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Unveiling Entrepreneurial Identities: Perspectives from Women Entrepreneurs in the Global South

Introduction

To understand the nature of the debate surrounding how the entrepreneur is identified, one must first examine the root of the problem. The question of '*who is an entrepreneur?*' is a popular topic across entrepreneurship literature (Gartner, 1988). By adopting the belief that the best unit of analysis to study entrepreneurship are the characteristics of the individual who takes on this role, a selectiveness is introduced in how scholars recognise entrepreneurship. The starting point of this narrative must examine how entrepreneurship has been conceptualised in early works. In this endeavour, Block et al. (2017) identify the Schumpeterian entrepreneur as one of the most influential views embraced by entrepreneurship scholars (e.g. Piano, 2022; Antoncic et al. 2018; Block et al., 2017; Karabulut, 2016). The idealistic traits of the self-made man, described by Schumpeter, are deeply embedded in entrepreneurial studies and prevail even in the study of entities such as organisations and networks in contemporary works.

In his early work, Schumpeter (1939) presents a romanticised image of entrepreneurs as heroic individuals possessing unique personality characteristics that differentiate them from the masses. However, disparity exists even in Schumpeter's own work when defining the entrepreneur. While the Schumpeterian entrepreneur is primarily described as a heroic self-made man, sometimes the entrepreneur is portrayed as an individual *pushed* into entrepreneurship. Alternatively, Schumpeter (1939) predicts that all managers would be gradually substituted by entrepreneurs, whilst at the same time defining the entrepreneur as an individual with unique traits. In his later work, Schumpeter (1943) deviates from the individualistic view of the entrepreneur towards a firm-oriented view. The above classifications introduce ambiguity to the definition of the entrepreneur, which Schumpeter does little to

clarify, eschewing the nature of the relationships among the firm, the manager and the entrepreneur. The underlying ambiguity in Schumpeter's approach has propagated into the broader discourse of entrepreneurship and contributes to the disparity of how entrepreneurship is identified by scholars. Similar to the ambiguity introduced in Schumpeter's work, scholars have continued to carry forward diverse views of managers, business ownership and second-generation owners within the context of entrepreneurship.

In this critical review of the traditional understanding of the entrepreneur, it is also necessary to highlight the gendered exclusivity attached to the role of entrepreneur. For example, Schumpeter (1939) considers the entrepreneur to be a man of high social status. This definition has been adopted in many studies, leading to a firm integration of gendered assumptions valuing *masculine* traits over *feminine* in subsequent work on entrepreneurship. Similarly, widely cited authors such as Mueller and Thomas (2001), Bapat and Harkal (1989), Snizek (1976), Palmer (1971), and McClelland (1961) define the entrepreneur using masculine traits, providing further evidence of the gender bias in research. The masculine representation of the entrepreneur overlooks the existing structural barriers to women's entrepreneurship. As a result, underlying assumptions considering the privileged male entrepreneur as the norm, overlook the impact of asymmetries in resources and agency on the said entrepreneurial traits. Thus, the disadvantaged and marginalised are burdened with proving their legitimacy as entrepreneurs.

When traits have been used to explore both men and women, women are often identified as underperformers or inadequate in their endeavours. Orser et al. (2011) and Ahl (2006) further argue that women do not relate to masculine terms commonly used to define entrepreneurs. Thus, the use of masculine traits as measures of entrepreneurial performance immediately disqualifies those who do not relate to the privileged white, western, heterosexual male view attached to entrepreneurship. To better understand discourse surrounding women

entrepreneurs, the following section will present an overview of themes emerging from women's entrepreneurship literature.

An overview of women in entrepreneurship

Gender presumptions are predominant even when women have been the primary focus, exposing the extant biases linked to women considered in these studies. Ahl (2006) explains that gender-biased assumptions in entrepreneurship research classify women's priorities as stereotypically domestic and revolving around their family obligations. This is further exemplified by how women entrepreneurs are dominantly assumed to be *maternal figures* who struggle to attain work-life balance (e.g. Brush, 1992; Bruni et al., 2004; Machold et al., 2008). Further evidence can be found in works such as Lewis et al. (2022), Surangi and Ranwala (2018), Luomala (2018), Ekinsmyth (2014; 2011) and Duberley and Carrigan (2012), who focus on a subcategory of women entrepreneurs referred to as *mumpreneurs* and reveal how the maternal figure intrinsically ties in to the occupation of entrepreneurship in the case of women. Within this narrative, Ladge et al. (2019) recognises that the masculine notions associated with entrepreneuring cause women entrepreneurs to feel as if they are imposters leading to low self-efficacy.

In the discourse surrounding women entrepreneurs, scholars have shown an interest in examining second-generation business owners. While the primary interest in such studies revolves around succession challenges (e.g. Anggadwita et al., 2023; Bağış et al., 2023; Chang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020; Bizri, 2016; Hougaz, 2015), an emerging theme across such literature is that second-generation entrepreneurs are viewed as *voluntary entrepreneurs* (Mitra and Basit, 2021) who draw on inherited and self-established networks to carry out their entrepreneurial endeavours. While studies recognise the privileged access to networks that second-generation women entrepreneurs gain through the inherited business, scholars have

also highlighted the challenges women face in negotiating their position as business owners (see, Xian et al., 2021).

When examining women entrepreneurs in the global south, scholars have found value in exploring how women's outsider status within the realm of entrepreneurship shape how they engage in their occupation[1]. For example, studies exploring the intersectionality of non-western women's experience in the western context relating to an occupation such as entrepreneurship (e.g. Essers et al., 2020; Essers and Tedmanson, 2014; Pio, 2007; Pio, 2006) recognise a status quo in how women are positioned socially as entrepreneurs and how this may influence their acceptance as rightful practitioners. Similarly, when emerging economies have been studied, there is an intricate relationship between how women are socially and culturally positioned and how they engage in their occupational role (see, Godwyn and Stoddard, 2017; Torri and Martinez, 2014; Welter and Smallbone, 2010). When examining the global south, Ojediran and Anderson (2020) find that the interplay of tradition, culture, and patriarchy conspire to subordinate women's entrepreneurial efforts positioning them at a disadvantage. Such findings motivate this study to explore women's lived experiences regarding how they engage in their role as entrepreneurs while navigating patriarchal social structures.

However, Corrêa et al. (2022) and de Vita et al. (2014) reveal the limited visibility of women in the global south within broader entrepreneurship discourse. For example, de Vita et al. (2014) present that between the period of 2000 to 2012, only 70 papers focused on women entrepreneurs in developing countries from an overall sample of 191 research publications, with many of these publications appearing in country specific journals. Among them, only 12% focused on South Asian women. As a result, the experiences of non-western women in the

[1] In the context of Sri Lanka, entrepreneurship is referred to as an occupation rather than a profession. This emerges from the hierarchical class structure that value education, income and profession and often entrepreneurship is viewed as unskilled or not linked to educational qualifications.

global south are either overlooked or often assumed to be unified. Rashid and Rattan (2020) further highlight that when women in SAARC[2] countries are studied, individual, social and institutional factors are commonly used by scholars to examine women entrepreneurs in these regions. Rashid and Rattan (2020) further identify that a major limitation of such studies is the limited attention given to informal institutions, such as culturally embedded norms, behaviours and social protocols, in unpacking why and how women engage in entrepreneurship as an occupation.

Within this narrative it is also important to acknowledge stereotypes governing the understanding of women entrepreneurs in the global south. Primarily, there is a centrality to presumptions that position women entrepreneurs in a rural locality and economic poverty (Shabbir and Di Gregorio, 1996). Thus, little attention is granted to women entrepreneurs in urban regions who work within different sociocultural structures. Furthermore, Baruah (2004) states that the motivations for self-employment differ between women in developing countries from those in developed countries. While those in the developed world are considered to choose self-employment in spite of having the option for wage/salaried work, women in the developing world are assumed to turn to self-employment for survival (see; Shah and Saurabh, 2015; Sandhu et al., 2012; Tambunan, 2009; Niethammer et al., 2007; Goheer, 2003; Das, 2000). It is interesting to note that, in such studies the primary focus is on micro/SME-level businesses in the informal sector, while large-scale business have been largely ignored.

Though the stigma linked to women-owned business has been broadly accepted across regions (Peiris et al., 2023), in the context of South Asia, the low growth potential or the informal appearance (e.g. home-based and small-scale) of women-owned businesses has primarily been linked to women's limited access to financial capital (Wellalage and Locke, 2017; Bushell,

[2] SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) is an intergovernmental union for the welfare and economic development of nations in South Asia.

2008; Niethammer et al., 2007). In doing so, scholars have identified social, cultural and economic barriers that subordinate women entrepreneurs in the South Asian region. Alternatively, Davis and Abdiyeva (2012) propose that women in the global south face institutional barriers, such as exclusion of women entrepreneurs by the government and third-party networks. Often, such exclusions are used to explain how women-owned businesses are challenged.

In their criticism of traditional entrepreneurship literature, Ahl (2006; 2004), Bruni et al. (2004) and Ogbor (2000) argue that the western masculine portrayal of the entrepreneur in foundational texts have seeped into contemporary works that continue to *other* those who do not embody these characteristics. As a result, such individuals are categorised as underachievers in entrepreneurship. In fact, it is often the case that masculine entrepreneurial traits are used to explain women's underperformance in entrepreneurship. Marlow and McAdam (2013) and Bruni et al. (2004) further explain that the masculine personification of the entrepreneur is based on cultural norms that strongly associate entrepreneurship with men. The traditional identities of men and women are intertwined with gender roles even today, resulting in a misleading representation of women entrepreneurs' experiences. Furthermore, the gender bias in distinguishing the entrepreneur poses further barriers for women who lack the resources that privileged white western men possess. Therefore, to pursue the role of entrepreneurship, Mavin (2008) explains that women are forced to undergo *identity work* by incorporating prescribed masculine characteristics, thereby altering women's natural process of identity creation.

Hence, scholars such as Essers et al. (2010), Essers and Benschop (2007), Ahl (2006; 2004), Bruni et al. (2004) and Mirchandani (1999) highlight the need to embrace more inclusive approaches to entrepreneurship. Thus, the need arises to break away from the gendered lens of

entrepreneurship towards a broader view of how individuals engage in the occupation of entrepreneurship.

This study is aimed to unpack how women in the global south engage with the occupation of entrepreneurship. To better understand the nuances of how women entrepreneurs engage with their occupation in the way that they do, it is important to also draw on knowledge emerging from the broader landscape of how women operate within organisations. Thus, the following section will delve into coping strategies employed by women in work environments.

Women, work and coping strategies

As presented Thus, far, extant literature on entrepreneurship position women entrepreneurs as the other, enforcing structural barriers on how women may engage in their occupation. To further understand how women traverse the patriarchal structures that shape their occupational practice, there is a value in examining the broader discourse surrounding women in the workplace.

In their work, Acker (1990) and Kanter (1975) highlight that gendered structures embedded within organisations position women as disadvantaged. Acker (1990) further informs researchers of the value in examining the oft taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that maintain the gendered hierarchies within organisations to unpack the complexity surrounding the *gendering* of individuals. In the case of women entrepreneurs who taken on a position of leadership and authority within the firm, there is interest to see how *gendered subcultures* (Acker, 2012) within the organisation of entrepreneurship shape women's everyday experience.

The vast body of research on women in male-dominated work environments reveal that women often incorporate coping mechanisms into their practice to establish their belonginess (see, Parker et al., 2022; Aldossari and Chaudhry, 2021; Lekchiri et al., 2019; Veldman et al., 2017; Custodio and Siy, 2017; Van Den Brink and Stobbe, 2009). Custodio and Siy (2017) go on to

elaborate that cultural constraints that position women as homebound and domestic result in a role conflict between motherhood, spouse, daughter and career woman leading to emotional and psychological distress. Thus, coping strategies become *survival skills* allowing the individual to maintain balance between the sociocultural expectations tied to the various roles they must step into in their daily lives. Jennings and McDougald (2007) inform that, in the case of women entrepreneurs, strategies for managing the work and family interface often consider individual level tactics employed by the individual to strike a balance between the various roles they may take on in their everyday lives. Table 1 presents an overview of strategies considered by scholars who have examined how women strike a balance between the home-bound and occupation-bound roles. Drawing on the strategies presented in Table 1, in this study, coping strategies are conceptualised as mechanisms of negotiating belongingness to the occupation.

Table 1 Overview of strategies to minimise the effects of role conflict

Author	Strategies
Hall (1972)	*Structural role definition* - structurally imposed expectations of appropriate behaviour attached to the role is altered consciously. *Personal role definition* - altering one's own attitude towards the expectations of others attached to the role. *Reactive role definition* - altering the behaviour itself to satisfy the demands of the role.
Custodio and Siy (2017)	*Adaptive* - maintaining a positive disposition by establishing means of getting comfort and support. *Emotion-focused* - changing the individuals own attitude towards a problematic situation.
Jennings and McDougald (2007), Kreiner (2006), Greenhause and Parasuraman (1999) and Lambert (1990)	*Segmentation* - the separation of the work-bound and home-bound roles by erecting physical, emotional and cognitive barriers. *Compensation* - a mechanism of increasing involvement in one domain in order to compensate for any dissatisfaction in the other. *Accommodation* - where individuals limit their involvement in one sphere to satisfy the demand in the other.

Among scholars who have drawn on such theoretical dimensions to understand how women entrepreneurs cope with role conflict (see, Mutsindikwa and Gelderblom, 20203; Hundera et al., 2021; Hundera et al., 2019; Shelton, 2006), the nuances of the interplay of social structures

such as ethnicity, race, gender, etc. have been drawn on to unravel how these practices take shape. In their seminal work, Smith and Nkomo (2021), explain that race, gender, and class intersect to create unique experiences for women that shape their everyday practices and experiances. Understanding discrimination involves fully recognising the role that gender, race and class play in shaping individuals lived realities. This involves acknowledging the existence of systemic biases, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices that impact marginalised groups. For example, Smith and Nkomo (2021) find that, while ethnic minority women found power in their racial identity, to *fit in* they often actively incorporate coping mechanisms to conceal their racial identity in order to navigate complex social structures that define women as the other. Smith and Nkomo (2021) further reveal that coping mechanisms are not necessarily limited to fitting in, but also act as a mechanism of dealing with these structures by contesting them. These findings lay the foundation of how gender-race dynamics shape lived experiances as well as how it may allow for a better understanding of social structures that shape how individuals navigate the inherent complexity of everyday life. By drawing on the work by Smith and Nkomo (2021), this study examines how the multifaceted identities of women shaped by gender, race, class, etc. influence their experiances; while also interrogating how structural barriers tied to womanhood and entrepreneurship may hinder women's ability to claim acceptance as rightful practitioners.

Further exploration reveals that scholars have found value in examining lived experience by considering intersectionality through *race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, sexuality, caste, and occupation* (see, Fulcher et al., 2023; Essers et al, 2022; Kadlak et al., 2019; Frenkel and Wasserman, 2020; Essers and Benschop, 2007) to unravel the intricate relationship between structure and agency. Such studies provide a deeper understanding of how women negotiate their positioning within the spaces they occupy in their day-to-day life.

This study aims to contribute to extant knowledge by sharing the lived experience of women entrepreneurs in the global south through the lens of intersectionality. Thus, there is a value in examining how women in the global south undertake this role and how they cope with the barriers enforced by social structures. To better understand the structural landscape presented by the context of Sri Lanka, the following section will provide an account of the sociocultural factors affecting Sri Lankan women's everyday lives and women's participation in the workforce particularly in entrepreneurship.

The context of Sri Lanka

This paper presents Sri Lanka as backdrop to understanding how women engage in entrepreneurship. Thus, it is necessary to provide the reader with an overview of the complex social system in which women are located.

The Sri Lankan population can be categorised into nine ethnicities. These according to the Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka (2012) are: Sinhalese (74.9% of the population), Sri Lankan Tamil (11.15% of the population), Indian Tamil (4.12% of the population), Sri Lankan Chetty (0.03% of the population), Bharatha (0.01% of the population), Sri Lankan Moor (9.3% of the population), Malay (0.22% of the population), Burgher (0.19% of the population) and other (0.09% of the population). With the term *other* representing minority groups such as the Kaffir, Sri Lankan Chinese and Indigenous population (also known as *Wanniyala-Aetto*). The composition of ethnicities varies based on province[3] and forms a complex hierarchy of power in each province. As Wickramasinghe (2006) explains, the colonial[4] bureaucratic model of classifying individuals based on distinct cultural traits has been carried forward by the post-colonial state and continues to distinguish groups in society based

[3] Sri Lanka consists of nine provinces: Western, Central, Southern, Northern, Eastern, Northwestern, North Central, Uva and Sabaragamuwa Provinces.
[4] Sri Lanka's colonial area: Portuguese colonial era: 1505-1658; Dutch colonial era: 1658-1796; and British colonial era: 1796-1948.

on cultural differences. The number of ethnic classifications considered in the census data has increased over the years and further reflects the ethnic divisions and differences in the island.

Sri Lankan society is a complex ethno-religious mosaic, with ethnicities on the island further dispersed into religions. The Sinhalese, predominantly Buddhists, account for the majority of the population of the country. The Tamil speaking population is predominantly Hindu or Muslim. Similar to the ethnic distribution across the Sri Lankan provinces, religion also plays a pivotal role in power relations within each province. What is most interesting in this distribution is the prominence of the Hindu Tamil community in the Northern Province and the Muslim community in the Eastern Province, while the Sinhala Buddhist population holds dominance in all other provinces.

Religious norms, traditions and conventions followed over time play a crucial role in what is considered appropriate behaviour for both women and men. As a result, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity have all influenced the Sri Lankan woman's place in society. Together, the Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu way of life have created a conservative, symbolic image of Sri Lankan women (Seneviratne, 1999). The colonial influence has ingrained Victorian values into what is perceived moral and virtuous in each religious community. As a result, women's role as a mother is greatly valued across Sri Lankan society and as women transition through different stages of their lives such as daughter, wife and mother, there is an expectation that women will continue to prioritise their domestic role centred around parents, spouse and children.

The employed population in Sri Lanka can be mainly subdivided into waged and salaried workers (employees) and self-employed (employers, own account workers and contributing

family workers[5]). Women's participation in most of these classifications is significantly less in comparison to men, particularly in the case of self-employment. What is most interesting is the high participation of women as *contributing family workers/unpaid family workers* (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2018; Asian Development Bank, 2015). The high proportion of women participating in vulnerable employment[6] further exposes Sri Lankan women's limited *voice* and security in the workforce.

Considering the social, cultural and economic environment, entrepreneurship continues to be a national solution to the significant unemployment rates among women (Kodikara, 2018). However, women's limited participation in self-employment causes major concern, as women are recognised as the majority of the economically inactive population in the country. A study by Ministry of Labour Relations And Foreign Employment (2006) reveals that there is a general rejection of entrepreneurship and voluntary unemployment among women and the educated and relatively affluent youth. To better understand women's limited participation in entrepreneurship, there is a value in examining how entrepreneurship has been culturally embedded in Sri Lankan society.

Traditionally, entrepreneurship was associated with the bourgeoisie class in Sri Lanka, among both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. However, entrepreneurship has also enabled disadvantaged communities to gain social and economic mobility. The Western Victorian ethos has formed a unique gender division among entrepreneurs resulting in a male dominance among the upper- and middle-class entrepreneurs, while entrepreneurship among lower classes

[5] Contributing family workers refers to unpaid family workers engaging in a business run by a related person (United Nations Statistics Division, 2015).
[6] Vulnerable employment is an umbrella term used to represent own account workers and contributing family workers (United Nations Statistics Division, 2015).

are shared equally between both genders. As a result, entrepreneurship, particularly for women, carries a certain degree of stigma.

Though women's participation in self-employment continues to remain significantly low, since the 1970's it has shown exponential growth (Jayaweera, 2002). However, inadequate working capital, inadequate access to external finances, limited knowledge and skill, lack of family support, social norms, values, rules and inadequate regulations, and weak public policy continue to limit women's participation in entrepreneurship (Jayawardane, 2016). The resulting outcome leaves unemployed women in a position of disadvantage, constrained by unresolved structural and institutional barriers.

The limited understanding of women entrepreneurs has further led to projects and policies that do not fully align with women's needs. While Jayaweera (2002) recognises that many projects designed to encourage women's self-employment often are directed towards women from underprivileged backgrounds or gendered industries; there are challenges faced by women in accessing institutional support, as many projects do not focus on women entrepreneurs and SMEs (Attygalle et al., 2014).

Considering the unique landscape presented by Sri Lankan society, attributed by its complex interplay of gender, class, ethnicity, lifecycle stage, etc. along with women's limited participation in entrepreneurship, there is an interest in examining how women engage with their role as entrepreneurs. Such a feminist endeavour requires a methodology that facilitates the complex interplay of structure and agency to be unravelled. Thus, in the following section, the epistemic stance of this study will be laid out.

Feminist standpoint theory, Intersectionality and Entrepreneurship

Originally presented as a feminist theory to examine power relations, over time Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) has evolved to standpoint *theories* by considering not only the

knower in opposition to male bias in scientific research, but also considering the implication of difference among knowers. Though pioneering feminist standpoint theorists such as Hartsock (1998), Harding (1987) and Smith (1987) provide diverse views of standpoints, *knowing* and truths, there is always an underlying centrality given to *women* as subjects of knowledge. Original versions of FST are politically fuelled and oppose dominant masculinity by presenting women as a singular, unified category in opposition to men. To standpoint theorists, the relationship between the *knower* and the *known* is socially constructed and inevitably gendered. Thus, FST recognises the value of the lived experiences of marginalised groups when conducting research on topics that affect marginalised groups.

Hartsock (1997) explains that *groups* should not be lightly construed as *aggregates of individuals*. The *collective subject* referred to in FST represents the interplay between the individuals and the larger social and historical forces that constitute the subject. This version of standpoint theory diverts from the traditional epistemic authority granted to women as a general category and allows for intersectionality to recognise varying power relations that produce and define experience (e.g. Harding, 1997; Hartsock, 1997; Smith, 1997). Thus, Feminist Standpoint Epistemology (FSE), in that sense, offers multiple knower positions that are culturally and discursively grounded in experience (Kokushkin, 2014) and subjected to the effects of intersectionality. Furthermore, Smith (1997) theorises that FST is better read as *women's standpoint*. This conceptualisation of women's standpoint identifies that *women* are a nonexclusive category and remain open-ended; granting privilege to *experiences of difference,* sensitive to the effects of not only gender, but also race, class, ethnicity, nationality, those subjected to colonial domination, etc. This can be further expressed as: the underprivileged in society possess the ability to present perspectives, based on social situatedness and historicity, that are less distorted or less partial in comparison to those with higher social positions

(Harding, 1991). In this view, it is important to acknowledge that the subject position is indeed sensitive to the effects of intersectionality.

Thus, FSE is particularly apt in this study, as it provides a means to study how power results from the intersection of race, class and gender; rather than viewing these social relations as independent and isolated. Therefore, the standpoint of Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs based on the intersection of gender, class, ethnicity, lifecycle stage, etc. allows for a deeper understanding of the multi-faceted experiences involved with entrepreneuring.

Methodology

This study follows an FSE to explore how power results from the intersection of gender, ethnicity, class, and lifecycle stage; rather than viewing these social relations as independent and isolated. Undertaking such a feminist project also requires careful selection of the research methods. Feminist research undertakings require methods that allow the researcher to reach beyond facts and figures and unravel women's lived experiences. In this endeavour, qualitative methods can be useful as it allows the researcher to engage with marginalised groups (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Smart, 2009) and draw on the nuances of lived experience. Recent works such as those by Poggesi et al. (2016), Henry et al. (2016) and Ahl (2006); recognise the value of Life History Interviews (LHIs) in unpacking the complexities of women entrepreneurs' lived experiences. As a research method, LHIs support the views of FSE by providing a means of acquiring knowledge through the subject's experiences encapsulated within their life story narratives. Here a series of in-depth interviews are used to develop grounded conversations with the participant. The participant will use culturally available discourse to express their experiences providing the researcher with insight into the social structures that shape the lived experiences of the subject.

This study draws on LHIs with 44 women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka. When conducting LHIs, Seidman (2015), Granot et al. (2012), Elliott (2005), Cauvery et al. (2003) and Wengraf (2001) recommend the use of multiple interviews to gradually uncover the complexity of the respondent's life history, each laying the foundation for the next exploratory interview. While the first interview is used to build a timeline of the respondent's account of their life leading up to the topic or event of interest, the second interview focuses on the concrete aspects of the respondent's present experiences. The final interview is used to encourage the respondent to reflect on their understanding of the experiences captured through stories. However, considering the participants availability, in this study a pre-interview questionnaire, two-interviews and a focus group discussion was adopted. The pre-interview questionnaire was used as a mechanism to identify participant demographics and develop a timeline of their individual entrepreneurial journey, while the two-interview model was used to uncover events and experiences that shaped their lived experiences. By following a two-interview model and pre-interview questionnaire, the lived experiences shared by the participants were unpacked and tied together following an established timeline of their entrepreneurial journey. The participants were finally invited to participate in a focus group to reflect on and share their experiences. In their work, Pollack (2003) and Wilkinson (1998) recognise that, especially in feminist research endeavours, focus groups can be valuable to understand collective experience of marginalisation to unpack the often taken for granted effects of gender, sexuality, class, etc. Thus, this resulted in a reflexive process where the participants reflected on their own positionality, while also forming a solidarity in their experiences.

Woodley and Lockard (2016) highlight that in feminist research, methods and techniques that harness the power of social networks and personal connections can be useful to gain access to marginalised communities and groups. By following a snow-ball sample technique, the researcher is able to draw on personal connections and connections formed with the participants

as a way of attracting participants and building trust. An interest in this study was to capture how intersectionality shapes women entrepreneurs' lived experience. Therefore, though participant recruitment took on a snow-ball approach, to ensure diversity of ethnicity and religion, participant from across the island were targeted. My own personal connections formed as a woman entrepreneur in Sri Lanka was useful to gain access to networks and communities across the island.

When considering the participant demographics (Table 2), it is important to note that, 73% of the participants had employment prior to starting their business(es) while 27% were, at the time, employed in another occupation simultaneously while running their business. It is noteworthy that there was no direct link between the industry of employment and the venture. This study considers two types of business owners; Founders (84%) and second-generation owners (10%). Interestingly, 6% of these participants were founders of one/more ventures, while also the second-generation owner of another. 11% of the participants were founders and co-owners of the business; where 9% were shared co-ownership with their spouse and only one participant was a founder and co-owner of a business with someone other than their spouse. In this study, second-generation owners were included in the sample due to two motivations. While many of the participants (founders) felt conflicted in recognising themselves as entrepreneurs it was interesting to see that second-generation owner's recruited in the study had local recognition as entrepreneurs and/or self-identified as entrepreneurs. Thus, in line with the research interest of this study, second-generation owners provided a different perspective of how they establish legitimacy.

Table 2 Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Highest Education level	Previously employed	Currently employed elsewhere	Marital Status	Children	Region where business is located	Business scale	Business Ownership Type	Business type
Amanda	60	Sinhalese	Christian	GCE A/L	Yes	No	Married	Yes	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Beautician
Amaya	27	Burgher	Other	Masters	Yes	yes	Single	No	Western Province	SME	Founder	Shoe manufacturer
Angela	44	Burgher	Christian	Diploma	yes	No	Married	Yes	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Bespoke linen company
Anjalee	33	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE A/L	Yes	No	Single	No	Western Province	SME	Founder	Café owner
Anu	28	Indian Tamil	Hindu	GCE O/L	Yes	No	Married	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Yoga studio owner
Arali	36	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hindu	Masters	Yes	No	Married	Yes	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Digital marketing company
Bhavani	65	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hindu	GCE O/L	No	yes	Married	Yes	Eastern Province	Micro	Founder	Fish vendor
Chandramali	67	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE O/L	No	No	Married	Yes	Southern Province	Micro	Founder	Owner of a traditional lace manufacturing social enterprise
Cristina	40	Sinhalese	Christian	GCE A/L	Yes	yes	Married	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder/ Second Generation Owner	Beautician
Dinithi	33	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Masters	Yes	No	Single	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Owner of a travel company and tutoring service
Fayasa	38	Sri Lankan Moor	Islam	Masters	Yes	Yes	Married	Yes	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Owner of baby clothing and ethnic clothing businesses

Dinusha	33	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Degree	Yes	Yes	Single	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder/ Second Generation Owner	Second-generation owner of a construction material company, Owner of an events company and bespoke packaging business
Gajani	45	Sri Lankan Tamil	Christian	Masters	Yes	yes	Married	Yes	Eastern Province	SME	Founder	Social enterprise in the form of a marketplace
Geetha	68	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Below GCE O/L	Yes	Yes	Married	Yes	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Shoe manufacturer
Hafeeza	44	Sri Lankan Moor	Islam	Masters	Yes	No	Married	Yes	Western Province	Large	Founder	IT company
Hansika	44	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE O/L	No	No	Married	Yes	North Central Province	Micro	Founder	Beautician
Hashani	35	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Degree	Yes	No	Married	No	Western Province	SME	Founder	Café owner
Himasha	28	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Degree	Yes	No	Single	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder/ Second Generation Owner	Café owner/ food outlet
Imesha	31	Sinhalese	Christian	Degree	Yes	No	Single	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Speech therapy clinic
Indrani	71	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Degree	Yes	No	Married	Yes	Central Province	Large	Founder	Food factory owner
Isaipriya	54	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hindu	GCE A/L	No	No	Married	No	Eastern Province	Micro	Founder	Food outlet owner
Ishika	34	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Masters	Yes	yes	Single	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Stationary company
Janani	35	Sinhalese	Christian	Masters	Yes	yes	Married	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Home baker
Kasuni	39	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Degree	No	yes	Married	Yes	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Online preowned bookshop and an exotic homeware business
Kaveesha	28	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Masters	Yes	yes	Married	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Party product business

Luxmi	50	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hindu	GCE O/L	No	No	Married	Yes	Northern Province	Micro	Founder	Fish vendor
Mallika	67	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE A/L	No	No	Married	Yes	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Tailoring business
Nadeesha	35	Sinhalese	Christian	Degree	No	No	Married	Yes	Western Province	SME	Second Generation Owner	Second-generation manufacturer of hotel supplies
Nalini	64	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE O/L	Yes	No	Married	Yes	Western Province	SME	Founder	Social enterprise centred around preschool education
Natasha	20	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE A/L	No	No	Single	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Plant based beauty product business
Navoda	44	Sinhalese	Other	Degree	Yes	No	Single	No	Western Province	SME	Founder	Boutique hotel owner
Nethmi	36	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Masters	Yes	No	Single	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Owner of a designer label
Noofa	27	Sri Lankan Moor	Islam	Degree	Yes	No	Married	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Hand-made artisanal soap business
Pawani	33	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Masters	Yes	No	Married	Yes	Western Province	SME	Founder	Social enterprise in the form of a marketplace
Raagavi	76	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hindu	GCE O/L	No	No	Married	Yes	Northern Province	Micro	Founder	Tailoring shop
Rathnawathi	73	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Below GCE O/L	Yes	No	Single	No	Central Province	Micro	Founder	Batik business
Roshani	31	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE A/L	Yes	No	Married	No	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Womenswear boutique
Rukmani	60	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE A/L	No	No	Married	Yes	Western Province	SME	Founder	Vegan food outlet owner
Sachini	32	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Masters	Yes	No	Married	No	Western Province	SME	Founder	Café owner
Shriyani	63	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE A/L	Yes	yes	Single	Yes	Western Province	Micro	Founder	Handmade women and children accessories business
Supuni	31	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE A/L	Yes	No	Married	Yes	North Central Province	Micro	Founder	Owner of a car service centre)

Umaiyarl	70	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hindu	GCE A/L	No	No	Married	Yes	Northern Province	Micro	Founder	Tailoring business
Upeksha	28	Sinhalese	Buddhist	GCE A/L	Yes	No	Married	Yes	Southern Province	Micro	Founder	Home baker
Wathsala	32	Sinhalese	Buddhist	Masters	Yes	No	Married	No	North Western Province	Large	Second Generation Owner	Second-generation owner of a garment factory

As mentioned earlier the LHIs followed a two-interview structure; Thus, 56 interviews were conducted in English, 20 in Sinhalese and 12 in Tamil. The interviews in Sinhalese and Tamil were translated and all interviews were transcribed. As a native Sinhala speaker, I translated all interviews in Sinhala to English, while the interviews in Tamil were translated to English by a Tamil translator. The translated interviews were then reviewed by a native language speaker to identify any misinterpretations or errors in the translation. A randomly selected sample of transcripts has been back translated to ensure accuracy in translation.

The thematic analysis was carried out using Nvivo 12. The coding underwent first and second cycle coding with multiple iterations of coding within each cycle. The first cycle of coding underwent six iterations. The first iteration used holistic and structural codes to code the data using concepts emerging from the theoretical dimensions and identified areas of inquiry. The following coding iterations used initial, in vivo, descriptive and process codes for detailed coding of the data. The conclusion of the first cycle of coding resulted in 700 codes. The second cycle of coding too underwent seven iterations of coding and used pattern, focus and axial codes. To demonstrate, Table 3 illustrates the aggregate codes emerging from the thematic analysis and Table 4 presents illustrative quotes from the coding process.

Table 3 Overview of coding process

Aggregated Codes	Second-order Codes	First-order Codes
Establishing Belonginess	Feeling like an outsider	*Fears at start-up phase*
		Feeling like an outsider
	Proving belonginess	*Cultivating social status*
		Educational qualifications
		Material possessions
		Skills and capabilities
	Social acceptance	*Acceptance due to family background*
		Advantaged by access
		Being accepted as an entrepreneur
		Breaking away from familism
		Equal status due to business
		Gaining legitimacy
Coping Mechanisms	Keeping up appearances	*Creating an impression via appearance*
		Appearance to gain respect
		Symbolism of appearance
	Managing roles	*Conforming to beliefs attached to mother, daughter, wife*

		Conforming to beliefs attached to woman business owner
		Conforming to beliefs attached to business owner
	Creating an impression via behaviour	*Customising how she presents herself*
		Hiding parts of herself
		Customising how she interacts
		Customising herself according to the audience
		Image she wants to present

Table 4 Illustrative quotes

First Order Codes and illustrative quotes	Second Order Codes	Aggregate Codes
• *That's why like if you want to get something done, you tell Ammi [mother]! [She laughs] If we have to go and get the chicken and come, my god! We will be paying like 1000 rupees. If we went to Pettah and started talking in our broken Sinhala, finish! He will charge a 1000 rupees a kilo form us.* **(Himasha, 28-year-old, Sinhalese, Founder of a café and a second generation owner of a cafe)** • *For some areas, yes. Because still, they like the people who talk in their language. And even when we go there and bargain, they tend to reduce for the people who talk in their language not us. Because sometimes I have gone with one of my Tamil friends and he has told me that happened! Because I was, for example, I was just buying this saree material and the other person, he has told it like 200 or 150 less that is also some amount so considering a meter that, if we take a couple of meters that's a lot. So, yeah. Likewise, there are some incidents not only in Pettah at well. In some shops in Colombo I have noticed that, but I think it's minor than the previous years. Considering to previous years.* **(Kaveesha, 28-year-old, Sinhalese, Founder of a party products business)** • *I have had negative experience also, so sometimes like people lose the respect that they have for you when they know you have another business, especially because I am a woman…* **(Kasuni, 39-year-old, Sinhalese, Founder of an online preowned bookshop and exotic homeware business)**	Feeling like an outsider *(33 participants)*	***Establishing Belonginess***
• *I applied and did that exam and I have the qualification now. The last stage is, there are two people who come to the salon and inspect the salon and give the certificate and give the 'ok' to run the salon. So, that also I have. All those certificates I have. So, now actually no one can say anything that I am not [she laughs] qualified enough to do this and that.* **(Amanda, 60-year-old, Sinhalese, Founder, Beautician)** • *I have learnt everything online. I have never gone to a designing school or anything like that, but as I watch YouTube and [business partners name] has helped and she has helped me to learn all that, but the thing is, I was never allowed to study it. Now if I had studied that particular area, it would have helped much more. But it doesn't matter. Still you are educated, and you can do it.* **(Arali, 36-year-old, Sri Lankan Tamil, Founder of a digital marketing company)** • *Although I don't really wear shalwars, that often, the few times they have seen me wear it, it's good enough for them to buy from me. So, you have to, I think if you represent a brand of what you are trying to do, then it's as easy and it also builds the trust in people…* **(Fayasa, 38-year-old, Sri Lankan Moor, Founder of a baby clothing company and ethnic clothing business)**	Proving belonginess *(41 participants)*	
• *Yeah so, for now the respect I get, is much more than when I was working. Even at home. Even in the family background, so and also when I share my opinion or when I say something, people are able to take it. So, when I was working, they give some suggestion, 'no! this doesn't work', so when I share my opinion now, they are more like 'okay, we should think about it, we should take it'. That's what they say. So, I feel, okay, gives me a you know, it gives me a new place, where people acknowledge, accept you or I don't know.* **(Anu, 28-year-old, Indian Tamil, Founder of a yoga studio)**	Social acceptance *(43 participants)*	

• *Not in the beginning. I had to do transactions with them over time. Sometimes when a big businessman I know comes to the shop and they urge the shop people to give me the stuff and they give a big introduction about me. This has happened several times. So, from that there is a good trust between us.* **(Chandramali, 67-year-old, Sinhalese, Founder, owner of a traditional lace manufacturing social enterprise)**		
• *Yeah, like you have to look the part, otherwise people won't come [she laughs]. I'm 62. If I don't colour my hair and if I go with all greys and all that, people will not come to my- to my salon to get their hair tinted. I mean coloured. So, you have to look the part, you have to look good to a certain extent.* **(Amanda, 60-year-old, Sinhalese, Founder, Beautician)** • *I always wear sari when I go to the market because it is seen as a decent clothing. If I am bending to lift the fish or something the dress is difficult. I feel comfortable in a sari, and people see the sari in a respectful way.* **(Bhavani, 65-year-old, Founder, Fish vendor)** • *We learn how to go somewhere and behave because we gather in big gatherings. In these gatherings there is a way we should behave. Womanhood should be taken care of. That is the first thing. You have to be decent.* **(Geetha, 68-year-old, Sinhalese, Founder, shoe manufacturer)**	Keeping up appearances *(39 participants)*	***Coping Mechanisms***
• *Home! Home is where I go and shut off. It's where I become Anjalee where I'm walking around in my pyjamas, not doing anything. Just lounging on the chair just ... just trying to switch everything off… Like Sri Lanka like people will call you at like 10:00 in the night and be like I want to get a cake! You have to draw the line at some point. So, I try to switch off as soon as I get home.* **(Anjalee, 33-year-old, Sinhalese, Founder, Café owner)** • *I have to say it really helped me to move out of the home office and into an office in Nugegoda. Because that also helped focus and you actually have chunks of time where you can you know not be a mom but be an entrepreneur.* **(Hafeeza, 44-year-old, Sri Lankan Moor, Founder, IT Company)** • *I would bring my children to work only if suddenly there is no maid. But I somehow tried to get maids to look after them. Even from agencies… My husband doesn't like it. He says 'don't bring them here it's not nice'. He really doesn't like it, even if I wanted to. There was plenty of space. But when my elder daughter was small that is where she was. She was in the back room. Even though we didn't take her out to the outlet she stayed at the back. At that time there was no separate section called the house.* **(Rukmani, 60-year-old, Sinhalese, Founder, Vegan food outlet)**	Managing roles *(24 participants)*	
• *See probably the way I talk to them, they were able to see I was honestly trying to find out what is really good today and what they genuinely use. Because now they tell me, like they tell me from the time that they always used to watch me... even the times that they would tell me 'yes the material is there' and I would go and it turns out it has finished. But still I would never shout at them and scold them say 'why you told me to come?' So, I have also been nice to them. So, equally, they feel that they should be nice to me. And that's how the relationship I think has built up.* **(Angela, 44-year-old, Burgher, Founder, Bespoke linen company)** • *Initially I thought if I put a document with all my qualifications and say that, you know, I have these qualifications and all of that I can give it to them and pitch about myself, that they will believe. It was not like that. First, they gave me the business, one thing is, you know, I felt that my communication skill was key to that. Now you have to go and present yourself and convince them. Okay. Other thing is persistence. They never gave me business after I went once. I think to get business I have worked, I walked for a week in Pettah market, and after that I have for 2 – 3 meetings, by around 5th meeting I got the contract. Later on, by the time I had around 5- 6 clients, you know, it was easier. You can understand whether this is going to work or not.* **(Arali, 36-year-old, Sri Lankan Tamil, Founder of a digital marketing company)**	Creating an impression via behaviour *(39 participants)*	

• *When we face difficulties, we shouldn't tell all our difficulties we need to bottle them ourselves. Why should we tell the others? Sometimes we can't let others know what we are facing.* **(Bhavani, 65-year-old, Founder, Fish vendor)** • *Yeah, I think so. I think it does become easy for your customers to trust you, if they can relate to you but not necessarily due to you ethnicity or your exposure. Like, I can easily adapt to any kind of customer from any ethnicity. I think it's really down to your personality. Rather than you know, what you are wearing or? What you are wearing is an addition that only gets you into the door but the rest is done with your personality. You're convincing as a business person. Once you start talking your outer appearances and all your cultural biases just kind of disappear. I think it's very important to be quite humble in your approach. I think that's one thing very acceptable qualities, basically.* **(Fayasa, 38-year-old, Sri Lankan Moor, Founder of a baby clothing company and ethnic clothing business)**		

The thematic analysis revealed that women are positioned as outsiders in the realm of entrepreneurship, and as coping mechanisms, women consciously embraced micro level coping strategies to fit in. The following section will expand on how women engage in entrepreneuring in the context of Sri Lanka.

Findings

According to Stead (2017), research on women entrepreneurs' belongingness has largely focused on the processes men and women undertake to establish their membership in a wider entrepreneurial and business community. Though the body of work on women entrepreneurs' belongingness is still in its infancy (Stead, 2017), scholars investigating the connection between gender and entrepreneurship (e.g. Essers, et al. 2020; Duberley and Carrigan, 2012; Bruni et al., 2004; Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986) identify the distinctive influence of gender on the individual's ability to gain legitimacy and acceptance. The findings of this study exemplify that, in the case of the global south, the nuanced relationship between gender, ethnicity, age, and lifecycle stage form a constrained system challenging women's ability to identify as rightful practitioners of entrepreneurship.

The participants of the study demonstrated that, as women engaging in a role often perceived as masculine in the context of Sri Lanka, they needed to establish their belonginess within the field of entrepreneurship. 33 of these participants specifically referred to how they felt like an outsider in the realm of entrepreneurship. As Arali (36-year-old, Sri Lankan Tamil, founder/owner of a digital marketing agency) explained;

> *Pettah [7]is a very male dominated market. If you look at it, most of the business, it's male… I wanted to get into the one-day printing service. So, I was asking this guy*

[7] *Pettah is a central marketplace in the commercial capital of the island. This space is dominated by male shop owners predominantly from a Tamil and Muslim ethnicity.*

where to get these printers, and they said 'Oh miss! Why are you doing all of that? Can you do these things?'. So I asked 'why can't I?' And he said 'These things are suitable for men only. They are not suitable for you.' I said 'what!? You mean pressing this mug on the printing press?' I just laughed and came back. He thinks that women can't just put some ink to the printing machine, they think like that.

Arali's explanation draws on her experience as a woman in a highly male dominated industry and space. As a woman, Arali feels as if she is expected to underperform in certain activities. In her interview, Arali went on to say that the businesses she worked with are often owned by Tamil men, she explained that '*They will give you work, but you can't overpower them*'. Within this space, as a young mother and a Sri Lankan Tamil woman, she is expected to be submissive in their presence and conform to the gendered beliefs within the community. To Arali, conforming to and accommodating these ideals enable her to fit in to expectations and co-exist within the business sphere. Ling et al. (2020) identify that the masculinity attached to the occupational role/title propagate job-related stereotypes and influence an individual's perceived belongingness to the occupation. As a result, the study identifies that women experienced internalised conflict in the form of imposter syndrome in identifying as legitimate practitioners. Interestingly, in the case of Arali and exemplified in the narratives of 10 participants, though they saw themselves as entrepreneurs, their understanding of sociocultural beliefs and expectations within these spaces encouraged them to consciously alter how they positioned themselves to gain acceptance from the dominant other.

In her interview, Kaveesha (28-year-old, Sinhalese, founder/owner of a Party product business) referred to her experience within Pettah:

They like the people who talk in their language. And even when we go there and bargain, they tend to reduce for the people who talk in their language, not us.

Because sometimes I have gone with one of my Tamil friends and he has told me that happened!

Unlike in the case of Arali where her status as a woman acted as a dimension of discrimination by men of Tamil background, to Kaveesha her identity as Sinhalese produce another layer of discrimination that position her as the other. In her narrative Kaveesha explained that she does not intend to disrupt the way in which business takes place within this space as it would be unfavourable to her. While this frustrates Kaveesha, she draws on her understanding of protocol to navigate this space and gain the confidence of the business men she must transact with. These findings further provide insight into the strategies women follow in every day interactions by drawing on their own understanding of their positionality to embrace certain expectations of their ethnicity, gender and life cycle stage to fit in. While Arali uses reactive role definition as a way of accommodating the sociocultural beliefs in Pettah into her practice due to her own membership within the ethnic category of the powerful other, Kaveesha shows that as a woman of a different ethnicity she adopts personal role definition to adapt to this space. Furthermore, Smith and Nkomo (2021) argue that professional identity is shaped by societal perceptions and expectations, which can differ based on race and gender. The participants' conscious alteration of how they position themselves highlights the negotiation of professional identity in response to these societal dynamics. The gendered presumptions relating to entrepreneurship establish entrepreneurship as a highly gendered activity. In such cases, women entrepreneurs seek to gain acceptance as business owners within the gendered space of entrepreneurship by striking a delicate balance between how they are viewed in their occupation and how they are viewed as women belonging to an ethnic categorisation.

Dinusha (33-year-old, Sinhala, Second-generation owner of a construction material company, founder/owner of an events company and bespoke packaging business) presents a rich example

of how women in entrepreneurial spaces are often positioned as outsiders due to their appearance as women;

So, when I joined this program, ... they picked entrepreneurs from each district, ... So, this was maybe four years ago. I had my fringe, I had ballet flats on, but those ballet flats had bows on them. There was one session where it was mostly men, where they had to give feedback on different people, because we'd been around each other for about a week, on what each person thought about each other's business plans and whatever. This one guy, he goes; that my business plan is good, but if he walks with me on the road, they will think that he has brought a 'Kaalla[8]' and doing business. Then, I was like 'okay, then what do you expect me to wear?' Then he was like, if I wear a sari or whatever, people will look at you as if they look at a 'baduwa[8]'. I am not overweight, I don't look middle aged, and immediately I am something I guess…!

In her interview, Dinusha reflected on the challenges she has faced as a businesswoman in commanding respect in, male dominated, entrepreneurial circles. In these narrations she highlighted her age, appearance, preconceptions related to women-owned businesses and her lifecycle stage as attributes that disadvantaged her. As a result, Dinusha is positioned as an outsider and her legitimacy is often questioned. As a coping mechanism, Dinusha explained that she consciously customises her appearance through how she dressed to fit into the spaces she occupies as a woman entrepreneur.

I think intentionally if I go for an event or what not, like, I make sure that I dress in a way that appeals. In the sense, I cover with a blazer or no nonsense specs. That

[8] *Kaalla/baduwa is a sexist way of referring to a woman as an object. Implies she is easy*

sort of approach. It's not great, I am part of the problem then, but I need to protect myself in order to get things done, so this is the method I have adopted.

Dinusha's intention is to create an impression of authority to support her entrepreneurial role by following a behavioural coping strategy. The customisations she made to her appearance were carefully made to adapt to and mirror the overlying cultural values and expectations in the communities she engaged with. By wearing a blazer, Dinusha makes attempts to shield her femininity and age with the expectation that she would be taken seriously within the entrepreneurial spaces she operates in. Echoing this experience, 38 of the participants referred to how the appearance was customised as a way of gaining acceptance. As exemplified in the above quote, Dinusha felt conflicted in her strategy. While customising how she looked to fit in was a coping mechanism to present herself as belonging, she is also aware that by consciously altering her appearance to gain acceptance she was sustaining the status quo within the entrepreneurial spaces. The findings resonate with the research by McDonald (2013) and van den Brink and Stobbe (2009) by illustrating that within the field of entrepreneurship, where women are seen as outsiders and rare, women are naturally expected to underperform. As a result, women shield their femininity to prove their belongingness. A further contribution to this understanding of women entrepreneurs through this study, is the nuance of how the intersectionality of gender and age present a hierarchy of how women are perceived and accepted in Sri Lankan society. While older women or women identifying as mothers command a sense of respect in Sri Lankan society, younger women are often perceived as inexperienced and under the control of her family and signify instability. As a result, younger women must undergo a process of establishing legitimacy to prove themselves as autonomous. Dinusha's account exemplifies how women entrepreneurs' outsider position is multifaceted and not only influenced by gender but also their lifecycle stage and age. Furthermore, Dinusha's account reveals the significance of appearance to shift perceptions in the process of gaining legitimacy.

As the founder and co-owner of an IT company, Hafeeza (44-year-old, Sri Lankan Moor) often felt challenged by other actors in the industry and her community due to her gender and ethnicity. In her interview, she explains that;

> *When people say, you know 'you're a woman you can't do it' I'm like 'watch me!' You know? I mean we're constantly battling stereotypes. So, it's always a case of, you know, you can't do it because you're a girl.*

Hafeeza's role as an owner of a business in a technical sector positioned her as an outsider. To Hafeeza, it was necessary to validate her legitimacy by proving her capabilities. In her interview, Hafeeza further highlighted how underlying beliefs within her community position women as expected to perform well in more inherently feminine industries. Prior to starting her IT company, Hafeeza was the owner of a women's Sari[9] business. She explained that within her community, her status as an entrepreneur is assumed to be linked to the inherently feminine industry, while her role in the IT company was underplayed;

> *I started this with my husband... Some of them still think I do only the sari thing, you know, if they haven't spoken to me in while. So, some of them think I work for my husband and I'm like 'excuse me! No I don't! We work together! I started this company! Did you know that?' [she laughs]*

The gendered beliefs attached to her gender, lifecycle stage as a mother and ethnicity are used to link Hafeeza to gendered expectation as a business owner. As a result, Hafeeza often felt the need to remind others of her legitimacy as a co-owner of the IT business. This can be better understood by reflecting on the sociocultural norms associated with the relationship between husband and wife in a traditional Sri Lankan family. In the context of Sri Lanka, a woman's

[9] *Sari is a traditional attire worn by women in the South Asian region.*

role within the family unit is considered to be a secondary role to her spouse (Seneviratne and Curie, 2001); thus, this arrangement is assumed as the norm within her business arrangement with her husband. Prevailing literature defines co-preneurship as a venture that is owned and managed by a couple in a marriage-like relationship (Rutherford et al., 2006; Fitzgerald and Muske, 2002; Barnett and Barnett, 1988). In this arrangement, patriarchal beliefs linked to gender roles result in an assumption that the business relationship between the two parties reflects the domestic relationship. As a result, women are placed in a subordinate position to the male partner (Karataş-Özkan et al., 2011). These findings further expand literature on co-preneurship by presenting the status quo in the co-preneurial relationships, particularly how women are viewed as secondary in their position in more technical industries. Thus, to validate her claim to the role of entrepreneur and co-owner, Hafeez explained how she shielded certain aspects of gender especially in the early stages of motherhood to prove her commitment to her job. Among the participants who claimed the title of mother, this was a common theme where they felt their position of motherhood introduced a perception that their central commitment was to their child rather than to their business. As exemplified by Hafeeza, segmentation strategies allowed her to sperate her role as a new mother from duties relating to running the business.

The findings of the study revolve around the central theme that women's outsider position is attributed by gendered social structures that constrain women's claim to entrepreneurship and unravel that in the case of women entrepreneurs in the global south, the ability to claim the title of woman entrepreneur requires an internalised process of shifting culturally embedded perceptions.

Discussion and conclusion

The discourse surrounding entrepreneurship is strongly influenced by historical masculine perspectives surrounding who qualifies to be recognised as an entrepreneur. Feminist scholars such as Dean et al. (2017), Ahl et al. (2016) Poggesi et al. (2016) Ahl and Marlow (2012) Ahl (2006), and Bruni et al. (2004) argue against the simplistic and narrow representation of women entrepreneurs resulting from such one-dimensional narratives. Thus, feminist research on women entrepreneurs has expanded to examine the complex nuances attached to how women engage in the role of entrepreneurship to better inform policy makers. However, the insights into women entrepreneurs continue to be dominated by western literature that postulates the white, western, privileged women's experience as the norm, thereby presenting a status quo in how women in the global south are located in the field of women's entrepreneurship. Thus, this study was inspired by insightful research such as Essers et al. (2020), Godwyn and Stoddard (2017), Essers and Tedmanson (2014), Torri and Martinez (2014), Welter and Smallbone (2010), and Pio (2007) to unravel women entrepreneurs' experience from a non-western perspective.

The findings of this study provide a fresh view of women entrepreneurs in the global south and reveal the complexity of structures that locate women as entrepreneurs in the non-western landscape. The study of women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka exposes that the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, age and lifecycle stage position women as outsiders within the field of entrepreneurship; leading to their belongingness and legitimacy as rightful practitioners to be questioned. To engage in the role of entrepreneur, the respondents revealed a variety of micro strategies in the form of coping mechanisms that allowed them to navigate the complexity of the system of oppression formed by their gender, ethnicity, age, and lifecycle stage. The findings further expand on studies such as Filimonau et al. (2022), Smith and Nkomo (2021), Khandelwal and Sehgal (2018), and Lee Siew Kim and Seow Ling (2001) by revealing that, in order to fit into the role of entrepreneur, women follow micro level coping strategies to present

themselves as belonging. An emerging finding of this study is that micro strategies employed by women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka take the form of behavioural mechanisms and segmentation. Thus, careful curation of ones behaviour in different social spheres allow women entrepreneurs to cultivate an impression of belonginess within the realm of entrepreneurship. These findings resonate with Peiris et al. (2023) who argue that women entrepreneurs in the global south engage in a continuous process of impression management to fit into the role expectations attached to their gender and occupation. A further contribution by the present study to this narrative is in how micro strategies are followed to manage impressions to gain acceptance.

Furthermore, The findings emerging from the study of women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka highlight that the micro strategies employed are shaped by the intersection of gender, ethnicity, age, lifecycle stage, etc. Thus, in alignment with the findings by Smith and Nkomo (2021), the study finds the coping strategies emerge from a careful negotiation of how these women understood their social position through these dimensions, while also recognising the structural barriers that limit women's agency and autonomy within their role. While this study presents some insights into the difference in discrimination experienced by women entrepreneurs, this also lays the foundation for future works that may unpack the nuances of how women may subvert or resist the structures that constrain them.

An emerging contribution of this study to the body of work on co-preneurship is how women in the global south as a product of the intersectionality between gender, ethnicity, age and lifecycle stage are positioned as secondary to their partners in the entrepreneurial relationship. Thus, as a coping mechanism, women actively work to prove themselves as equal and capable.

Finally, the study suggests that a deeper understanding of the structural barriers faced by women in their everyday practice of entrepreneurship can shed light to how policies at a

national level can be developed to create an encouraging and inviting environment for women's participation in entrepreneurship. Especially in the case of Sri Lanka, which is currently facing economic turmoil, encouraging women's participation in the workforce and facilitating the overcoming of barriers imposed by social structures can be a way forward.

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