International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review

Volume: 09, Issue: 02 March - April 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

# INFLUENCE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS' BUSINESSES IN NORTHERN PROVINCE, SRI LANKA

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https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2025.9206

## ABSTRACT

Women entrepreneurs play a critical role in economic development, yet their participation in Sri Lanka's Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector remains disproportionately low. Women in Sri Lanka own only 25% of sole proprietorship businesses, despite their high literacy and education rates (92%). This study investigates the influence of key entrepreneurial skills—business management, financial, communication, marketing, and networking skills—on the business performance of women entrepreneurs in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 109 registered women entrepreneurs across five districts. Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS and AMOS, supplemented by qualitative insights from interviews. Results indicate that entrepreneurial skills significantly and positively impact business performance, with financial and marketing skills emerging as the strongest predictors. Marketing skills showed the strongest impact ($\beta = 0.39–0.40$, $p < 0.001$), followed by financial skills ($\beta = 0.31–0.32$, $p < 0.001$). The combined model explained 58–61% of variance in business performance. Qualitative findings revealed that sociocultural factors and local adaptation needed to mediate skill application. The study provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and development agencies to design targeted skill-enhancement programs. By addressing the entrepreneurial skill gap, this research contributes to fostering women's economic participation, SME growth, and regional development in post-conflict Sri Lanka. Future study may investigate the long-term effects of skill treatments, conduct cross-regional comparisons within Sri Lanka, and examine the influence of digital skills on company performance enhancement.

**Keywords:** women entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial skills, business performance, SMEs, Northern Province, Sri Lanka, mixed-methods research

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship serves as a significant driver of economic growth, innovation, and employment, particularly in developing economies. In Sri Lanka, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) contribute approximately 45% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and account for about half of all employment (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2020). Despite this substantial contribution, women's participation in entrepreneurship remains limited, with only 25% of SMEs being women-owned. This stat is particularly concerning given that women constitute 35.3% of the economically active population in Sri Lanka (Export Development Board, 2022).

  

Volume: 09, Issue: 02 March - April 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

The Northern Province of Sri Lanka presents a unique context for examining women's entrepreneurship. Emerging from three decades of civil conflict that ended in 2009, the region faces specific challenges with economic revitalisation. Women entrepreneurs in this region encounter multifaceted barriers, including limited access to finance, markets, training, and networks. A critical yet under-researched factor in this context is the role of entrepreneurial skills in determining business performance (Tanko & Andow, 2011). While existing literature has explored entrepreneurial skills generally, there is a paucity of research examining how these skills function in post-conflict settings and how they are mediated by sociocultural factors specific to women entrepreneurs.

This study addresses this research gap by investigating the influence of entrepreneurial skills on the business performance of women entrepreneurs in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with qualitative thematic analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the strength and contextual mediation of skill-performance relationships. The findings aim to inform policy and programmatic interventions that enhance women's entrepreneurial capacities and, consequently, their contribution to economic recovery and growth in post-conflict regions.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What entrepreneurial skills are available among women entrepreneurs in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka?
2. To what extent do these skills relate to the business performance of women entrepreneurs in the Northern Province?
3. How do sociocultural factors mediate the application of entrepreneurial skills in this specific context?

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on women's entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills; Section 3 details the research methodology; Section 4 presents the results; Section 5 discusses the findings; and Section 6 concludes with recommendations and implications for research and practice.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Women Entrepreneurship in Developing Contexts

Women's entrepreneurship has gained increasing attention as a strategy for promoting gender equality and economic development globally. Research indicates that women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to job creation, innovation, and community development (Brush et al., 2019). In many developing countries, such as Sri Lanka, women encounter unique obstacles in their entrepreneurial endeavours. These challenges include limited access to capital, gender-based discrimination, sociocultural constraints, and work-family conflicts (Jennings & Brush, 2013).

In Sri Lanka, despite high female literacy rates (92.6%) and substantial representation in higher education (60% of university enrolment), women's labour force participation remains significantly lower than men's (40% versus 73%; Department of Census and Statistics, 2021).

  

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ISSN 2582-0176

This disparity extends to entrepreneurship, where women own only 25% of SMEs despite representing 35.3% of the economically active population. Structural, cultural, and institutional barriers constrain women's entrepreneurial activities, including traditional gender roles, limited mobility, and restricted access to business networks (Export Development Board, 2022).

### 2.2 Entrepreneurial Skills and Business Performance

Entrepreneurial skills comprise a range of competencies that enable individuals to identify opportunities, mobilise resources, and manage ventures effectively. Research identifies several key skill categories essential for entrepreneurial success:

**Business management skills: these include planning,** organising, and operational capabilities necessary for business establishment and growth. Effective business management enables entrepreneurs to set goals, allocate resources efficiently, and monitor progress (Madan, 2018).

**Financial Skills:** For a business to last, its owners need to know how to budget, keep records, manage cash flow, and analyse finances. Studies show that financial skills have a direct effect on how well a business does, especially in developing countries where access to formal financial services may be limited (Baporikar & Akino, 2020).

**Communication Skills:** Effective communication encompasses negotiation, persuasion, and interpersonal skills essential for building relationships with customers, suppliers, and stakeholders. Strong communication skills facilitate business transactions and conflict resolution (Bouronikos, 2022).

**Marketing Skills:** Market analysis, branding, and customer relationship management enable entrepreneurs to identify opportunities, position their offerings, and build customer loyalty. Marketing skills are particularly important in competitive environments (Chatterjee & Das, 2016).

**Networking Skills:** Building and leveraging professional and social networks provides access to resources, information, and support. Networks can offer mentorship, partnership opportunities, and market access (Hirschauer, 2021).

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that these skills significantly influence business outcomes, including sales growth, profitability, and sustainability (Hurriyati et al., 2016; Jha et al., 2018). However, different contexts may vary the relative importance of specific skills, and environmental and individual factors often mediate their application.

### 2.3 Conceptual Framework

This study employs a conceptual framework (Figure 1) that positions entrepreneurial skills as independent variables influencing business performance as the dependent variable. The framework incorporates five skill dimensions (business management, financial, communication, marketing, and networking skills) and measures business performance through three indicators: sales growth, customer growth, and profit growth.

  

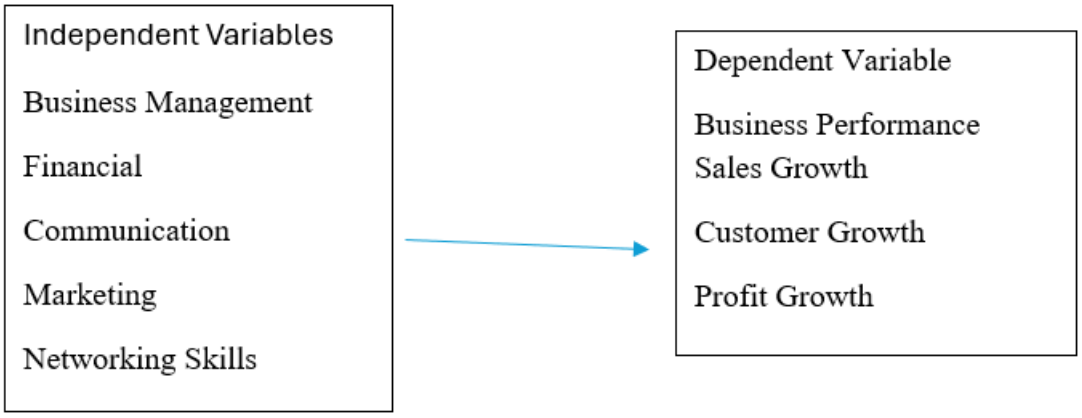


**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

The framework acknowledges that skill-performance relationships are not direct but are mediated by contextual factors, including sociocultural norms, institutional environments, and individual characteristics. This mediation is explored through qualitative investigation in addition to quantitative measurement of direct effects.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design, prioritising quantitative analysis, followed by qualitative exploration. This approach allows for broad generalisations of relationships through statistical analysis while providing an in-depth understanding of contextual factors through qualitative investigation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The quantitative phase established patterns and relationships between entrepreneurial skills and business performance, while the qualitative phase explored how these relationships manifest in the specific context of Northern Province, Sri Lanka.

### 3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all registered women entrepreneurs in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The Industrial Development Department's records show that there were 109 registered women entrepreneurs in the province's five districts: Jaffna (45), Vavuniya (21), Kilinochchi (14), Mannar (11), and Mullaitivu (18). A census approach was adopted, including all registered entrepreneurs due to the manageable population size.

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was used to select 25 participants representing different districts, business sectors, and experience levels. This sampling strategy ensured diverse perspectives while maintaining relevance to the research questions.

### 3.3 Data Collection

**Quantitative Data Collection:** A structured questionnaire was developed based on established scales from previous research. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to measure entrepreneurial skills and business performance.

  

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The instrument was pre-tested with 15 entrepreneurs not included in the final sample to ensure clarity and relevance. Data collection occurred between January and March 2024, with researchers administering questionnaires through in-person visits to ensure high response rates and data quality.

**Qualitative Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 25 purposively selected participants. The interview guide covered topics including skill acquisition, application challenges, business performance indicators, and contextual influences. Interviews were conducted in Tamil (the local language), audio-recorded with permission, and lasted 45–60 minutes each. Field notes were also maintained to capture observational data and contextual insights.

### 3.4 Measurement Instruments

The questionnaire comprised three sections: demographic information, entrepreneurial skills assessment, and business performance evaluation. Entrepreneurial skills were measured using adapted scales from previous studies:

- Business Management Skills: 5 items adapted from Madan (2018)
- Financial Skills: 5 items adapted from Baporikar and Akino (2020)
- Communication Skills: 5 items adapted from Bouronikos (2022)
- Marketing Skills: 5 items adapted from Chatterjee and Das (2016)
- Networking Skills: 5 items adapted from Hirschauer (2021)

Business performance was measured using 9 items assessing sales growth, customer growth, and profit growth over the previous three years, adapted from established performance scales (Murphy et al., 1996).

### 3.5 Data Analysis

**Quantitative Analysis:** The data were analysed using SPSS 26 and AMOS 23. Analysis included:

1. Descriptive statistics to summarise demographic characteristics and variable distributions
2. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency
3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to validate the measurement model
4. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to test hypothesised relationships
5. Multiple regression analysis as supplementary validation of SEM findings

**Qualitative Analysis:** Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 software to facilitate systematic coding and theme identification.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

  

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The study received ethical approval from the Advanced Technological Institute Research Ethics Committee. Participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study purpose, procedures, and their rights. Confidentiality was maintained through the anonymisation of data and the secure storage of records.

## 4.0 RESULTS

### 4.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 109). The majority were aged 31–40 years (42.2%), had completed secondary education (56.9%), and had been in business for 3–5 years (38.5%). Most operated in the retail sector (45.9%), followed by services (29.4%), handicrafts (16.5%), and agriculture (8.2%).

*Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 109)*

| Characteristic | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Age** | 20–30 years | 28 | 25.7% |
| | 31–40 years | 46 | 42.2% |
| | 41–50 years | 27 | 24.8% |
| | Above 50 years | 8 | 7.3% |
| **Education Level** | Primary | 12 | 11.0% |
| | Secondary | 62 | 56.9% |
| | Diploma | 18 | 16.5% |
| | Degree or above | 17 | 15.6% |
| **Business Experience** | < 2 years | 22 | 20.2% |
| | 3–5 years | 42 | 38.5% |
| | 6–10 years | 35 | 32.1% |
| | > 10 years | 10 | 9.2% |
| **Business Sector** | Retail | 50 | 45.9% |
| | Services | 32 | 29.4% |

  

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| Characteristic | Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Handicraft | 18 | 16.5% |
| | Agriculture | 9 | 8.2% |

### 4.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the study variables. Marketing skills scored highest (M = 4.02, SD = 0.68), followed by communication skills (M = 3.91, SD = 0.69) and financial skills (M = 3.85, SD = 0.72). Business performance indicators showed positive levels, with sales growth being highest (M = 3.95, SD = 0.74).

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Entrepreneurial Skills and Business Performance**

| Variable | Mean | SD | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Business Management | 3.78 | 0.75 | 2.00 | 5.00 |
| Financial Skills | 3.85 | 0.72 | 2.20 | 5.00 |
| Communication Skills | 3.91 | 0.69 | 2.40 | 5.00 |
| Marketing Skills | 4.02 | 0.68 | 2.60 | 5.00 |
| Networking Skills | 3.65 | 0.80 | 1.80 | 5.00 |
| Sales Growth | 3.95 | 0.74 | 2.00 | 5.00 |
| Customer Growth | 3.82 | 0.77 | 2.20 | 5.00 |
| Profit Growth | 3.70 | 0.81 | 1.80 | 5.00 |

### 4.3 Reliability and Validity Analysis

Reliability analysis showed all constructs had Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70, indicating good internal consistency (Table 3). Convergent validity was assessed through Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All CR values exceeded 0.70, and AVE values exceeded 0.50, confirming adequate convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019).

**Table 3: Reliability and Convergent Validity Analysis**

  

| Construct | Cronbach's α | Composite Reliability (CR) | Average Variance Extracted (AVE) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Business Management | 0.84 | 0.86 | 0.55 |
| Financial Skills | 0.87 | 0.89 | 0.62 |
| Communication Skills | 0.82 | 0.85 | 0.53 |
| Marketing Skills | 0.88 | 0.90 | 0.65 |
| Networking Skills | 0.79 | 0.82 | 0.51 |
| Business Performance | 0.91 | 0.93 | 0.68 |

### 4.4 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 4) revealed significant positive relationships between all entrepreneurial skills and business performance measures ($p < 0.01$). Marketing skills showed the strongest correlation with sales growth ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$), while financial skills correlated strongly with profit growth ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$).

**Table 4: Correlation Matrix of Entrepreneurial Skills and Business Performance**

| Variable | Business Management | Financial Skills | Communication Skills | Marketing Skills | Networking Skills |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sales Growth | .66** | .70** | .61** | .72** | .57** |
| Customer Growth | .60** | .65** | .59** | .68** | .53** |
| Profit Growth | .58** | .68** | .55** | .65** | .50** |

**$p < 0.01$

### 4.5 Structural Equation Modeling (AMOS) Analysis

#### 4.5.1 Measurement Model Assessment

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate the measurement model. The model demonstrated acceptable fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 1.85$ ($p < 0.001$), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.94, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.92, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.05. All factor loadings exceeded 0.60 and were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming adequate indicator reliability.

### 4.5.2 Structural Model Assessment

The structural model tested hypothesized relationships between entrepreneurial skills and business performance. The model showed good fit: $\chi^2/df = 1.92$, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.06. All hypothesized paths were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

**Table 5: Structural Model Path Coefficients (AMOS Results)**

| Path | β | SE | C.R. | p | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Business Management → Performance | 0.24 | 0.08 | 3.00 | 0.003 | [0.08, 0.40] |
| Financial Skills → Performance | 0.31 | 0.07 | 4.43 | <0.001 | [0.17, 0.45] |
| Communication Skills → Performance | 0.21 | 0.09 | 2.33 | 0.020 | [0.03, 0.39] |
| Marketing Skills → Performance | 0.39 | 0.08 | 4.88 | <0.001 | [0.23, 0.55] |
| Networking Skills → Performance | 0.17 | 0.08 | 2.13 | 0.033 | [0.01, 0.33] |

Note: β = Standardized regression weight; SE = Standard Error; C.R. = Critical Ratio; CI = Confidence Interval. All paths significant at $p < 0.05$.

The model's $R^2$ value was 0.61, indicating that 61% of the variance in business performance was explained by the five entrepreneurial skills. The critical ratios (C.R. > 1.96) for all paths confirmed statistical significance. The confidence intervals not crossing zero further reinforced the robustness of these relationships.

### 4.6 Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to complement the SEM results (Table 6). The combined model was significant, $F(5, 103) = 28.37$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 58% of the variance in business performance ($R^2 = 0.580$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.558$).

**Table 6: Multiple Regression Analysis: Impact of Entrepreneurial Skills on Business Performance**

| Predictor | β | SE | t | P | 95% CI | VIF |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 0.45 | 0.22 | 2.05 | 0.043 | [0.02, 0.88] | |
| Business Management | 0.25 | 0.09 | 2.78 | 0.006 | [0.07, 0.43] | 1.85 |
| Financial Skills | 0.32 | 0.08 | 4.00 | <0.001 | [0.16, 0.48] | 1.92 |
| Communication Skills | 0.22 | 0.10 | 2.20 | 0.030 | [0.02, 0.42] | 1.78 |
| Marketing Skills | 0.40 | 0.09 | 4.44 | <0.001 | [0.22, 0.58] | 2.10 |
| Networking Skills | 0.18 | 0.08 | 2.25 | 0.027 | [0.02, 0.34] | 1.65 |

Note: Dependent Variable: Business Performance (Composite Score). $R^2 = 0.580$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.558$, $F(5, 103) = 28.37$, $p < 0.001$. CI = Confidence Interval; VIF = Variance Inflation Factor.

All variance inflation factors (VIF) were below 3, indicating no multicollinearity issues. The regression results aligned closely with SEM findings, confirming the robustness of the relationships.

### 4.7 Qualitative Analysis

#### 4.7.1 Thematic Analysis Findings

Four main themes emerged from the qualitative analysis:

**Theme 1: Skill Application Challenges**

Participants expressed difficulty applying formal skills in their specific business contexts. One retailer from Jaffna noted, "I learned accounting in a course, but applying it to my small business with irregular income is completely different." Another participant from the handicraft sector mentioned, "Marketing theories don't always work here. Our customers prefer personal relationships over digital advertisements."

**Theme 2: Sociocultural Constraints**

Traditional gender roles and post-conflict dynamics significantly affected skill development and application. A service provider from Vavuniya explained, "As a woman, I cannot attend evening networking events. My family would not approve." An agricultural entrepreneur from Kilinochchi added: "After the war, we lost business connections. Rebuilding networks takes time and courage."

**Theme 3: Resource Limitations**

  

Limited access to technology and training hindered skill enhancement. A retailer from Mannar stated, "I want to learn digital marketing, but internet access is poor and expensive here." A handicraft entrepreneur from Jaffna noted, "Training programmes are usually in Colombo. We need local programmes in Tamil."

**Theme 4: Adaptive Strategies**

Entrepreneurs developed context-specific strategies to overcome challenges. A service provider from Jaffna explained, "I use WhatsApp for customer relationships since formal CRM tools are too complex." A retailer from Vavuniya described collective learning: "We women in similar businesses formed a savings group to learn financial management together."

### 4.7.2 Integration with Quantitative Findings

The qualitative data provided contextual explanations for quantitative results:

- The strong correlation between marketing skills and performance was tempered by local adaptation needs.
- Networking skills' moderate impact reflected sociocultural constraints identified in interviews.

Financial skills' importance aligned with entrepreneurs expressed need for practical financial management training.

### 4.8 Hypothesis Testing Summary

All five hypotheses were supported by both quantitative methods:

**H1a:** Business management skills positively impact business performance ($\beta = 0.24–0.25$, $p < 0.01$)

**H1b:** Financial skills positively impact business performance ($\beta = 0.31–0.32$, $p < 0.001$)

**H1c:** Communication skills positively impact business performance ($\beta = 0.21–0.22$, $p < 0.05$)

**H1d:** Marketing skills positively impact business performance ($\beta = 0.39–0.40$, $p < 0.001$)

**H1e:** Networking skills positively impact business performance ($\beta = 0.17–0.18$, $p < 0.05$)

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Interpretation of Key Findings

This study provides robust evidence that entrepreneurial skills significantly enhance business performance among women entrepreneurs in Northern Province, Sri Lanka. The findings align with previous research emphasising the importance of entrepreneurial competencies for business success (Chatterjee & Das, 2016; Baporikar & Akino, 2020). However, this research extends existing knowledge by demonstrating how these relationships manifest in a post-

  

Volume: 09, Issue: 02 March - April 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

conflict context and how they are mediated by sociocultural factors specific to women entrepreneurs.

The strong effects of marketing (β = 0.39–0.40) and financial skills (β = 0.31–0.32) suggest these are primary levers for improving business performance. Marketing skills enable entrepreneurs to identify opportunities, understand customer needs, and position their offerings effectively—particularly important in competitive markets. Financial skills facilitate prudent resource management, investment decisions, and sustainability—critical in environments with limited access to formal financing.

The moderate but significant effects of networking skills (β = 0.17–0.18) require contextual interpretation. Networking is theoretically significant for resource acquisition and information dissemination; however, its practical efficacy is hindered by sociocultural factors that restrict women's mobility and engagement in business networks. This finding highlights the importance of considering contextual mediators when designing entrepreneurship support programmes.

### 5.2 Theoretical Implications

This research makes several theoretical contributions to entrepreneurship literature:

**Contextualisation of Skill-Performance Relationships:** While previous studies established generic skill-performance relationships (Tanko & Andow, 2011), this research demonstrates how these relationships are mediated in post-conflict settings. The finding that marketing skills require local adaptation contrasts with universalist assumptions in mainstream entrepreneurship literature.

**Validation of Skill Hierarchies:** The consistent identification of financial and marketing skills as primary predictors across both SEM and regression analyses provides empirical support for targeted intervention prioritisation. This hierarchical ordering remained stable even when controlling for business experience and sector, suggesting fundamental rather than contingent importance.

**Evidence of Sociocultural Mediation:** Qualitative data provided empirical evidence of how sociocultural factors transform skill application. For example, networking skills, theoretically important for resource acquisition, showed a reduced practical impact due to mobility restrictions—a finding absent from decontextualised quantitative studies.

**Integration of Mixed-Methods Approaches:** The study demonstrates the value of combining SEM-based quantitative modelling with qualitative exploration to understand complex entrepreneurial phenomena. This approach captures both generalisable patterns and contextual nuances, advancing methodological sophistication in entrepreneurship research.

### 5.3 Practical Implications

The findings offer several practical implications for stakeholders supporting women's entrepreneurship:

  

**For Policymakers:**

It is essential for policymakers to develop tiered skill development frameworks that prioritise financial and marketing skills, given the robust evidence of their strong predictive power for entrepreneurial success. Concurrently, creating business environments that are intentionally friendly to women—and directly addressing the sociocultural constraints identified as mediators of skill development—is critical to fostering inclusive growth. Additionally, setting up systems to monitor how skills are used instead of just how they are learned will help address the challenges identified through qualitative insights, making sure that training leads to real business results.

**For Training Providers:**

Training providers should design modular programmes that allow for skill sequencing aligned with distinct business development stages, thereby offering tailored learning pathways. To bridge the theory-practice gap highlighted in interviews, these programs ought to incorporate local case studies and vernacular tools to make content more relatable and actionable. Furthermore, adopting blended learning approaches that combine digital tools with community-based mentoring can enhance engagement and support the practical application of newly acquired competencies.

**For Financial Institutions:**

Financial institutions have a pivotal role in creating financial products that align with the irregular cash flow patterns characteristic of women's businesses in post-conflict settings. By offering financial literacy training integrated directly with credit access, they can address the interconnectedness of financial skills and business performance, thereby building both capability and resilience among women entrepreneurs.

**For Development Agencies:**

Development agencies need to create programs that consider the specific social and cultural challenges women face when using their skills, rather than just using one-size-fits-all training. Facilitating peer-learning networks that build upon the adaptive strategies already identified in the research can foster collective problem-solving and knowledge sharing. Additionally, supporting digital skill development alongside traditional entrepreneurial competencies will prepare women for increasingly connected economies and broaden their market opportunities.

**5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions**

While comprehensive, this study has limitations that suggest meaningful avenues for future research. Methodologically, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences; longitudinal studies could more effectively establish skill development trajectories over time. Additionally, reliance on self-reported performance measures may introduce bias, and future work could benefit from incorporating objective indicators such as tax records or sales data. The regional focus may also affect generalisability, underscoring the need for comparative studies across diverse contexts to distinguish universal from context-specific factors.

  

Substantively, several research directions emerge. Future studies should investigate skill interaction effects and complementarities, moving beyond individual skill impacts to understand how competencies combine to influence outcomes. Examining digital skills as emerging competencies in increasingly connected economies represents another important frontier, as does exploring intergenerational skill transfer within family businesses. Rigorous impact evaluations are also needed to assess the effectiveness of policy interventions, alongside detailed research into the processes of skill adaptation across varied cultural and institutional environments.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

This research provides robust, multi-method evidence that entrepreneurial skills—particularly financial and marketing competencies—are critical determinants of business performance among women entrepreneurs in Northern Province, Sri Lanka. The study confirms that investing in women's entrepreneurial skills yields measurable economic returns, with marketing and financial skills showing the strongest impacts. However, skill effects are neither automatic nor uniform; they are profoundly mediated by sociocultural contexts, requiring adapted rather than imported development approaches.

The integration of SEM-based quantitative modelling with qualitative thematic analysis has yielded insights that neither approach could provide alone. Quantitatively, the research established clear hierarchical relationships among entrepreneurial skills and their collective explanatory power for business performance. Qualitatively, it elucidated the contextual intricacies that alter the application of skills in practice, especially the sociocultural limitations that influence networking efficacy and the necessary adaptations for marketing strategies.

These findings have important implications for theory, policy, and practice. Theoretically, they contribute to a more nuanced understanding of skill-performance relationships in developing and post-conflict contexts. Practically, they provide evidence-based guidance for designing more effective entrepreneurship support programmes that acknowledge both the importance of core competencies and the necessity of contextual adaptation.

Ultimately, this research affirms that investing in contextually grounded skill development for women entrepreneurs is not merely a social imperative but a sound economic strategy with measurable, scalable returns. By enhancing women's entrepreneurial capacities, such investments can drive individual empowerment, business growth, and regional economic development—particularly vital in post-conflict settings like Northern Province, Sri Lanka.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the women entrepreneurs of Northern Province, Sri Lanka, who generously shared their time and experiences for this research. We also thank the Advanced Technological Institute, Jaffna, for institutional support, and our research assistants for their dedication to data collection and processing. The authors self-funded this research.

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