

# SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES HINDERING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS' BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY IN GAUTENG PROVINCE

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## Abstract

**Background and objective:** This study explored the socio-economic challenges women entrepreneurs face in the Gauteng province of South Africa. It further examines the specific challenges these women encounter in running their businesses.

**Study design:** A qualitative research approach was employed and draws insights from in-depth interviews with forty (40) women entrepreneurs operating in various sectors of the Gauteng SMME sector. The study used semi-structured interviews to collect data from the participants. Through these interviews, participants shared their experiences, perspectives and challenges hindering their business success in the region. The data was analysed manually using a thematic analytical technique.

**Results:** The findings identified several key challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. These were: (i) psychological issues, (ii) managerial issues, (iii) economic issues, (iv) sociocultural issues and (v) policy issues. These challenges are often exacerbated by gender-related disparities, which have substantial implications for business sustainability and growth potential. In addition to identifying these challenges, the study explores their impacts on business **sustainability, which include the inability to achieve** success, limited expansion, reduced confidence, a lack of strategic planning, and closure of the business, among others.

**Practical implications:** Through the lens of social capital theory, it becomes evident that financial support, access to mentorship, and networking opportunities are vital components needed by women entrepreneurs to achieve business sustainability in Gauteng.

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**Conclusion and summary:** This study concludes that the facilitation of gender-inclusive policies, mentorship programmes, and financial support structures is essential in nurturing a business ecosystem conducive for the success of women entrepreneurs.

**Keywords:** women entrepreneurship, business sustainability, socio-economic challenges, entrepreneurial resilience, social capital

**JEL classification:** J16

**Paper type:** Research study

## 1. Introduction

In Gauteng Province and the world at large, women entrepreneurs stand as resilient pillars of economic growth, innovation and job creation (Ogunlana, 2018). According to Doran, McCarthy and O'Connor (2018), entrepreneurship is the driving force of countless success stories that contribute to individual prosperity and economic growth in nations. In South Africa, a country where economic progress remains a pressing need, the importance of entrepreneurship is imperative (Bushe, 2019). Entrepreneurship, in essence, serves as the cornerstone for identifying opportunities in the market, conceiving novel solutions and boldly transforming ideas into tangible realities. Entrepreneurs, whether they emerge from diverse backgrounds or distinct walks of life, share a common trait: the ability to navigate uncertainty, take calculated risks and drive economic progress (Hechavarria, Bullough, Brush & Edelman, 2019). They are not merely business proprietors, but are also societal change-makers who contribute to the total well-being of communities and nations (Ge, Abbas, Ullah, Abbas, Sadiq & Zhang, 2019).

The significance of entrepreneurship in fostering economic development cannot be overstated, and women entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in driving this progress (Anderson & Ojediran, 2022). In the South African context, women entrepreneurs occupy a unique and prominent position in entrepreneurship (Makandwa, De Klerk & Saayman, 2023). They are a powerful force, not only for economic growth, but also for societal transformation. Women entrepreneurs have demonstrated remarkable resilience and innovation in establishing and managing businesses, often in sectors traditionally dominated by men (Kamberidou, 2013). Their entrepreneurial endeavours have contributed significantly to the national economy and catalysed the empowerment of women to bridge gender disparities and foster inclusive development (Kamberidou, 2020). Successful women entrepreneurs possess a diverse range of qualities that enable them to thrive in challenging environments. These qualities include, amongst others, determination, adaptability, effective communication and the ability to identify opportunities. They often bring unique perspectives and innovative solutions to the entrepreneurial journey, which drive their enterprises and the communities they serve (Rosca, Agarwal & Brem, 2020).

However, Kamberidou (2020) notes that the path of women entrepreneurs in South Africa is not without hurdles. While breaking barriers and defying traditional conventions, these enterprising women frequently face a myriad of challenges that can impede their entrepreneurial journey. These challenges, which range from limited access to finance and resources, to gender-based biases, pose formidable obstacles to their growth and sustainability. This study focused on the Gauteng province of South Africa, where women entrepreneurs face similar problems while socio-economic issues remain outstanding. To enhance success in the entrepreneurial sector of the province, these challenges need to be examined to determine the measures that can be tailored to ensure growth. The study explored the experiences of women entrepreneurs in this province, seeking to illuminate the specific challenges they encountered in their business processes. The aim of the study is to recognise women entrepreneurs' experiences and identify the socio-economic challenges they face in Gauteng Province. The findings of this study will play a crucial role in informing policy decisions, enabling policymakers to craft legislation that is free from gender bias. Such non-discriminatory laws will create an environment that is conducive to women entrepreneurs flourishing within diverse business sectors in Gauteng, the rest of South Africa and other developing nations.

## 2. Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory is rooted in sociology and economics, and focuses on the resources embedded within social networks and relationships, and how these resources can facilitate individual and collective action (Claridge, 2018a). The concept of social capital can be traced back to the early sociological writings of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber (Islam, 2018). Durkheim discussed the importance of social cohesion and collective values in maintaining social order. However, Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, introduced the concept of social capital in his work as the resources embedded within social networks, incorporating relationships, norms and trust (Claridge, 2018a). Social capital refers to the resources and benefits that individuals derive from their social networks, such as trust, reciprocity, information and social support (Tuominen & Haanpää, 2022). This theory recognises that social connections and relationships are valuable assets that can facilitate access to resources, opportunities and support systems (Claridge, 2018b). Claridge (2018b) further classified social capital into different forms: bonding social capital (within homogeneous groups), bridging social capital (across diverse groups), and linking social capital (connecting individuals to external resources and institutions). Regarding the assertion made by Claridge (2018b), Tuominen and Haanpää (2022) sustain that the central proposition of social capital is that relationships matter and that social networks are an asset which allow people to collaborate and coexist. Social capital has productive benefits, such as goodwill between people and groups,

and has been described as lubricating the fabric of society and allowing modern economies to function effectively (Swanson, Kim, Lee, Yang & Lee, 2020). This depicts that social capital enhances people or groups to work together by sharing values, norms, trust and belongings, which make exchange possible (Ievdokymov, Lehenchuk, Zakharov, Andrusiv, Usatenko, & Kovalenko, 2020).

The adoption of social capital theory can play a crucial role for women entrepreneurs in Gauteng Province in handling the socio-economic challenges they face. Access to supportive networks, and mentorship within their communities can provide valuable support to women entrepreneurs. Social networks can also offer access to business opportunities, partnerships, and potential customers, thereby enhancing the sustainability and growth of women-owned businesses. Social capital can help women entrepreneurs overcome barriers, such as limited access to financial resources, market knowledge and business expertise, by considering the collective resources and expertise of their networks. In the context of Gauteng Province, understanding the social networks and support systems available to women entrepreneurs can provide valuable insights into how these resources can be used to address their challenges to promote business sustainability. In this regard, policymakers and stakeholders can develop initiatives to facilitate the creation and enhancement of supportive networks and favourable communities, and this may involve investing in networking events, mentorship programmes, business incubators, and other resources that foster social connections and collaboration among women entrepreneurs in Gauteng Province. Policymakers can empower women entrepreneurs to overcome barriers, build resilience, and contribute to economic growth and development in the region by strengthening social capital.

### **3. A brief history of the journey of women's entrepreneurship in South Africa**

In the mosaic historical narrative of South Africa, women's entrepreneurship traces a resilient path through various epochs, intricately woven by socio-cultural, economic and political forces. In the pre-colonial era, long before European colonisers set foot on South African soil, many African societies operated with traditional economic systems where women were pivotal figures as traders, artisans and agriculturalists (Gaitskell, 2002). In the view of Pless et al. (2021), women's engagement in diverse economic activities showcased entrepreneurial traits that predated the formal concept of entrepreneurship. These women were integral to the economic fabric of their communities, laying the groundwork for future generations of women entrepreneurs (Raniga, 2021). During the apartheid era, from 1948 to 1994, the oppressive regime enforced discriminatory laws that severely limited opportunities for non-white South Africans, including women (Lensers, 2019). Amira (2023) points out that despite these harsh circumstances, some women defied the constraints by

establishing small businesses informally. In doing so, they sought economic sustenance for their families and became subtle agents of defiance against the discriminatory policies that sought to suppress their potential.

The mid-1990s marked a transformative era with the end of apartheid and the birth of a democratic South Africa. This political shift presented new opportunities and support mechanisms for women entrepreneurs (Eynon, 2017). The government's commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women translated into policies and programmes aimed at fostering women's entrepreneurship and the economic inclusion of women (Noyoo, 2019). This era became a turning point, catalysing the emergence of a new generation of women entrepreneurs. Throughout apartheid and into the democratic era, women's organisations have played a crucial role in advocacy for women's rights, economic empowerment and entrepreneurship (Noyoo, 2019). Organisations such as the African Women's Development Fund, the Businesswomen's Association of South Africa, the Women's Entrepreneurial Network, South African Women in Construction (SAWIC), the National Council of African Women and the Black Business Council for Women became pillars of support, offering training and networking opportunities for aspiring women entrepreneurs. These organisations have facilitated the exchange of knowledge and experiences, empowering women to navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship by providing a platform for collective action. They also provide access to education and resources and have played a pivotal role in enabling more women to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for entrepreneurial success. The emergence of microfinance institutions and support initiatives has contributed significantly to the growth of women's entrepreneurship (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015). As South Africa became more integrated into the global economy, women entrepreneurs have been influenced by international trends and cultures, leading to the growth of businesses with a focus on innovation and technology.

Despite the notable progress in the entrepreneurship path of women in South Africa, enduring challenges cast a shadow over the journey, impacting the growth of women entrepreneurs. Issues such as gender biases persist in many areas, affecting access to opportunities, resources and support (Martin & Barnard, 2013). In the realm of finance, women entrepreneurs often face barriers that hinder their access to capital. This financial constraint limits their ability to invest in business expansion and hampers their competitiveness in the market. Kamberidou (2020) affirms that societal norms continue to impose expectations and restrictions on women, which shape their entrepreneurial experiences and influence their choices of business sectors and leadership roles. However, the tenacious entrepreneurial spirit of South African women prevails as they make substantial contributions to the economy (Irene, 2017). Despite gender biases in the financial sector, entrepreneurs like Nokwazi Mzobe (the founder of Matoyana Business Solutions) is successfully empowering women entrepreneurs as she provides them with the skills and resources

needed to overcome gender-specific obstacles in the business world (Mzobe, 2017). SAWIC, which was founded by Hlengiwe Ndlovu, not only empowers women in the male-dominated construction industry, but also facilitates their access to financial resources and training (Sowetan, 2019). The leadership of Dr Anna Mokgokong (the co-founder of Community Investment Holdings [CIH]), challenges traditional gender norms, inspiring a new generation of women entrepreneurs to break free from societal constraints (CIH, 2023). These are only a few examples that illustrate the resilience, empowerment and contributions of South African women entrepreneurs. The evolving journey of women in entrepreneurship in South Africa reflects not just a narrative of perseverance despite barriers, but is also a testament to the strength and impact of women entrepreneurs in the vibrant economy of the nation.

#### 4. Insights and support for women's entrepreneurship

In the 21st century, scholars and researchers are presented with perspectives on the significance of women's entrepreneurial activities, with the discourse ranging from overemphasising the role of women entrepreneurs to downplaying their contributions (Bullough, Renko & Abdelzaher, 2017; Rashid & Ratten, 2020; Ge *et al.*, 2022). However, Ge *et al.* (2022) maintain that some scholars tend to oversimplify women, reducing them to typical social models. Arguments vary, with some suggesting that a high proportion of women fear failure (Holienka, Jančovičová & Kovačičová, 2016; Ng & Jenkins, 2018) while others assert that women entrepreneurs are highly ambitious, open to challenges and dynamic in pursuing their goals (Hasan & Almubarak, 2016; Ahmed, Amponsah & Deasi, 2018; Kamberidou, 2020). When delving into topics such as innovation, managerial approaches or leadership styles, Henry *et al.* (2016) describe female entrepreneurs as more democratic, interactive and transformational. Some scholars, such as Kamberidou and Fabry (2012), Kamberidou (2013) and Henry *et al.* (2016), argue that women exhibit better listening skills and a greater tendency to collaborate. This perspective highlights the importance of diversity and of integrating the gender dimension into entrepreneurial discussions.

Over the past two decades, numerous studies have recommended the implementation of legislation, policies and practices to encourage sustained female entrepreneurial involvement and foster socio-economic development (Ellis, 2007; Akhalwaya, 2012; Mathibe, 2019; Kamberidou, 2020). Khaire (2011) considers women to be innovative entrepreneurs and advocates for the implementation of policies that promote their empowerment. Akhalwaya (2012) proposes training opportunities that are exclusively for women, financial assistance, and policies aimed at motivating and supporting women entrepreneurs. Kalim (2012) is aligned with this approach, suggesting the need for equal opportunity policies for women entrepre-



neurs, including well-defined property rights, transparency and adherence to the rule of law.

In South Africa, women entrepreneurs have benefitted from targeted funding programmes initiated by both financial institutions and governmental agencies (Mathibe, 2019). For instance, the Industrial Development Corporation provides financial support to women-owned businesses across various sectors, empowering them to overcome financial constraints (Mabongo, 2019). Institutions and government departments such as the Department of Trade and Industry, the Small Enterprise Development Agency, the National Empowerment Fund, Local Economic Development, the Department of Economic Development, KHULA Enterprise Finance Limited, NTSIKA, the SA Micro Finance Fund, the National Business Advisory Council, the Local Business Service Centre Programme and others have been established to assist women entrepreneurs to access funding opportunities (Gasealahwe, 2023). These funds help to address the historical gender gap in terms of women accessing capital and enabling women entrepreneurs to start, sustain or expand their businesses (Mabongo, 2019). Furthermore, mentoring and training programmes have been instrumental in equipping women entrepreneurs with essential skills (Bhatti *et al.*, 2021). The Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, in collaboration with local partners, runs the Road to Growth programme in South Africa (Latchem & Latchem, 2018). According to Latchem and Latchem (2018), this initiative offers mentorship, business training and networking opportunities to women entrepreneurs, fostering their personal and professional development. Similarly, the Lionesses of Africa platform connects women entrepreneurs and provides access to mentorship, skills workshops and a supportive community (Mukuka, 2019).

Recognising the need for a conducive business environment, South Africa has implemented policies to address gender-based barriers in all the provinces, including Gauteng. For instance, the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Act includes provisions for the advancement of women in business (Musabayana & Mutambara, 2022). Companies that comply with gender equity targets receive higher B-BBEE ratings, which encourages gender inclusivity. The 30% Club Southern Africa advocates for gender diversity on corporate boards, promoting a more inclusive leadership landscape for women entrepreneurs (Scheepers, Douman & Moodley, 2018). The establishment of women-specific business incubators and innovation hubs in South Africa provides a dedicated space for women entrepreneurs to collaborate, learn and access resources (Visser, 2020). These platforms offer mentorship, networking opportunities and infrastructure support tailored to alleviate the challenges women face in business. Advocacy efforts are also provided to raise awareness about the challenges for women entrepreneurs. In this regard, the South African Women Entrepreneurs Network advocates for policies that support women in business, and creates awareness about available resources (Molefe, 2019). Collaborative efforts between government agencies, financial institutions and private companies have

resulted in innovative programmes, funding opportunities and mentorship initiatives that further empower women on their entrepreneurial journey (Okeke-Uzodike, Okeke-Uzodike & Ndinda, 2018). Despite the support by the government and its agencies, research affirms that women entrepreneurs in Gauteng Province still face numerous challenges. These are expounded upon in the next section.

## 5. Socio-economic challenges hindering women entrepreneurs

The landscape of entrepreneurship has evolved significantly over the years, with increasing participation by women entrepreneurs globally. However, women entrepreneurs often encounter distinct economic challenges that can hinder their business growth and sustainability (Mulaudzi, 2022). According to Aneke (2015), one of the prominent challenges is limited access to finance, which is often exacerbated by gendered barriers in funding. Access to adequate financial resources is critical for the establishment and growth of any entrepreneurial venture (Enwereji, 2022). It enables entrepreneurs to invest in their businesses, expand their operations and navigate economic uncertainties. However, access to finance remains a persistent challenge for women entrepreneurs, particularly in emerging economies like South Africa (Gasealahwe, 2023). In Gauteng Province, where entrepreneurial activities are vibrant, socio-economic challenges persist that warrant examination (Sigauke, 2020). However, the study of Mulaudzi (2022) indicates that women entrepreneurs often encounter gender bias when seeking funding from traditional financial institutions. This bias manifests in various forms, including skepticism about the business acumen of women and concerns about their ability to repay loans. As a result, women entrepreneurs may face higher scrutiny and more stringent lending criteria, which makes it challenging to access loans or credit lines on favourable terms (Mhlongo, 2019). This financial hurdle impedes their ability to invest, expand their operations and navigate economic uncertainties, hindering the entire sustainability of their businesses.

Another barrier to the success of women's entrepreneurship is the challenge to secure loans due to a lack of collateral and assets (Derera *et al.*, 2014). Many women entrepreneurs find themselves in a predicament where they have limited personal assets to offer as collateral, which significantly impedes their ability to access essential financial resources. According to Derera *et al.* (2014), this predicament is often exacerbated by societal norms that restrict women's ownership or control of assets, which further limits their financial flexibility. Jordaan (2020) affirms that in response to these challenges, resourceful women entrepreneurs often turn to alternative avenues such as informal financial networks or microfinance institutions to secure funding. While these options offer a lifeline by providing an alternative source of financing, they come with their own set of challenges. Informal financial networks and microfinance institutions may impose higher interest rates on loans,



creating financial burdens for women-led businesses (Wamaita, 2012; Futha, 2021). Additionally, the loan sizes offered by these institutions are often limited, impacting the scalability and growth potential of women-owned enterprises (Derera *et al.*, 2014). These challenges highlight the need for comprehensive interventions that address the financial constraints and underlying societal norms that contribute to the gendered barriers in entrepreneurship.

According to Kanayo (2021), access to resources and support is a critical determinant of the success and sustainability of women-led businesses. Beyond financial capital, women entrepreneurs require access to a range of resources, which include physical infrastructure, technology and market information. Supportive networks and organisations can provide valuable resources, such as co-working spaces, access to markets and information about business opportunities (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015). Gauteng Province, as an economic hub, offers a range of resources and support mechanisms for entrepreneurs (Gasealahwe, 2023). However, disparities in access persist as women entrepreneurs encounter barriers when attempting to access these resources, which include lack of information about available opportunities, limited representation in networking groups, and gender biases in terms of access to mentorship and support organisations (Derera *et al.*, 2014). Training and capacity building are essential components of entrepreneurship development, enabling entrepreneurs to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to manage and grow their businesses. For women entrepreneurs, tailored training programmes can address the specific challenges they face, such as managing work–life balance and building confidence in a male-dominated business environment. Training initiatives in Gauteng have recognised the importance of gender-sensitive programmes that address the unique needs of entrepreneurs (Jones, 2021). These programmes often focus on areas such as financial management, marketing and leadership skills (Mulaudzi, 2022). However, gaps in access to training opportunities persist, with some women entrepreneurs facing constraints related to time, location and/or affordability. It is crucial to address potential barriers such as geographical distance to ensure that women from all parts of the province can access these valuable resources. These barriers hamper their ability to fully leverage the available resources, hindering the sustainability of their businesses.

Gender bias and stereotyping are deeply ingrained societal attitudes that significantly impact women entrepreneurs in South Africa (Mazonde, 2016; Love, Nikolaev & Dhakal, 2023). The pervasive force of patriarchy constrains the growth and success of women in business by perpetuating traditional gender roles that confine them to domestic spheres, undermining their perceived suitability for entrepreneurial leadership (Mazonde, 2016). This influence is evident in various aspects, particularly in accessing financial resources and opportunities. According to Chinomona and Maziriri (2015), women entrepreneurs frequently encounter gender bias when seeking funding from traditional financial institutions, leading to negative percep-

tions of their leadership abilities and doubts about their business acumen. These biases can result in lower funding allocations and less favourable terms, particularly in venture capital and angel investment contexts. Stereotypes about women's preferred business sectors further limit their opportunities in high-growth industries (Akhawaya, 2012). In Gauteng Province, these biases intersect with regional dynamics and compound the challenges for women entrepreneurs (Valla, 2012; Scott *et al.*, 2023). The regulatory and institutional constraints pose barriers to entry and hinder business registration or impede access to licenses and permits (Akhawaya, 2012; Okeke-Uzodike *et al.*, 2018). Valla (2012) and Visser (2020) affirm that women entrepreneurs in Gauteng face compounded challenges in transversing these complex regulatory environments. Understanding the specific regulatory and institutional constraints in Gauteng Province remains vital for assessing how local policies may inadvertently perpetuate gender disparities.

## 6. Research methods

This study was conducted in the Gauteng province of South Africa in 2023. The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, recognising the importance of understanding and interpreting the experiences, perspectives and realities of women entrepreneurs in the province. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the economic challenges women entrepreneurs encounter and their impact on business sustainability. A qualitative research approach was adopted to facilitate a holistic understanding of the experiences of women entrepreneurs. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is particularly well suited to uncovering the complex nature of the challenges participants face and the contextual factors that influence their experiences.

Face-to-face interviews were adopted for the study, conducted with 40 women entrepreneurs operating in diverse enterprises, such as wholesale and retail trade, hairdressing, financial lending services, catering services, cleaning ventures, internet/business centres, furniture businesses and others in Gauteng Province (Participants 1–10 wholesale and retail; Participants 11–15 hairdressing salon; Participants 16–20 financial lending services; Participants 21–25 catering services; Participants 26–30 cleaning ventures; Participants 31–35 internet/business ventures; Participants 36–40 furniture business and others). Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used to select the participants for the study. Purposive sampling allowed for the deliberate selection of women entrepreneurs with diverse backgrounds and experiences, which ensured the representation of a wide range of perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection instrument. The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in questioning or prompting while ensuring that the key research objectives were addressed. The interview guide enabled exploration of the socio-economic challenges faced by women entrepreneurs

and the impact of these challenges on business sustainability. The face-to-face interviews were conducted at a location that was convenient for the participants, which promoted a comfortable and conducive environment for open and candid discussion. Each interview session was recorded with a field note and with the participant's consent, allowing for the accurate capture of responses. The interviews were conducted from February to June 2023 (five months), allowing the researchers to actively engage with the study participants.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data gathered from the interviews. Thematic analysis involves a systematic process of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Ivankova, 2015). It allowed for the exploration of commonalities and differences in the participants' responses, with a focus on identifying recurring themes related to the economic challenges the women entrepreneurs faced in Gauteng. The analysis conformed to the following procedure: the organisation of data, the coding of data, data representation, data interpretation and the summary of data. After the categories were identified, the outcomes were grouped into five themes, which were discussed to find solutions to the problem of the study. Ethical guidelines and principles were adhered to throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and confidentiality. The participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous in the reporting of the findings. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee (University of South Africa).

## 7. Presentation of the results

This section presents the findings of the study, which sought to investigate the experiences and socio-economic challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in Gauteng Province. The results obtained from the interviews with the participants were grouped into five themes representing recurring or significant patterns or ideas that emerged from the data during the analysis process. The themes that were identified were psychological issues, managerial issues, economic issues, socio-cultural issues and policy issues. Sub-themes were also identified from the main themes, representing the perceptions of different participants regarding the main theme. The sub-themes or categories represent the different perceptions of participants that fall under the themes. The results presented in Table 1 were further discussed in the subsequent section.

Table 1 presents the psychological issues women face in Gauteng Province.

**Table 1.** Challenges for women entrepreneurs: Psychological issues

Themes of the study	Categories	Direct excerpts from one of the participants	Impacts on sustainability
Psychological issues	Gender bias and discrimination	<b>PA3 asserted,</b> <i>There's a prevailing perception that women are less capable in certain fields. It's disheartening to prove yourself repeatedly just because of your gender.</i>	Reduced confidence, increased stress and hindered decision making, leading to potential disengagement and burnout.
	Societal expectations and gender roles	<b>PA10 said,</b> <i>As a woman, society expects me to prioritise family over career. Balancing both is a constant struggle, and there's a societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles.</i>	Conforming to traditional roles may limit innovation and strategic thinking, impacting the adaptability and resilience of the business.
	Imposter syndrome/Lack of mentorship and role models	<b>PA20 said,</b> <i>I wish I had more female mentors. It's tough navigating a male-dominated field without guidance from someone who's been through similar experiences.</i>	Limited guidance and inspiration may result in a lack of strategic vision, hindering long-term planning and growth.
	Negative attitudes towards women	<b>PA25 said,</b> <i>Negative attitudes towards women pursuing leadership roles are pervasive. It creates a hostile environment, making it challenging to thrive and contribute effectively.</i>	Negative perceptions can influence market reception, affecting customer trust and brand reputation, thereby impacting business sustainability.
	Cultural and societal norms/Family responsibility	<b>PA7 said,</b> <i>Cultural norms place a heavy burden on women to fulfil family responsibilities. It's often at the expense of career aspirations, creating a constant internal conflict.</i>	Balancing family obligations may lead to time constraints, affecting managerial focus and strategic planning.

Source: own elaboration.

According to Table 1, the problems women face in Gauteng Province include gender bias and discrimination, societal expectations and gender roles, imposter syndrome/lack of mentorship and role models, negative attitudes towards women, and cultural and societal norms/family responsibility. Table 2 presents the managerial issues women entrepreneurs face in business.

**Table 2.** Challenges for women entrepreneurs: Managerial issues

Themes of the study	Categories	Direct excerpts from one of the participants	Impacts on sustainability
Managerial issues	Leadership and decision making	<b>PA3 said,</b> <i>Women entrepreneurs often encounter challenges in accessing leadership roles, impacting the diversity of decision making within enterprises. Limited representation at the top levels may hinder innovation and adaptability.</i>	Limited opportunities for women in leadership roles may result in a lack of diverse perspectives and potentially hinder innovation, adaptability and the ability to navigate complex challenges and seize opportunities, potentially affecting long-term sustainability.
	Limited networking opportunities	<b>PA30 said,</b> <i>The restricted access to professional networks for women entrepreneurs poses a significant hurdle. This limitation can impede collaboration, mentorship and the establishment of valuable business connections critical for sustainable growth.</i>	Reduced access to potential clients, partners and market insights, limiting the business's ability to adapt and innovate.
	Work-life balance	<b>PA32 said,</b> <i>Work-life balance challenges among women entrepreneurs are prevalent, potentially leading to burnout. Sustainable business practices require a healthy and motivated workforce, resolving work-life balance issues crucial for long-term success.</i>	Potential burnout, reduced productivity and challenges that affect organisational health.
	Market dynamics	<b>PA36 said,</b> <i>Women entrepreneurs often grapple with limited awareness of market trends and dynamics. This can impact strategic decision making, hindering the enterprise's ability to adapt to evolving market conditions and meet customer demands effectively.</i>	Limited awareness of market trends and dynamics can result in suboptimal strategic decisions. Adapting to changing market conditions is essential for sustainability, and challenges in this area may hinder the enterprise's ability to meet evolving customer demands.
	Customer relationship management	<b>PA39 said,</b> <i>Challenges in managing customer relationships can result in lower satisfaction and retention rates. Building and maintaining positive customer relationships are essential for sustainability, and difficulties in this area may adversely affect the long-term success of the enterprise.</i>	Difficulties in managing customer relationships may lead to lower customer satisfaction and retention rates. Sustainable enterprises often rely on strong customer loyalty and positive relationships, making effective customer relationship management crucial for long-term success.
	Financial management	<b>PA40 said,</b> <i>Limited access to financial resources and challenges in financial management pose significant obstacles. Without adequate financial strategies, women entrepreneurs may struggle to invest in growth opportunities, innovate and maintain stability during economic uncertainties.</i>	Limited access to financial resources and challenges in financial management can impede the enterprise's ability to invest in growth opportunities, innovate and weather economic downturns.
	Technology integration	<b>PA12 said,</b> <i>Insufficient technology integration is a common challenge for women entrepreneurs. This limitation can impact competitiveness and operational efficiency, hindering the enterprise's ability to adapt to technological advancements and stay ahead in the market.</i>	Insufficient technology integration may result in a lack of competitiveness and operational efficiency. Sustainable businesses often leverage technology for improved processes, innovation and staying ahead in the market.

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2 shows that the managerial challenges women face include leadership and decision-making capabilities, limited networking opportunities, work–life balance, market dynamics, customer relationship management, financial management, and technology integration. Table 3 presents the economic challenges women face.

**Table 3.** Challenges for women entrepreneurs: Economic issues

Themes of the study	Categories	Direct excerpts from one of the participants	Impacts on sustainability
Economic issues	Limited access to financial capital	<b>PA18 said,</b> <i>Women entrepreneurs often face challenges in accessing financial capital, limiting their ability to invest in business growth, innovation and overall sustainability.</i>	Restricts investment in growth opportunities, limits operational efficiency and hampers the ability to navigate economic uncertainties.
	Technology and digital divide	<b>PA27 said,</b> <i>A significant digital divide persists for women entrepreneurs, affecting their access to technological resources and digital platforms crucial for business operations and competitiveness.</i>	Reduced competitiveness, hindered market reach and limitations in adopting efficient business processes.
	Education and training	<b>PA29 said,</b> <i>Limited access to education and training opportunities hampers women entrepreneurs' ability to acquire essential skills, hindering their professional development and business success.</i>	Impact: Limited skill sets may impede the adoption of new technologies and innovative business practices.
	Limited access to market information	<b>PA34 said,</b> <i>Access to crucial market information is constrained for women entrepreneurs, impacting their decision-making processes and ability to respond effectively to market dynamics.</i>	Reduced ability to identify market trends, customer preferences and competitive dynamics, impacting strategic decision making.
	Lack of collateral security to access funding	<b>PA36 said,</b> <i>The absence of collateral security poses a barrier for women entrepreneurs seeking funding, limiting their access to loans and other financial resources necessary for business expansion and sustainability.</i>	Constrains access to funding, limiting investment in growth initiatives and potentially hindering business expansion.

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3 confirms that the economic challenges women face in Gauteng Province include limited access to financial capital, technology and digital divide, education and training, limited access to market information, and lack of collateral security to access funding. Table 4 presents the socio-cultural challenges women face.



**Table 4.** Challenges for women entrepreneurs: Socio-cultural issues

Themes of the study	Categories	Direct excerpts from one of the participants	Impacts on sustainability
Socio-cultural issues	Cultural and societal norms	<b>PA6 said,</b> <i>Cultural norms strongly influence our approach to leadership. There's a prevailing expectation that a leader should exhibit assertiveness, a trait often associated with masculinity. This cultural norm can create challenges for women leaders who may have a collaborative leadership style.</i>	Conforming to traditional norms may limit business innovation and adaptation to evolving market trends.
	Societal expectations and gender roles	<b>PA8 said,</b> <i>Societal expectations regarding women's roles can be stifling. There's an unwritten script dictating how women should balance career and family. This pressure to conform to traditional gender roles can limit opportunities and create internal conflicts.</i>	Limited diversity in leadership and decision making, potentially hindering creativity and strategic thinking.
	Family responsibility	<b>PA9 said,</b> <i>Family responsibilities impact career decisions and trajectories. The expectation that women should bear the primary burden of caregiving often results in career interruptions. Striking a balance between family responsibilities and professional aspirations is an ongoing challenge.</i>	Balancing family obligations may impact work availability and responsiveness, affecting operational efficiency.
	Negative attitudes towards women	<b>PA11 asserted,</b> <i>Negative attitudes towards women in leadership persist. It's disheartening to encounter skepticism about our abilities solely based on gender. Overcoming such attitudes requires a concerted effort to educate and promote inclusivity in professional settings.</i>	Hinders community support, customer trust and employee morale, potentially affecting brand loyalty and business sustainability.

Source: own elaboration.

In Table 4, the findings confirm that the socio-cultural issues women face in Gauteng Province include cultural and societal norms, societal expectations and gender roles, family responsibility, and negative attitudes towards women.

According to Table 5, women entrepreneurs in Gauteng Province face policy issues such as institutional and policy constraints and the regulatory environment. The next section presents a discussion of the results.

**Table 5.** Challenges for women entrepreneurs: Policy issues

Themes of the study	Categories	Direct excerpts from one of the participants	Impacts on sustainability
Policy issues	Institutional and policy constraints	<b>PA17 said,</b> <i>The regulatory environment significantly impacts our strategic planning. Ambiguous regulations create uncertainty, making it challenging to anticipate compliance requirements. A more transparent and streamlined regulatory framework would greatly contribute to the stability of our business.</i>	Compliance challenges and administrative burdens may increase operational costs and limit flexibility in adapting to market changes.
	The regulatory environment	<b>PA25 said,</b> <i>Adherence to regulatory standards is paramount, but the evolving nature of regulations in our industry introduces uncertainties. The need for continuous adaptation to comply with changing requirements creates a constant challenge for long-term planning and sustainability.</i>	Stringent regulations may hinder business agility, limit scalability and increase the complexity of operations, affecting overall sustainability.

Source: own elaboration.

## 8. Discussion of the results

The discussion of the findings of this study focuses on the five themes identified in the study results. Concerning the psychological issues, this study highlighted pervasive gender bias and discrimination encountered by the women entrepreneurs, adversely affecting their psychological well-being. Constant pressure being put on entrepreneurs to prove themselves, rooted in the prevailing stereotypes, led to diminished confidence, increased stress and compromised decision making, potentially resulting in disengagement and burnout. Societal expectations, particularly the struggle to balance family and career due to traditional gender roles, exacerbated these psychological challenges, which limited innovation and strategic thinking, which is in accordance with previous research by Agrawal (2018) on the challenges facing women entrepreneurs. Additionally, the participants concurred that imposter syndrome, a lack of mentorship and negative attitudes towards women contributed to psychological stress and hindered long-term planning. Kamberidou (2020) points out the importance of addressing cultural norms and family responsibilities, which create internal conflicts and impact managerial focus. The findings align with the study of Neneh (2021) on gender bias, work-life balance and the pivotal role of mentorship in women’s career development.

Regarding managerial challenges for women entrepreneurs, the study revealed critical issues related to lack of leadership and resilience attributes. Other challenges include a lack of networking abilities, an inability to understand market dynamics,

difficulties in managing customer relationships, inadequate financial management, and insufficient technology integration. Findings from the study highlight the detrimental impact of restricted access to professional networks, emphasising the crucial role of networks in career advancement and business success. The study noted that the limited awareness of market dynamics may impede the adaptability of women entrepreneurs to meet evolving customer demands. Effective customer relationship management was highlighted as crucial for long-term success, which is deemed important to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. This study noted that poor financial management and technology integration emerged as significant challenges with implications for investments, competitiveness and operational efficiency. The limited opportunities for women in leadership roles not only affect decision-making diversity, but also have the potential to hinder innovation and adaptability (Bullough *et al.*, 2015). Enwereji (2023) affirms that poor financial management remains one of the main challenges inhibiting the success of entrepreneurs in the South African context.

Regarding the economic challenges, the participants concurred that women entrepreneurs faced formidable challenges, which included limited access to financial capital, a persistent digital divide, constrained educational opportunities, difficulties in obtaining market information and limited abilities to possess collateral security. This conforms with the study of Akhalwaya (2012), who affirms that the persistent gender disparities in accessing financial resources have hindered women's economic empowerment and business development. The participants of the study affirmed that the digital gender gap has hindered access to technological resources for women entrepreneurs, which reduces competitiveness and market reach and limits the adoption of efficient business processes. Ojo, Mafimisebi and Amdt (2022) confirm that the lack of entrepreneurial education for female entrepreneurs has limited their access to technological resources in the country. The study emphasised the relationship between education, training and entrepreneurship and stressed the necessity to provide accessible educational opportunities for women entrepreneurs. Challenges in accessing market information and collateral security were identified as significant barriers hindering women entrepreneurs in Gauteng Province from achieving their strategic goals. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Chinomona and Maziriri (2015) and Mulaudzi (2022), who also stressed the critical role of market information and collateral security in shaping business strategies.

According to the findings of the study, the socio-cultural challenges faced by women entrepreneurs included, amongst others, cultural and societal norms, societal expectations that restricted women to traditional roles, family responsibilities that disrupted career paths, and persistent negative attitudes towards women. The study highlighted the limiting impact of traditional norms on the business success of women entrepreneurs. According to Little (2016), traditional norms limit individual women entrepreneurs and stifle economic growth by hindering the full utilisation

of women's entrepreneurial potential. Societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, and assumed family responsibilities were also identified in this study as factors that posed challenges to operational efficiency. These points are raised by Agrawal (2018), who identifies the detrimental impact of these societal expectations on women entrepreneurs. Agrawal's work likely delved into the intricate ways in which societal norms influenced women's roles in the business sphere, leading to operational challenges. The research conducted by Agrawal is in line with broader literature emphasizing the need for organisations and policymakers to address societal expectations that hinder women's professional growth and success (Little, 2016; Agrawal, 2018; Kamberidou, 2020; Mustafa & Treanor, 2022). This highlights the importance of promoting cultural shifts and establishing supportive policies to create an environment where women entrepreneurs can thrive without being unduly burdened by traditional expectations and assumed family responsibilities.

Finally, this study discovered the significant impact of institutional and regulatory constraints, such as ambiguous regulations and the nature of regulatory standards, on women entrepreneurs. In the view of Emami, Ashourizadeh and Packard (2023), these challenges in regulatory environments can lead to increased operational costs and decreased flexibility, which can impact long-term planning and adaptability. The study of Emami et al. (2023) sustains the importance of regulatory clarity and adaptability for business success, emphasising the need for a supportive regulatory framework that fosters innovation and sustainability in the entrepreneurial sector. Stringent regulations may hinder business agility, limit scalability and increase the complexity of operations, all of which affect the sustainability of businesses (Bullough et al. 2015). This emphasises the urgency of addressing institutional and policy constraints to create an environment conducive to sustain the growth and success of women entrepreneurs. Institutional and policy constraints, as highlighted by the study, significantly impact strategic planning for women entrepreneurs. Ambiguous regulations create uncertainty, making it challenging to anticipate compliance requirements. A more transparent and streamlined regulatory framework is suggested to contribute to the stability of businesses.

## **9. Recommendations of the study**

The recommendations of this study are addressed to women entrepreneurs and to the government and its agencies.

### **9.1. Recommendations to women entrepreneurs**

The recommendations addressed to women entrepreneurs are as follows.

- Build supportive networks: Women entrepreneurs should actively seek and engage in mentorship programmes, business networks and support groups. They

- should also establish connections with other women entrepreneurs to share experiences and insights.
- Promote skills development: Women entrepreneurs should invest in continuous education and training to enhance their skills and stay abreast of industry advancements. They should participate in workshops, seminars and online courses to develop leadership and managerial competencies.
  - Advocate for inclusivity: Women should challenge gender bias by actively participating in discussions and initiatives promoting gender equality. They should always advocate for inclusive workplace practices and diverse leadership within their own businesses.
  - Strategic planning: Women entrepreneurs should develop long-term business plans considering potential challenges and opportunities. They should prioritise strategic initiatives that foster innovation, adaptability and resilience.
  - Financial management: Women entrepreneurs should seek financial literacy training to enhance their skills in financial management. They should explore alternative funding sources, such as grants and partnerships, to overcome limitations in accessing traditional financial capital.
  - Technology integration: Women entrepreneurs should embrace technology to enhance operational efficiency and competitiveness. Moreover, they should invest in digital tools and platforms that align with business needs and industry trends.
  - Advocate for policy changes: Women entrepreneurs should collaborate with industry associations to lobby for supportive policies and regulatory reforms. They should engage in advocacy efforts to address gender specific challenges in entrepreneurship.

## 9.2. Recommendations to the government

The recommendations to the government and its agencies are as follows.

- Policy reforms: The government and its agencies should review and revise existing regulations to create a more transparent and supportive business environment for women entrepreneurs by implementing policies that encourage gender diversity and equality in entrepreneurship.
- Access to education and training: The government and its agencies should establish more programmes to provide accessible education and training opportunities for women entrepreneurs. They should collaborate with educational institutions and industry partners to offer targeted skills development initiatives.
- Financial support programmes: The government and its agencies should develop and promote financial support programmes tailored for women entrepreneurs. They should facilitate access to loans, grants and venture capital, addressing the specific challenges for women in securing financial resources.
- Networking opportunities: The government and its agencies should create platforms and events to facilitate networking and collaboration among women en-

trepreneurs. They should support initiatives that connect women entrepreneurs with mentors and role models.

- Awareness campaigns: The government and its agencies should launch awareness campaigns to challenge societal norms and stereotypes about women in business. They should promote the economic benefits of diverse and inclusive entrepreneurship.
- Research and data collection: The government and its agencies should invest in research to better understand the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. They should use data to inform evidence-based policy decisions and measure the effectiveness of implemented initiatives.
- Regular review of the regulatory environment: The government and its agencies should establish mechanisms for regular review and adjustment of the regulatory environment to minimise uncertainties for businesses. They should solicit feedback from entrepreneurs to identify areas of improvement in the regulatory framework.
- Collateral alternatives: The government and its agencies should explore alternative funding models that do not solely rely on collateral security. This could involve promoting peer-to-peer lending, community-based financing and/or government-backed financial programmes for women entrepreneurs.
- Mentorship programmes: The government and its agencies should establish mentorship programmes and platforms that connect experienced entrepreneurs with aspiring women business owners. They should foster the development of role models to inspire and guide the next generation of women entrepreneurs.

## 10. Conclusion

The findings highlight the imperative for a holistic and collaborative approach to addressing the socio-economic challenges hindering the sustainability of women entrepreneurs in Gauteng Province. Drawing from insights gleaned through social exchange theory, which holds the dynamics of reciprocal relationships and exchanges within social networks in high esteem, it becomes evident that fostering supportive environments is essential. This study reaffirms the significance of gender-inclusive policies, mentorship programmes, and financial support structures in nurturing a business ecosystem conducive for the success of women entrepreneurs. Moving forward, dismantling gender-based barriers and fostering a culture of inclusivity are paramount. This necessitates an intensive effort to create an ecosystem where the entrepreneurial spirit of women can flourish unencumbered. Through these collaborative endeavours, grounded in social exchange principles, an environment that empowers women entrepreneurs to thrive, innovate, and make substantial contributions to economic growth and sustainability in Gauteng Province and beyond can be cultivated. Further studies should explore the long-term impacts of gender-inclusive



policies and mentorship programmes on the sustainability of women entrepreneurs across different regions. Additionally, research on the effectiveness of various financial support structures in overcoming specific socio-economic barriers faced by women entrepreneurs would provide valuable insights for policy development.

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