The perceived future of female entrepreneurs in South Africa

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A B S T R A C T

The study under discussion aims to map the outlook for female business owners in South Africa by investigating nine stories shared by interviewees operating across industries, age groups, and holding different levels of education. Through a qualitative exploration grounded in the intersectionality theory, the research unveils a nuanced tapestry of challenges and opportunities shaping the experiences of these resilient entrepreneurs. The findings echo the transformative potential inherent in women-led businesses, vividly portraying them as dynamic agents fostering growth, attracting investments, and contributing positively to economic expansion, poverty alleviation, and community development. The narrative portrays the leading women-run businesses as agents of change, instigating economic growth, attracting investments, and contributing positively to the realisation of social justice, poverty eradication, and improved livelihoods. The theme of patriarchy surfaces as a challenge in the entrepreneurial field, but with more pronounced adverse structures in opposition to free-playing entrepreneurship. The study that has exhausted all the topics ends with an emphasis on targeted interventions, acknowledging the obstacle of domestic constraints, improving cooperation, and dismantling patriarchal power structures. Its principles are establishing a supportive environment that considers the distinctive factors of women's entrepreneurship, resulting in economic empowerment and sometimes overall social development. Due to its active contribution to women's direction in business and in implementing pertinent targeted interventions, South Africa can fully employ women's potential, which can lead to economic growth and be socially beneficial. The study also suggests that future inquiries to clear the sight about different actors within the entrepreneurship ecosystem and eventually form a comprehensive outlook of all factors that underline the complex business generation process.

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Introduction

The Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs (MIWE) revealed Africa as a leader globally in its 2021 score for female entrepreneurs. The MIWE report indicates women’s economic impact on the continent. It noted that empowering women’s entrepreneurship will fuel a global recovery that is more equitable and sustainable for everyone (Imokhai-Bello, 2023). South Africa has one of the highest percentages of female entrepreneurs according to the Veuve Clicquot 2020 Barometer, which measured 17 countries (CEO, 2021). South Africa is one of only 12 economies where women’s entrepreneurial activity rates increased, with 11.1% of working-age women engaged in early-stage entrepreneurial activities (Burger, 2022).

However, while South Africa moved up one place from 2020 to rank thirty-seventh in 2021, with a score of 54.9, women’s advancement remains hampered by less supportive entrepreneurial conditions compared with other global economies such as the US, which ranked first, with a score of 69.9; New Zealand, ranked second, with a score of 69.8; and Canada in third, with a score of 68.6 (Bureger, 2022).

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Entrepreneurship has been recognised as an important factor in economic development through job creation, social development, and economic growth (Radebe & Smith, 2023). Improving the economy will require the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Umar, Kadir, Reni, Thaba & Setiawan, 2023).

Current and future female entrepreneurs face a complex web of barriers and restrictions in their attempts to engage in entrepreneurial activities. All these issues require attention if South Africa is to realise women’s potential and reap the economic and social benefits of women’s inclusion (Radebe & Smith, 2023). The primary aim of the paper is centred on exploring the perceived future of female entrepreneurs in South Africa.

Literature Review

This study focuses on the environment of women’s entrepreneurship in a South African context. According to the 2019/2020 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report, the level of entrepreneurial intention in South Africa is 11.9%, lower than that of other African countries measured (Bowmaker-Falconer & Herrington, 2020). In addition, female entrepreneurship is on the rise, according to the Mastercard (2020) Index, which analyses female entrepreneurs’ ability to take advantage of opportunities granted through supporting conditions within their local environments. According to Statistics South Africa (2021), the South African population comprises approximately 60.14 million people, 51.1% of whom are women. Because South African women constitute 52% of the country’s population, South African women continue to suffer historical challenges that prohibit them from operating their businesses successfully. Women feed their communities and create essential agriculture and food-related economic activity, so their importance in the country’s food economy cannot be discounted (Statistics South Africa 2019). The World Bank also reports that women are critical for job creation. Women entrepreneurs are key to the country’s socio-economic recovery (Smit, 2021).

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship identifies and exploits potential opportunities and uses existing or new resources to create value (Elia, Margherita & Passiante, 2020). Entrepreneurship is a phenomenon that contributes to the economy in terms of growth, job generation, and increasing people’s quality of life (Aladejebi, 2020). An entrepreneur is an individual who takes considerable initiative and risk to design, launch, and operate a new enterprise by identifying an opportunity and gathering resources to execute it (Baig, Hussain, Meidute-Kavaliauskiene & Davidavicius, 2022). An entrepreneur is an individual who establishes and manages a business for profit and growth (Nieuwenhuizen, 2019). Entrepreneurship has been presented as obligatory for job creation and poverty alleviation in the country (Bowmaker-Falconer & Herrington, 2020). In addition, female entrepreneurship is on the rise, according to the Mastercard (2020) Index, which analyses female entrepreneurs’ ability to take advantage of opportunities granted through supporting conditions within their local environments. According to Statistics South Africa (2021), the South African population comprises approximately 60.14 million people, 51.1% of whom are women. Because South African women constitute 52% of the country’s population, South African women continue to suffer historical challenges that prohibit them from operating their businesses successfully. Women feed their communities and create essential agriculture and food-related economic activity, so their importance in the country’s food economy cannot be discounted (Statistics South Africa 2019). The World Bank also reports that women are critical for job creation. Women entrepreneurs are key to the country’s socio-economic recovery (Smit, 2021).

Female entrepreneurship

Female entrepreneurship is defined as “owning a business which makes women economically independent” (Alsaad, Hamdan, Binsaddig & Kanan, 2023). Schumpeter (2020) stated, “Women who are innovative, initiative or adopt a business activity are women entrepreneurs.” Female entrepreneurship refers to the leadership of one or more women in initiating ventures that identify problems and create solutions to them (Derera et al., 2020; Jaiyeola & Adeyeye, 2021). Women entrepreneurship is when a woman has a business idea, gathers resources and creates an enterprise by providing leadership to make it a commercial success (Kirani, 2021). Female entrepreneurship is when females start entrepreneurial ventures and become business owners (Olarewaju & Fernando, 2020). Through entrepreneurship, women can explore and maximise new boundaries, generate jobs, and financially empower others (Rahibah & Fahlevi, 2019). Females entrepreneurship increases social innovation and mobility (Aparicio, Audretsch, Noguera & Urbano, 2022). Okeke-Uzodike (2019) avers that females have been driven into entrepreneurship to support their family incomes and create opportunities for career success (Cho, Park, Han, Sung & Park, 2020). Female entrepreneurs often pursue business opportunities to satisfy major social needs (Solesvik, Iakovleva & Trifilova, 2019) and reduce poverty (Trivedi & Petrakova, 2021). Although entrepreneurial activity has good consequences on the individual or group level, women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to household income and society’s economic and social well-being (Sajjad, Kaleem, Chani & Ahmed, 2020). Stefan, Vasile, Oltean and Comes study (2021) implies that women’s participation in business positively impacts a country’s national economy since it contributes to the growth of innovation and sustainable businesses, increasing GDP value creation. Mukorera (2020) female entrepreneurship has been presented as obligatory for job creation and poverty alleviation in the country.

Female entrepreneurship in the 4.0 and 5.0 Industrial Revolution

The introduction of industries 4.0 and 5.0 and the exponential expansion of digital technologies spawn a new wave of abilities and skills (Benhayoun & Lang, 2021). Using digital technologies, entrepreneurs increasingly deploy entrepreneurial actions beyond traditional practice, such as ecosystems, networks, and communities (Kraus, Palmer, Kailer, Kallinger & Spitzer, 2019). Due to 4IR, the rapid advancements in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) spaces are suggested by Thaba-Nkadimene (2020) as a suitable basis for furthering the overall entrepreneurship levels in an economy. Abdullahi, Jabor and Akor (2020), Bowmaker-Falconer and Meyer (2022) and GEM (2022), there are abundant entrepreneurial opportunities arising from ICT advancements.
Research and Methodology

The study used an interpretative, phenomenological approach to comprehend the perceived future of female entrepreneurs in South Africa. A qualitative research approach was used to explore the perceived future of female entrepreneurs in South Africa. This approach aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the subject within its specific context without making broad generalisations. An exploratory research design was used because little research has been conducted in South Africa on the future of female entrepreneurs. Semi-structured interviews were the main method for gathering information. The study also adopted an interpretative perspective, which helps researchers understand the complexities of the phenomenon under investigation. This approach aligns with phenomenology, which delves into people's personal experiences with the subject (Lindseth & Norberg, 2022). The study's research philosophy is rooted in the belief that there could be a future for entrepreneurship for females in South Africa. From an ontological standpoint, the research considers reality to be subjective and socially constructed, emphasising the perceptions and experiences of entrepreneurship (Jantjies, 2022). Additionally, from an epistemological perspective (Gardiner, Fox-Kirk & Javaid, 2023), the study acknowledges that knowledge is context-dependent and seeks to investigate the meaning and understanding of female entrepreneurship from the participants' viewpoint through direct interaction and involvement. This approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives on the future of female entrepreneurs in South Africa. Lastly, axiology provided a philosophical foundation to explore the future of female entrepreneurship (Pulungan, Salminawati, Sulastri & Nasution, 2023).

Participants and Data Collection

The study's target population was 30 females at the Centre of Entrepreneurship at the Tshwane University of Technology. All these females were invited, and nine volunteered to participate in the study. The research instrument used in this qualitative study was a semi-structured interview. Data were collected by using an interview guide that included six open-ended questions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain the interviewee's views.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study involved thematic analysis. The process included several steps, as Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) outlined. The first step was to read all the data collected, providing a general sense of the information and an opportunity to reflect on its overall meaning. The second step involved coding all the data by organising it into categories. The third step entailed generating descriptions and themes from the coded data. Themes appeared as major findings and were often used as headings in the findings section. The fourth step was to present the description and themes in a narrative passage, which conveyed the findings of the analysis (Fathi, Hagh Kashani, Jameii & Mahdipour, 2022). The researchers used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti version 23, to analyse the data. This software enhanced the research quality by providing a platform for organising and analysing the collected data. Using thematic analysis and ATLAS.ti allowed a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and viewpoints.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

Kumar (2011) proposes that trustworthiness is composed of the following four constructs: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability, to reflect validity and reliability in qualitative research. The credibility of the findings was established by reviewing the data from different perspectives and having an independent coder critique the analysis findings (Kumar, 2011). Transferability was addressed by providing a comprehensive description of the study setting, enabling readers to determine if the results could be applied to their contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2022). Dependability was ensured by thoroughly documenting participant responses and methodology to enable replication (Flake, Davidson, Wong & Pek, 2022). Confirmability was addressed by including examples of the coding process and a comprehensive data collection and analysis discussion to ensure that the findings were derived from participants' experiences rather than the researcher's qualities or preferences (Tabudlo, Joven & Joven, 2022).

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical principles by obtaining clearance and permission from the faculty of management sciences research ethics committee at Tshwane University of Technology. The participants were informed about the study and provided consent forms to ensure their voluntary participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained in data collection and reporting, and measures were taken to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. The study did not harm the participants. In this study, issues about trustworthiness and credibility were addressed through the use of multiple avenues in the data collection process: the interview guide was emailed to participants for completion, follow-up emails were sent for clarification, and the interview notes or recordings were emailed back to the participants for rectification and further comments.

Findings and Discussions

Participant's profile

Below is a summary of the biographical information of the participants.
Table 1: Participant’s profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant number</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of entrepreneurial experience</th>
<th>Highest qualification</th>
<th>Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Laboratory Chemicals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Business consultancy/ Training &amp; Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>B-tech</td>
<td>Broilers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Business Consultancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>National Diploma</td>
<td>Agro-processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>National Diploma</td>
<td>Livestock Production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Master’s in business leadership</td>
<td>Property, Training &amp; Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Agriculture</td>
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<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Matric</td>
<td>Agriculture</td>
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</tbody>
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Identified Themes

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Intersectionality Theory recognises that individuals have multiple intersecting social identities, such as race, gender, class, and age, which shape their experiences and opportunities (Al-Faham et al., 2019). When it comes to female entrepreneurship in South Africa and this study, deeper analysis can be gleaned from the sample’s intersectional encounters: investigating how the intersection of gender and other social categories (such as race or class) influences female entrepreneurs’ perceptions of their future. Intersectionality and access to networks and resources examine how intersectionality affects access to networks, funding, and other resources. It is important to consider whether certain intersectional identities offer benefits or drawbacks regarding resource mobilisation and business opportunities. Below is a diagrammatic overview of the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts.

![Perceived future of Female Entrepreneurs in SA](image-url)
Theme 1: Vital role played by women

When asked about their views on the future of female entrepreneurs, the participants overwhelmingly agreed that there are opportunities for growth for female entrepreneurs, emphasising the strengths that these entrepreneurs bring to the table. This largely aligns with Ojong, Simba and Dana (2021), who affirm that female entrepreneurs are increasingly recognised as critical for economic growth. This is similar to Ogundana, Simba and Dana (2021), who highlight that female entrepreneurs need intentional access to opportunities to grow their businesses. In addition, the ongoing global crises (i.e., climate change and COVID-19) emphasise the necessity to involve women in entrepreneurship to achieve the country's economic development goals (Pastran, Colli & Poclaba, 2021). Women entrepreneurs are increasingly recognised as the latest engines for inclusive and sustainable industrial development and the rising stars of country economies (Thaddeus, Bih, Nebong, Ngong, Mongo, Akume & Onwumere, 2022).

Below are some of the insights from the participants:

Participant 7 (54-year-old entrepreneur with 5 years experience in business):

“Women, both in corporate and as business owners, have the ability to spread their wings, empower others, and teach others to do things themselves.”

Participant 4 (39-year-old with 11 years of experience in business):

“Entrepreneurship enables the development and implementation of programmes that support the poor and vulnerable to establish their own income-generating activities, with a specific focus on young people and women. It also relieves the pressure from the government on social assistance from the state as the income is not sustainable.”

This participant highlights that entrepreneurship for females in South Africa is well positioned to alleviate poverty and thereby spread the returns from their entrepreneurial ventures into the communities. This will likely aid in the government’s NDP (2030) goals of reducing poverty and creating employment through entrepreneurship. Participant 7, a 54-year-old entrepreneur with 5 years of business experience, emphasised women's empowering and teaching potential in corporate and entrepreneurial settings. They highlighted how women can spread their wings, inspire others, and encourage self-sufficiency. This perspective recognises the role of women as mentors and role models, helping others develop their skills and capabilities.

Participant 4, a 39-year-old entrepreneur with 11 years of business experience, highlighted the transformative potential of entrepreneurship in supporting the poor and vulnerable, particularly young people and women. They emphasised that entrepreneurship offers the opportunity to establish income-generating activities that provide sustainable livelihoods. By doing so, entrepreneurship can alleviate the pressure on the government's social assistance programs, as individuals can rely on their own income rather than relying solely on state support. This perspective underscores the importance of entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic independence and social upliftment.

Both Participant 7 and Participant 4 emphasise the potential for women in business to have a broader impact beyond their ventures. They recognise the capacity of women entrepreneurs to empower others, foster self-reliance, and contribute to poverty reduction. These viewpoints align with the notion that women entrepreneurs can create a ripple effect of positive change through their businesses and by imparting knowledge, skills, and opportunities to others. These findings highlight the transformative potential of women entrepreneurs in South Africa. By leveraging their skills, experiences, and resources, women in business can play a vital role in empowering and teaching others, fostering self-sufficiency, and reducing dependency on social assistance. Recognising and supporting the contributions of women entrepreneurs can have far-reaching benefits for individuals, communities, and society as a whole.

Theme 2: Women comparable to men

Participants 1 and 7 emphasised the comparability and equity of female entrepreneurs with their male counterparts, stating they can do just as well as their male colleagues. This is confirmed by Bosma, Hill, Ionescu-Somers, Kelley, Levie and Tarnawa (2020) that there are changes in attitudes toward entrepreneurship and more women becoming entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the fighting spirit [entrepreneurial resilience] was cited as a driving force for women to successfully operate in a man’s world, should they be allowed to do so. Opportunity and gender balance increase women's assets and earnings and the supply of female labour (Bandiera, Burgess, Das, Gulesci, Rasul & Sulaiman, 2017); moreover, more than half of South Africa's population is female. This is important for female entrepreneur development practitioners and policymakers to understand the need to create opportunities for the inclusion of women in traditionally male-dominated sectors. This is like the contribution by Participant 9, who emphasises the need to be self-reliant to improve your livelihood. Outside influences, like programs, policies, and practices, should be designed to encourage women’s entrepreneurship (Bullough, Hechavarria, Brush & Edelman, 2019; Frešer, Širec & Tominc, 2019).

Participant 7 (54-year-old entrepreneur with 5 year’s experience in business):
“Whilst sometimes women are marginalised, their fighting spirit makes them fit to operate and compete in a “man’s world.” Therefore, it is my firm belief that when women have an opportunity and authority to make a decision, they will take it for the betterment of society.”

Participant 1 (50-year-old entrepreneur with 5 years’ experience in business):

“I think that the future of the women entrepreneur is the same as that of the male entrepreneur. I am not sure why there is a distinction. Whether male or female is irrelevant; I don’t believe I should have special treatment as a women entrepreneur. My contribution to society should be viewed the same as a male”

Participant 7, a 54-year-old entrepreneur with 5 years of business experience, acknowledged that women are sometimes marginalized but highlighted their fighting spirit and ability to operate and compete in a “man’s world.” They firmly believed that when women are given opportunities and authority to make decisions, they will use them for the betterment of society. This perspective underscores the resilience and determination of women entrepreneurs and their potential to contribute positively to their communities and society. Moreover, the government is encouraging and motivating women to be part of the economic cycle in addition to their role of raising and growing the future generation and taking care of the household (Hamdan, Hamdan, Alareemi, Atayah & Alhalwachi, 2022).

Participant 1, a 50-year-old entrepreneur with 5 years of business experience, believed that the future of women entrepreneurs is no different from that of male entrepreneurs. They questioned the need for a distinction based on gender, emphasising that gender should not determine the relevance of one’s contributions to society. They did not advocate for special treatment but for equal recognition and evaluation of their contributions. This viewpoint highlights the desire for gender equality and equal opportunities for women entrepreneurs, where their accomplishments and impact are evaluated on an equal footing with their male counterparts. Both Participant 7 and Participant 1 highlight the importance of recognising the capabilities and potential of women entrepreneurs without limiting them or subjecting them to gender-based biases. Participant 7 emphasises the transformative power of women entrepreneurs when given opportunities and decision-making authority. Participant 1 challenges the notion of special treatment and advocates for equal recognition and evaluation based on merit, regardless of gender. Notably, entrepreneurship is a tool for “social turn” Alkhaleed & Berglund (2018), which supports the creation of more equal and inclusive societies (Haugh & Talwar, 2016).

These findings emphasise the need for a gender-inclusive approach that acknowledges and supports the abilities and contributions of female entrepreneurs. By providing equal opportunities and removing gender-based biases and barriers, society can tap into the full potential of women entrepreneurs, resulting in their significant contributions to economic growth, social development, and the betterment of society.

**Theme 3: Self-Reliance**

Participant 9, a 62-year-old entrepreneur with 13 years of business experience, expressed that as an entrepreneur, one prefers to rely on oneself rather than others for their livelihood. This viewpoint highlights the self-reliant nature of entrepreneurship and individuals’ motivation to improve their lives through their efforts. It underscores the entrepreneurial mindset of taking initiative and responsibility for success and well-being. Successful entrepreneurs increase self-governing, control one’s future, be their boss, own revenue, and capital gains (Li, Luo, Anwar, Lu, Wang & Liu, 2020). Entrepreneurs’ specific dispositions to pursue their goals include motivation to achieve goals, creativity, and higher levels of self-efficacy (Kusumawijaya & Astuti, 2021; Sarwoko & Nurfarida, 2021). Due to their superior ability to resilience, women entrepreneurs desire independence, autonomy in decision-making, a sense of self-achievement, and a desire to be creative, have power and make handsome earnings (Troise & Tani, 2020). Furthermore, women entrepreneurs’ multiple roles and identities draw them on entrepreneurial agility and resilience to address the challenges of cultural groups, women- hood or motherhood (Ayatakshi-Endow & Steele, 2021).

Participant 1 (50-year-old entrepreneur with 5 year’s experience in business):

“As an entrepreneur, you always like to rely on yourself, not others, for your livelihood, so people are working to improve their lives.”

The statement suggests that individuals who choose entrepreneurship are driven by a desire for autonomy and the ability to shape their destiny. By relying on their skills, resources, and efforts, they aim to create opportunities and improve their quality of life. In support of this stance, female entrepreneurs often have higher levels of autonomy like feelings of freedom and independence (Shir & Ryff, 2021). This perspective aligns with the idea that entrepreneurship offers individuals a pathway to economic independence, self-determination, and personal growth. Independence allows female entrepreneurs to have free time and, therefore, be able to perform their family responsibilities more flexibly (Godany & Mura, 2021). Participant 9’s viewpoint underscores the resilience and self-motivation that entrepreneurs possess. They highlight the proactive nature of entrepreneurs, who actively work towards improving their lives and creating opportunities rather than relying solely on external factors or assistance.

Overall, this finding emphasises the intrinsic motivation and self-reliance that drive entrepreneurs, including women entrepreneurs, to take control of their livelihoods and work towards personal and economic advancement. It underscores the significance of fostering an environment that supports entrepreneurship, providing individuals with the tools and resources they need to succeed on their entrepreneurial journeys.
**Theme 4: Women as growth catalysts:**

These findings underscore the potential benefits of supporting and empowering women entrepreneurs in South Africa. They indicate a growing awareness of women's valuable contributions to business and society. By implementing measures to address barriers, provide resources, and promote inclusivity, it is possible to harness the full potential of women entrepreneurs, contributing to the overall economic growth and development of South Africa. Given its potential to empower women in business and development, female entrepreneurship is a strategic priority and a catalyst for change (Naguih, 2022). Females value entrepreneurship as a way to find better incomes for their families and impact their communities and economies Simba & Niziku, (2022) and an effective way to help them gain financial independence through finding work (Kruga & Berberi, 2020; Kruga & Berisha, 2021). In addition, African women are natural entrepreneurs and are often also the caregivers and educators of their children (Anyansi-Archibong, 2021). Findings from Participant 4 and Participant 3 shed light on the significance of women in South African business and the potential for economic growth through their empowerment and support. Boosting entrepreneurial activities and enhancing the economic positioning of women entrepreneurs in developing economies through a more appropriate recognition of tools that empower them can advance their access to entrepreneurial opportunities (Ajjan, Stephanie, Mostafa & Crittenden, 2014; Barrachina Fernández, García-Centeno & Calderón Patier, 2021; Martínez-Rodríguez, Quintana-Rojo, Gento & Callejas-Albinana, 2022).

Participant 4, a 39-year-old with 11 years of business experience, believed that women play a critical role as catalysts for development and growth from a sociological perspective.

Participant 4 (39-year-old with 11 years of business experience):

“Women in South Africa are critical catalysts in development and growth from a sociological perspective.”

This viewpoint highlights the recognition of women's valuable contributions to the South African business landscape. It suggests that empowering and supporting women entrepreneurs can positively impact various aspects of society, such as economic growth, social development, and overall progress. Giving women the opportunity increases their ability to control their income and increases the labour force in general (Anwana & Aroha, 2022; Field, Pande, Rigol, Schaner & Moore, 2021; Isa, Nor & Noor, 2021). Participant 3, a 32-year-old entrepreneur with 2 years of business experience, emphasised the need for greater efforts to support Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) operated by women.

Participant 3 (32-year-old entrepreneur with 2 years business experience):

“South African economic growth will develop very well if more effort is made to support SMMEs operated by women, maintain ways to encourage and improve women in business, and pursue intervention programmes that will attract more women's participation in business.”

They suggested that South Africa's economic growth could be enhanced by actively encouraging and improving women's participation in business and implementing intervention programs. This statement reflects the understanding that targeted support and interventions aimed at women entrepreneurs can lead to increased participation, innovation, and success in the business sector. It highlights the importance of creating an enabling environment that fosters the growth and success of women-owned businesses.

**Theme 5: Attracting investors as growth catalysts:**

The findings from Participant 9, Participant 8, Participant 6, and Participant 2 shed light on the potential impact of women entrepreneurs on economic growth, poverty alleviation, employment generation, and community development in South Africa. Participant 9, a 62-year-old entrepreneur with 13 years of business experience, believed that women entrepreneurs can attract investors to assist in business growth through their efforts. This statement emphasises the potential for women-owned businesses to attract external resources and support, contributing to their expansion and success. Entrepreneurial activity promotes economic growth and is the most relevant growth catalyst in developing countries (Hossain, Islam, Hosen & Mohd. Thas Thaker, 2023; Mouazen & Hernandez-Lara, 2023). Attracting more female investors and establishing funds led by women and invested in businesses founded and owned by women would create more gender equity in funding practices that are particularly fruitful for women entrepreneurs (Frese et al., 2019).

Participant 9 (62-year-old entrepreneur with 13 years of experience in business):

“Through our effort we can attract investors to assist us to grow our business.”

Participant 9 positions women as able to attract investors to benefit their businesses. Participant 3 pointed to the entrepreneur development ecosystem and encouraged more effort to be placed on creating specific interventions for female entrepreneurs; this would contribute to the development of the economy. This is much like the contribution by Participant 4, who positions female entrepreneurs as catalysts for economic growth. In their study, Hechavarria, Bullough, Brush and Edelman (2019) discovered that women entrepreneurs are important for creating new jobs and contributing to their societies’ social and economic growth. Similarly, participant 8 (38-year-old entrepreneur with 5 years of business experience) highlights that.
“As a marginalised group, women-run businesses will be more inclined to empower disadvantaged people when they need assistance and employ others with similar experiences. This will have a chain effect in increasing employment and alleviating poverty.”

This echoes the rest of the participants who stated that women are well positioned to be economic drivers as they multiply the impact by empowering other women. Thereby increasing the impact. In like manner, Participant 7 (54-year-old entrepreneur with 5 years experience in business) posits that female entrepreneurship is pivotal for job creation. This is echoed by Participant 5, a 39-year-old entrepreneur with 3 years of business experience:

Participant 7 (54-year-old entrepreneur with 5 years experience in business):

“Women entrepreneurs are the future of alleviating unemployment and poverty in South Africa, as there seems to be a deliberate focus on promoting women as individuals and entrepreneurs.”

Participant 5, a 39-year-old entrepreneur with 3 years of business experience:

“Entrepreneurship is the only way to decrease unemployment, poverty and other social ills. With entrepreneurship, especially in community, jobs will be created, poverty will be unheard of, and there will be a visible change in communities.”

Participant 8, who acknowledged the marginalised status of women, highlighted the potential for women entrepreneurs to empower other disadvantaged individuals and create a chain effect in increasing employment opportunities and alleviating poverty. This viewpoint recognises the unique perspective of women entrepreneurs in understanding the challenges marginalised groups face and their inclination to support and uplift others in similar circumstances. Moreover, Participant 8 emphasised that women entrepreneurs, being nurturers, are inclined to improve the livelihoods of others. They are more likely to employ individuals, considering their responsibilities outside of work, such as childcare and household management. This perspective highlights the potential for women entrepreneurs to create inclusive and supportive work environments that prioritise the well-being of employees. Women who are entrepreneurs have a constructive influence on national economic progress and employment (Nambari, Sutherland & Scheepers, 2019; Abiodun & Amos, 2018).

Participant 6, a 29-year-old entrepreneur with 2 years of business experience, emphasised the multiplier effect of women's entrepreneurship on families and communities. They stated that women entrepreneurs utilise these resources to benefit their families and communities when provided with skills and opportunities. Additionally, they recognise the importance of passing skills and opportunities to younger generations, thus contributing to sustainable community development.

Participant 2, a 50-year-old entrepreneur with 5 years of business experience, stressed the importance of a network of women entrepreneurs in supporting other women to become entrepreneurs. They highlighted the first-hand insight women entrepreneurs possess regarding the challenges faced by women and the potential impact of increasing the number of women entrepreneurs in South Africa on unemployment and poverty alleviation. In their businesses, women provide many new jobs, reinvest most of their profits in the family, work for it, are more sensitive to the social issues that they face, and can reduce poverty by contributing to economic growth by creating new jobs and increasing the income of poor people (Bardhyl, Kruja & Hysa, 2023). Moreover, entrepreneurship is an important driver behind poverty alleviation and human development (Sutter et al., 2019).

Collectively, these findings suggest that women entrepreneurs in South Africa have the potential to drive positive social and economic change. They can attract investment, empower marginalised groups, create inclusive work environments, generate employment opportunities, and contribute to poverty alleviation. By recognising and supporting women entrepreneurs' unique strengths and perspectives, South Africa can foster an environment that nurtures their success and harnesses their potential for broader societal benefits.

**Theme 6: Lack of collaboration:**

While the contributions highlighted the positive opportunities and role that female entrepreneurs could play in the future of South Africa, Participant 6 (29-year-old with 2 years of business experience) raised concerns about a threat to the future of female entrepreneurs:

“Idequate collaboration between people who seek to grow their businesses and employ more people and professionals who can provide expert advice hinders business growth and decelerates the eradication of poverty. I may know how to run my start-up, but do I have the knowledge to run a business that employs 50 more people?”

This is critical because it contradicts most of the abovementioned contributions, such as women being catalysts, nurturers, community builders, etc. The lack of collaboration endangers the growth of small businesses, as collaboration and relationship building have been identified as critical antecedents for business growth. Collaboration is highlighted as important for the growth of entrepreneurs. Bischof (2021), it is important that entrepreneur development practitioners consider this and encourage it among female entrepreneurs. Furthermore, female entrepreneurs often have a different approach to internationalisation, such as collaboration, which can help break down cultural barriers and open new markets (Machado, Braga, Correia, Braga & Silva, 2023).
Theme 7: Patriarchy

During the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts with a gender lens, the concept of patriarchy emerged as a significant theme. The findings indicate a nuanced and somewhat positive shift in South African society's perception of women. However, suppression and male dominance persist, as highlighted by the women interviewed, who emphasised the oppressive influence of systemic patriarchy.

“It is still a very patriarchal system we work in. It might be difficult for women to even start a business due to being blocked by their partners or, even worse, other women in their families who believe that they have no right to “ignore” their responsibilities of looking after the home when they want to be an entrepreneur”.

Furthermore, patriarchy was identified as being prevalent in some industries, such as construction and agriculture, as well as having a more damaging impact on the future of female entrepreneurs as they are said to be overlooked for funding due to their gender.

“In a situation where women start a business, other groups might overlook them when looking for funding or mentorship in running their business. This is mostly done because males are given preference or “taken more seriously,” particularly in male-driven industries, such as construction and agriculture.

These results underscore the enduring power of patriarchy in society and suggest that women in South Africa may face challenges in collaborative endeavours, possibly due to prevailing male dominance. Additionally, patriarchy was somewhat linked to intimate partner violence and a negative impact on female entrepreneurs through lack of support and sabotage from their partners due to domestic responsibilities. These findings echo previous studies (Mandipaka, 2014a; Mandipaka, 2014b). This also aligns with observations made by Etim and Iwu (2019), who highlight the continued marginalisation of female entrepreneurs across Sub-Saharan Africa. Some men will not allow their wives to start a company for various reasons, such as being accused of prostitution, and as a result, female entrepreneurs find it challenging to engage in commercial activities that need them to travel away from home, such as cross-border trading, as they cannot leave families behind (Derera et al., 2020). Thus, women’s participation in entrepreneurial ventures may need approval from their husbands. Kumar and Singh (2021) patriarchy kept female entrepreneurs bound to traditions, limiting their ability to experiment and sustain their businesses differently. Furthermore, because businesswomen could not decouple their business from the rest of their lives and profits, they left their operations susceptible to toxic interferences.

Conclusions

This study explored the perceived future of female entrepreneurs in South Africa through the lens of female entrepreneurs. The sample was 9 female entrepreneurs from diverse industries, years of experience, age and educational levels. The theoretical underpinning of the study was the intersectionality theory that helped the study to unpack the complex experiences of individuals who face overlapping and intersecting forms of social disadvantage and discrimination, specifically female small business owners in South Africa. This study aligns with the theory in that the participants’ insights highlighted gender-specific challenges and opportunities for the future of female entrepreneurs in South Africa. Furthermore, the findings indicate that there is still a need for gender-specific interventions for developing female entrepreneurs. Such interventions should consider the threats to the development of female entrepreneurs, such as domestic constraints, patriarchy and lack of collaboration among female entrepreneurs. For practitioners developing female entrepreneurs, it would be important to consider the factors highlighted as important for the future of female entrepreneurs. These findings highlight the transformative potential of women entrepreneurs in South Africa. By leveraging their skills, experiences, and resources, women in business can play a vital role in empowering and teaching others, fostering self-sufficiency, and reducing dependency on social assistance. Recognising and supporting the contributions of women entrepreneurs can have far-reaching benefits for individuals, communities, and society.

Moreover, the study findings emphasise the intrinsic motivation and self-reliance that drive entrepreneurs, including women entrepreneurs, to take control of their livelihoods and work towards personal and economic advancement. It underscores the significance of fostering an environment that supports entrepreneurship, providing individuals with the tools and resources they need to succeed on their entrepreneurial journeys. Additionally, the study findings emphasised the need for a gender-inclusive approach that acknowledges and supports the abilities and contributions of female entrepreneurs. By providing equal opportunities and removing gender-based biases and barriers, society can tap into the full potential of women entrepreneurs, resulting in their significant contributions to economic growth, social development, and the betterment of society.

They suggested that South Africa's economic growth could be enhanced by actively encouraging and improving women's participation in business and implementing intervention programs. This statement reflects the understanding that targeted support and interventions aimed at women entrepreneurs can lead to increased participation, innovation, and success in the business sector. It highlights the importance of creating an enabling environment that fosters the growth and success of women-owned businesses. Collectively, these findings suggest that women entrepreneurs in South Africa have the potential to drive positive social and economic change. They can attract investment, empower marginalised groups, create inclusive work environments, generate employment opportunities, and contribute to poverty alleviation. By recognising and supporting women entrepreneurs' unique strengths and perspectives, South Africa can foster an environment that nurtures their success and harnesses their potential for broader societal benefits. Future studies can look at the future of female entrepreneurs in South Africa from the perspective of various players in the
entrepreneurial ecosystem. This will enable a broader perspective from the enablers and developers of entrepreneurs to gain insights on how best to ensure that an inclusive approach from a gender perspective is taken.

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