They participants claim that men are able to only handle one task at a time, but that females have the ability to successfully manage many activities, simultaneously. Thereby, leading the participants to believe that they are sometimes more capable and therefore, ahead of their husbands. Further, they believe that women are mentally stronger and can do anything if determined and focused.

F: When it comes to the males, they can do only one thing. But if you take me, I do all the work at home, I do my business, and I study for a postgraduate diploma as well."

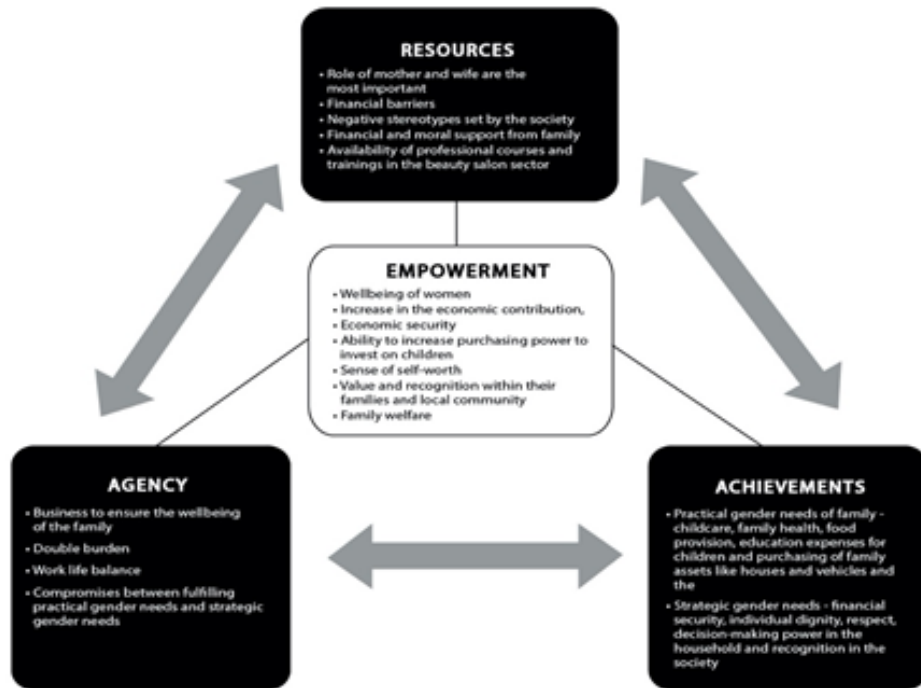
Thus, it can be assumed that the participants have achieved status, economic independence, decision-making power, and self-esteem, which leads to social and economic empowerment because of the choice they made to be a businesswoman.

Discussion

The following research questions: i) What are the challenges of women entrepreneurship? and ii) How do entrepreneurial activities empower women? were answered using the data collected through the focus group discussions organised for women entrepreneurs in the beauty salon sector. The analysis provides insights into how the self-perception and socio-cultural factors influence women when starting a business and how a business empowers them and their families.

Figure 2 presents the key findings of the current study through the lens of the empowerment framework of Kabeer. It shows the critical role of resources in defining the agency of women and their ability to make those critical choices that can lead to the fulfilment of practical and strategic gender needs.

Figure 2: Findings of the current study



Source: Authors

Resources

The women play different roles mainly as a mother, wife and a businesswoman. Their self-perception is that the role they play as a mother and a wife is vital to them. They have decided to play the role of a businesswoman facing all the societal and cultural barriers. The financial limitations and the negative stereotypes of being a woman entrepreneur and a beauty salon owner were the main institutional and structural barriers the women faced. However, later on, the immediate families extended support, financially and morally, at the point of establishing the business. The beauty salon industry provided opportunities for business through the availability of professional courses and training programmes. Further, the results indicated that even self-perception about their capabilities to start a business was negative. In addition, the participants described the struggles of facing negative feedback and restrictions imposed by society and culture towards a woman founding a business, especially in the beauty industry, to the extent

that even the immediate family shared the same adverse sentiments (Kailasapathy & Metz, 2012). Moreover, when the participants were determined to start the business, subsequent to gaining the support of their families, they lacked the required business knowledge to set up the business. Furthermore, they did not have the necessary finances to cover the initial costs. However, at the point of conceptualising a plan to earn an income to provide for the family via a business enterprise, the beauty salon industry was a great opportunity due to the availability of courses and training programmes at an affordable price. Subsequently, the participants pursued qualifications, and training programmes, and founded their own beauty salon businesses. Fortunately, many of their families supported them financially, so that the participants were able to realise their objective of establishing a business.

Agency

Kabeer (2001) defines women's agency as a process of decision making and negotiation to fulfil strategic life goals. The women have executed their agency by deciding to start a business, especially targeting the wellbeing of their families. The fact that they are a secondary income provider or a main income provider on par with the males at home, has not taken away their household or nurturing duties. The women in the study, have mainly chosen to assume the role of businesswoman to fulfil the duties of the role of a mother and wife. The women prioritise their gender ascribed role of reproductive work where they accept their childbearing and rearing responsibilities (Kabeer 1999). The women in the study are very cautious of the time they must allocate for their children, to the extent that some entrepreneurs restrict the working hours of the salon, sacrificing extra profits and customers, for the wellbeing of their children. Further, they sacrifice their sleep, leisure and personal time, to fulfil all household duties once they are home from work. The main challenges the women face are work and family life balance, double burden (Adikaram, 2018) and compromises they have to make when fulfilling practical gender needs and strategic gender needs. However, when women become significant contributors to the family income, husbands/partners are willing to provide more support in household activities and child care activities (Jayatilleke & Gunawardena, 2016).

Achievements

The women in the study seem to exercise their agency in order to achieve their practical and strategic gender needs (Moser, 1993). The women have decided to start a business in order to fulfil their practical gender needs. These practical gender needs are the gender-ascribed roles such as taking care of the family and economically contributing to the family assigned to women by society (Moser, 1989; Drolet, 2011). One of the main reasons for them to start a business was to create a better living condition for their family. At the same time, their decision to start the business has supported them to fulfil their strategic gender needs such as financial security, individual dignity, respect and decision-making power in the household. Therefore, it can be assumed that entrepreneurship helps women to meet their strategic gender needs. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that extensive engagement in practical gender needs, may deny the opportunity for women to fulfil their strategic gender needs. For instance, similar to the findings in Drolet's (2011) study on women on microcredit programme, some participants in the present study, strive to allocate more time for children than the business, as they are primarily concerned about the wellbeing of their children while they are at work. This negatively impacts the success of their business. Moreover, according to Sen (1999), the economic participation of women is rewarding and also yields greater agency, which has the potential to provide significant influence towards societal change. The results of the study revealed that the beauty salon business had provided these women a defined status in addition to sustaining decision-making power within their families, due to the income they earn, and consequently, earning more respect as businesswomen from society. The respect of the society was reflected by their shared experiences of being invited to occupy authoritative positions in local communities and of instances where they were invited as guests in small-scale events organised by the village temple. However, it must be noted that all these rewards and achievements seem to come at a very high cost of their time, commitment and hard work. The entrepreneurial agency has changed their status within the society in countless ways, the women have been able to improve their own wellbeing, increase their economic contribution, gain economic security, strengthen their ability to increase purchasing power to invest on their children, understand one's self-worth, establish value and recognition within their families and local community, and sustain family welfare.

Empowerment

In line with the ideas of the capability approach of Sen (1999) and Kabeer (2001), which confirms economic activity as a strategy for women empowerment, the participants believe that they are empowered through entrepreneurship. Empowerment is defined via the related dimensions of resources, agency, and achievement, and has subsequently, changed the status of a woman entrepreneur and also improved the lives of their families and society. The decision made by the participants to start a business, how decisions are made when managing their business, how they make decisions on home affairs, how well they execute these decisions are important reflections of how they exercise agency on their potential to achieve valuable outcomes. This study finds that the women entrepreneurs are empowered, as their wellbeing, economic contribution, economic security, the purchasing power to invest on children, sense of self-worth, value and recognition within their families and local community and family welfare, have vastly improved. These findings confirm the views of Kabeer (1999), which claims that involvement in economic activities is related to various measures of women's agency and achievements. The business can be considered as the basis of their empowerment. Their decision to start a business has changed, to some extent, their families' and their own perception on gender roles. Nevertheless, these women are still struggling to fulfil their domestic and business demands. The fact that the women are providing an additional income to the family has not released them from their domestic duties. Yet, entrepreneurship as a means of achieving economic independence and social emancipation can be considered as an agent to empower women (Sen, 1999).

The resources and agency in terms of the capabilities (Sen, 1999) the women possessed in order to start the business, provided them the opportunity and the ability to achieve the wellbeing of their family and of themselves. It becomes evident thus, that the way in which the women in the present study perceive themselves, has changed over the years, and the participants currently see themselves as agents who can transform their own lives and the lives of their entire family through their capabilities. This specific perception is identified and substantiated by Sen (1999), claiming that women increasingly act as agents of change who transform and alter the lives of both women and men.

Conclusion

In the current study, the researchers discuss the challenges of women entrepreneurship through the examples from the growing beauty salon sector, whilst exploring how entrepreneurial activities contribute to the empowerment of women. Women empowerment is defined in this study as a process which enhances the agency of women to meet their practical and strategic needs, while achieving individual dignity and respect on par with men, using the economic independence and status that women receive from entrepreneurship (Sen, 1999). The phenomena of women empowerment is analysed in three folds, resources, agency and achievements (Kabear, 1999). Women entrepreneurship is discussed as a significant notion for women empowerment, and hence the challenges of women entrepreneurs are explored. The study has examined three aspects of women entrepreneurship: barriers and opportunities when setting up a business, multiple roles of women and the changing status of women entrepreneurs.

The results of the study confirm that the participants perceived themselves mainly as mothers, homemakers and businesswomen (Moser, 1989). The women entrepreneurs seem to consider themselves as a valuable asset, and therefore are particularly proud of the contribution they make towards their families and the society. However, they are mindful of the challenges they face as women entrepreneurs, such as double burden, work-family life balance and compromises between fulfilling practical gender needs and strategic gender needs. Further, the views of the participants reveal that their need to raise their children in a responsible manner, is stronger than their passion for being an entrepreneur with economic and social independence.

The findings, therefore, specifies how the selected women entrepreneurs would compromise and sacrifice their strategic gender needs in order to fulfil their practical gender needs. Even in terms of agency, the life choices the women make are to ensure the wellbeing of their family, which consequently takes them back to square one. This becomes evident in one of the main contradictory views of the women entrepreneurs, which describes the participant's fear of negligence of duties as a mother and wife, due to their engagement in the business, which emphasises the conflict between their traditional and modern role as women. One of the main contributions of the study, thus, is that too much engagement in the practical

gender needs take away the opportunity of women to fulfil their strategic gender needs.

According to the analysis, many women in the study are able to make life choices and are supported by their husbands and extended family members to implement the decisions they make. Their ability to make decisions by themselves can be due to their self-perception, individual power and the environment or context where women are empowered to fulfil their needs. The women in the study have achieved an ameliorative status in the family and society while gaining decision-making power in the family due to the success of their business. The newfound respect for these women, is mainly due to their economic independence. Thus, it can be stated that entrepreneurship has changed their status. As per the findings of the study, the agency of women can be defined as the power they have gained from the economic independence as a result of becoming an entrepreneur which provides expansive freedom of choice, in order too live the life they value the most. According to the analysis of the study, the participants value the wellbeing of herself and her family, higher than any other factor discussed in the present research. Thus, Sen's (1999) thoughts on freedom and its intersections with gender and economy, become relevant here-the freedom provided for a woman to be a part of an economic activity fosters the freedom of all.

In conclusion, this study encompassed a focus group discussion comprising of a small group of twelve women entrepreneurs. The study was an effort to understand women who are entrepreneurs, the challenges they face and the impact of entrepreneurship towards empowerment. This study sets the foundation for future researchers to explore how women entrepreneurs can use information communication and technology (ICT) in their efforts to manage various demands within the multiple roles they play. It would also be of interest to conduct similar research in different industries and countries to ascertain if the challenges differ for women entrepreneurs across industries and destinations, and also to investigate the empowerment potential of entrepreneurship in these different contexts.

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