



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond the Classroom: Gender and Dreams in South African Entrepreneurship

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This study explores how gender impacts students' aspirations to pursue entrepreneurship within South African higher education. Reviewing international and local literature, it highlights how gender influences entrepreneurial intentions and aspirations. The study proposes a conceptual framework that considers sociocultural factors, institutional practices, and individual agency. It reveals that gendered perceptions and societal expectations shape students' entrepreneurial visions. Despite traditional gender roles posing challenges, targeted educational interventions show potential for transformation. The framework includes concepts of empowerment, resilience, and mentorship to mitigate barriers faced by underrepresented groups, especially women. The paper calls for a critical examination of entrepreneurship curricula to ensure inclusivity and responsiveness to diverse student needs. By fostering equity and innovation, higher education institutions can reshape the entrepreneurial landscape in South Africa. This conceptual exploration aims to inspire further research and guide policymakers and educators in supporting all students' entrepreneurial aspirations, with implications extending to global discussions on gender, education, and entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship is recognized globally as a key driver of economic growth and innovation (Juliana, Hui, Clement, Solomon, & Elvis, 2021). In South Africa, with its high unemployment rates, developing entrepreneurial skills among students is essential. However, gender disparities remain in entrepreneurship education and outcomes. These disparities impact not only individual aspirations but also economic growth and innovation in South Africa.

Despite opportunities, gender disparities significantly influence students' ambitions and opportunities in entrepreneurship (BarNir, 2021). The role of gender in shaping entrepreneurial aspirations is increasingly recognized, especially in higher education. In South Africa, systemic inequalities make the intersection of gender and entrepreneurship a critical area of study. Female students often report lower confidence and ambition compared to male peers, due to societal norms discouraging women from business leadership roles (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024).

This study examines how gender affects students' aspirations to pursue entrepreneurship in South African higher education, using insights from both local and international studies. In this context, the study has two main goals: firstly, to investigate how gender affects students' aspirations in entrepreneurship education programs in higher education and secondly, to identify the obstacles that prevent female students from fully achieving their entrepreneurial potential. The objectives involve examining the perceptions of both male and female students towards entrepreneurship, assessing the impact of institutional support on these aspirations, and suggesting strategies to create a more inclusive entrepreneurial environment.

To achieve these aims, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

How do gender norms affect the entrepreneurial aspirations of students in South African higher education?

What barriers do female students face in pursuing entrepreneurship compared to their male counterparts?

By exploring these questions, this study seeks to enhance the conversation on gender and entrepreneurship in South Africa, offering insights that can shape policy and educational practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of gender and entrepreneurship in South Africa is a multifaceted issue influenced by sociocultural dynamics, institutional frameworks, and individual aspirations (Greyling, 2023). This literature review compiles recent research, highlighting key themes, practical examples, and ongoing challenges faced by aspiring female entrepreneurs in the country.

Gender Disparities in Entrepreneurship: International Perspectives

Research consistently shows gender disparities in entrepreneurial intentions. For instance, Kovaleva et al. (2023) found that women are less likely than men to express interest in entrepreneurship, often due to self-doubt and a lack of role models. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Gupta et al. (2009) concluded that women exhibit lower entrepreneurial intentions than men, influenced by factors such as socialization and access to resources.

Funding is one of the biggest obstacles that women entrepreneurs must overcome. Compared to their male counterparts, female entrepreneurs frequently receive less financial support (Villaseca, Navío-Marco, & Gimeno, 2021). Karlstrøm, Jansen, and Solheim (2024), for example, point out that venture capitalists frequently choose male entrepreneurs, which is indicative of deep-rooted prejudices in the investment community. In addition to limiting the potential for expansion of women-led businesses, this funding gap feeds the loop of under-representation in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

According to Bullough, Guelich, Manolova, and Schjoedt (2022), women's involvement in entrepreneurship is greatly impacted by cultural views regarding gender roles. Chowdhury (2024) asserts that traditional gender conventions deter women from undertaking economic endeavours in many cultures. According to Kabeer (2021), on the other hand, female entrepreneurship is more prevalent in areas with progressive attitudes on gender equality. This demonstrates the significance of how society views women's business prospects.

In order to comprehend gender discrepancies in business, intersectionality must be taken into account. According to research by Martinez et al. (2024), women from marginalised areas face particular difficulties since race, class, and geography intersect with gender (Fernandez, 2023). According to Aini, Cosio, Greenwald, Jacoby, Keene, Kim, E.,... & Vu (2023), women of colour frequently experience compounded disadvantages that restrict their access to networks and resources that are essential for achieving success as entrepreneurs.

Gender Disparities in Entrepreneurship: South African Context

Despite significant progress in gender equality, women still face substantial barriers to entrepreneurship (Irene, Abdullah, & Murithi, 2021). According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) (2022), female entrepreneurship rates are significantly lower than male rates, with women encountering unique barriers such as limited access to funding and networks. Research indicates that women are underrepresented in entrepreneurial activities, often due to sociocultural norms that discourage female participation in business ventures (Franzke et al., 2022). Irene, Abdullah, and Murithi (2021) also emphasize that socio-cultural factors significantly constrain women entrepreneurs in South Africa. For example, Love, Nikolaev, and Dhakal (2024) found that traditional gender roles and societal expectations significantly limit women's entrepreneurial aspirations and opportunities, as women are often perceived primarily as caretakers, which can detract from their pursuit of business goals.

Institutional Support and Educational Frameworks

Entrepreneurship education is vital for shaping students' aspirations and providing them with essential skills. Higher education institutions in South Africa play a significant role in fostering entrepreneurial mindsets through various programs. These programs, which promote gender equity and support female entrepreneurs, are crucial for creating an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem (Veckalne & Tambovceva, 2023). For instance, a university in Cape Town has initiatives that support female students in entrepreneurship through mentorship and funding opportunities (Jali, 2021). Such support can help women overcome barriers and pursue their entrepreneurial goals, though the effectiveness of these programs in promoting gender equity is still debated.

The curriculum and teaching methods in entrepreneurship education can influence gender-related aspirations (Pimpa, 2021). Research suggests that women may thrive in collaborative and supportive learning environments (Whitlock, Hampton & Campbell, 2023). Gender-sensitive teaching approaches could enhance female students' engagement and aspirations in entrepreneurship programs.

The Role of Networks and Mentorship

Networking and mentorship are crucial for entrepreneurial success, especially for women. Studies show that female entrepreneurs benefit greatly from mentorship, which provides guidance, support, and resources (Theaker, 2023). St-Jean & Tremblay (2020) emphasize the importance of female mentorship networks, noting that women with mentors are more likely to succeed. Organizations like the Women's Business Network connect aspiring female entrepreneurs with experienced businesswomen, fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing. Access to female role models and mentorship programs can significantly boost students' entrepreneurial aspirations (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021). In South Africa, initiatives promoting female entrepreneurship often include mentorship programs linking aspiring entrepreneurs with successful businesswomen (Kunene, 2023).

Individual Agency and Self-Efficacy

Individual agency, the ability to act independently and make choices (Code, 2020), is crucial for entrepreneurial aspirations. Studies indicate that women with higher self-efficacy are more likely to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities despite societal barriers (Brändle, & Kuckertz, . (2023), Hamdani et al. (2023), Tihic, Hadzic, & McKelvie. (2021)). Female students who participate in entrepreneurship training programs report increased confidence in their ability to start and manage businesses (Elliott, Mavriplis, & Anis, 2020). This underscores the importance of educational interventions that boost self-efficacy among aspiring female entrepreneurs.

Barriers to Female Entrepreneurship Aspirations

Despite the availability of entrepreneurship education programs, several barriers hinder female students' aspirations, including socio-cultural norms and access to resources. Traditional gender roles in many South African communities discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurship (Meyer & Krüger, 2021). Societal expectations often prioritize domestic responsibilities over entrepreneurial pursuits for women (Hudson, Breen, & Leung, 2020).

Access to financial resources remains a major obstacle for female entrepreneurs. Women frequently face challenges in securing funding due to biases within the financial sector (Ajiva, Ejike, & Abhulimen, 2024). In South Africa, where credit access is limited, this can discourage female students from pursuing entrepreneurial ventures.

Enablers of Female Entrepreneurship Aspirations

Supportive networks are crucial in boosting female students' entrepreneurial aspirations (Mitra & Basit, 2021). Studies show that women who participate in entrepreneurial networks are more likely to gain confidence in their abilities (Shahzad, Khan, Saleem, & Rashid, 2021). In South Africa, initiatives aimed at promoting female entrepreneurship often stress the importance of building supportive communities.

Research on gender and entrepreneurship in South Africa highlights the need to address sociocultural barriers, improve institutional support, and enhance individual agency among aspiring

female entrepreneurs. By fostering an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem, South Africa can leverage the potential of women entrepreneurs, contributing to both economic growth and social equity.

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework examines gender and entrepreneurial aspirations within South African higher education through a multidimensional lens. It incorporates three main components: sociocultural influences, institutional support, and individual agency. These elements interact to shape students' aspirations and experiences in entrepreneurship education.

Students' views on entrepreneurship are influenced by sociocultural variables, which include gender norms, stereotypes, and societal expectations (UI Hassan & Naz, 2020). Studies reveal that conventional gender norms frequently determine the occupations considered appropriate for both men and women, which in turn affects their aspirations to become entrepreneurs (Gupta, Turan, & Gunter, 2021). For instance, women may absorb messages from society that entrepreneurship is a field dominated by men, which could decrease their confidence and goals. This element emphasizes the importance of addressing these deeply held cultural views to create an atmosphere where both sexes feel equally empowered to pursue business endeavours.

Institutions of higher learning play a crucial influence in influencing entrepreneurial goals. Access to resources, mentorship, and curriculum that encourage inclusive behaviours are all components of effective institutional assistance (Cerna, Mezzanotte, et al., 2021). According to studies, organizations that proactively advance gender parity and offer specialized support systems can greatly increase the entrepreneurial aspirations of female students (Hartman & Barber, 2020). According to this concept, societal hurdles can be mitigated by institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion, which will encourage more women to pursue entrepreneurship.

Individual agency refers to the capacity of students to act independently and make choices regarding their entrepreneurial aspirations (Nieminen, Tai, Boud, & Henderson, 2022). This component emphasizes the importance of personal motivation, resilience, and self-efficacy in overcoming external barriers (Bandura, 1997). Empirical evidence suggests that individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities, regardless of gender (Wu, Jiang, et al., 2022). By fostering individual agency, educational programs can empower students to challenge societal norms and pursue their entrepreneurial dreams.

The interaction among these three components creates a dynamic environment that influences students' entrepreneurial aspirations. For instance, a supportive institutional framework can help mitigate the impact of negative sociocultural influences, thus enhancing individual agency. Conversely, persistent sociocultural barriers can undermine institutional efforts, making it essential for higher education institutions to adopt a holistic approach that integrates these elements.

This conceptual framework serves as a foundation for examining the complex relationship between gender and entrepreneurial aspirations in South African higher education. By addressing sociocultural influences, enhancing institutional support, and promoting individual agency, this study aims to provide actionable insights that can help bridge the gender gap in entrepreneurship.

METHODOLOGY

This conceptual paper uses qualitative research to examine the relationship between gender and entrepreneurial aspirations in South African higher education. The methodology involves synthesizing existing literature, identifying key themes, and developing a comprehensive conceptual framework to address the research questions.

The study is based on a systematic literature review focusing on three main areas: gender and entrepreneurship, the role of higher education institutions, and individual agency in entrepreneurial pursuits. The review process included sourcing peer-reviewed articles, books, and reports from the last five years using academic databases like Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus. Key search terms included "gender and entrepreneurship," "entrepreneurial aspirations in higher education," and "South Africa entrepreneurship education." The selected studies were analyzed for recurring themes and patterns related to gender disparities in entrepreneurial ambitions, barriers faced by female students, and the impact of institutional support. After the literature review, a thematic analysis was conducted to extract key insights and build the conceptual framework. This analysis aimed to

understand how sociocultural influences, institutional support, and individual agency intersect to shape entrepreneurial aspirations, following Braun, Clarke and Hayfield's (2022) guidelines for thematic analysis.

To ensure the robustness of the conceptual framework, the study includes a validation phase with expert feedback from academics and practitioners in entrepreneurship and gender studies. Their insights will help refine the framework, ensuring it accurately reflects the complexities of the gender-entrepreneurship relationship in the South African context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The exploration of gender and entrepreneurship in South Africa uncovers key insights into the challenges and opportunities for female entrepreneurs. Recent studies highlight themes such as sociocultural influences, institutional support, mentorship, and individual agency. These findings have important implications for policy and practice, emphasizing the need for inclusive strategies to support women entrepreneurs. The thematic analysis gave insight into the development of a conceptual framework.

Sociocultural Influences

Socio-cultural factors greatly influence women's entrepreneurial ambitions and experiences in South Africa. Research shows that sociocultural norms significantly influence women's entrepreneurial aspirations in South Africa (Badghish et al., 2023). Traditional gender roles often shape the types of businesses women start and their access to resources, with societal expectations prioritizing family and community duties over personal goals.

Traditional gender roles often lead women to prioritize family responsibilities over business pursuits, limiting their entrepreneurial ambitions (Inkumsah, 2024). Marcus (2021) argues that these norms create psychological barriers, discouraging women from entrepreneurship by internalizing societal expectations. This is supported by Hamdani et al. (2023), who highlight that societal perceptions of gender roles can impact women's confidence and willingness to engage in entrepreneurial activities.

Despite these challenges, there is a growing acknowledgment of the value of female entrepreneurship for economic empowerment and social change. Recent research shows that women entrepreneurs are increasingly defying these norms, using their unique insights to develop innovative solutions that meet local needs (Moral, Rahman et al., 2024).

Institutional Support

Institutional support plays a vital role in creating a conducive environment for women entrepreneurs. Recent government initiatives and policies have increasingly focused on promoting gender equality in entrepreneurship. Essential programs offering financial aid, training, and resources tailored for women help address the unique challenges they encounter. In South Africa, various funding schemes and support networks have been established to improve women's access to capital and business development resources (Ogujiuba, 2021). However, the success of these initiatives often depends on effective local implementation, which can be hindered by bureaucratic obstacles and lack of awareness.

Higher education institutions play a crucial role in fostering female entrepreneurship. Elliott, Mavriplis, and Anis (2020) note that universities empower women through targeted entrepreneurship programs, which include mentorship, funding access, and business skills training. This institutional support is vital for creating an environment where women can thrive as entrepreneurs.

Mentorship and Networking

Mentorship is crucial for supporting female entrepreneurs. Maxheimer and Nicholls-Nixon (2022) found that women in mentorship relationships are more likely to succeed in their ventures. These relationships offer guidance, support, and access to valuable networks, facilitating business opportunities (Abu-Rumman et al., 2021). Studies show that mentorship programs connecting women with experienced business leaders boost skills, confidence, and community belonging

(Elliott, Mavriplis, & Anis, 2020). However, access to mentorship is uneven, with many women lacking necessary networks.

Networking is also vital for entrepreneurial success, providing opportunities, resources, and collaborations. The Women's Business Network, for example, connects aspiring female entrepreneurs with established businesswomen, promoting collaboration and knowledge sharing. This network effect is vital for building confidence and expanding the reach of female entrepreneurs in a male-dominated business environment (Constantinidis, 2021).

Women often struggle to access traditionally male-dominated networks, limiting their growth. Women-focused networking platforms are helping bridge this gap, promoting shared experiences and support (Provitt, 2024). Encouraging active participation in networking can enhance women's entrepreneurial journeys and foster a more inclusive business environment.

Individual Agency and Self-Efficacy

Individual agency is crucial for women's entrepreneurial success. The ability to make independent decisions and take risks is shaped by personal experiences and socio-economic backgrounds. Women with a strong sense of agency are more likely to pursue entrepreneurship despite challenges.

Individual agency, especially self-efficacy, is a key predictor of entrepreneurial success among women (Gielnik, Bledow, & Stark, 2020). Research shows that personal motivation, resilience, and obstacle navigation are key to successful entrepreneurship among women (Matharu & Juneja, 2024). Elliott, Mavriplis, & Anis, (2020) noted that women who participate in entrepreneurship training programs gain confidence in their ability to start and manage businesses. This highlights the importance of educational interventions that not only teach skills but also boost self-belief. By fostering a sense of agency, these programs empower women to challenge societal norms and pursue their entrepreneurial aspirations. Empowering women to harness their agency can boost their participation in entrepreneurship and lead to greater economic independence.

Conceptual Framework Development

The thematic analysis insights led to the creation of a conceptual framework that depicts the interactions among the identified components. This framework visually maps out how sociocultural influences, institutional support, and individual agency interact to shape entrepreneurial aspirations.

Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework that was developed from the thematic analysis.

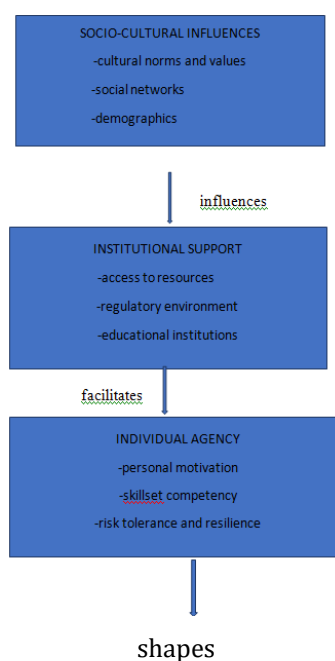




Fig.1: A framework for understanding socio-cultural influences, institutional support and individual agency.

The arrows in the diagram show how influence flows among the three components. Sociocultural influences shape the level of institutional support individuals perceive, while institutional support can enhance individual agency by providing essential resources and encouragement. Individual agency can also create feedback loops that impact sociocultural norms, as successful entrepreneurs may inspire others and change societal views on entrepreneurship. These dynamics can vary depending on geographical, economic, and cultural contexts, highlighting the need for tailored approaches to fostering entrepreneurial ecosystems.

This framework emphasizes the complex nature of entrepreneurial aspirations and the crucial interplay between sociocultural influences, institutional support, and individual agency. Understanding these relationships can guide policies and practices aimed at promoting entrepreneurship in diverse settings. The framework's development was guided by existing theoretical models, such as Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory, which focuses on self-efficacy and social influences on behavior, and the Entrepreneurial Event Model (Shapiro & Sokol, 1982), which underscores the importance of perceived opportunities and individual motivations in entrepreneurial decision-making.

Implications and Future Directions

Despite the advancements, women in South Africa still face significant challenges in entrepreneurship. Issues like limited access to finance, gender bias in business environments, and the lack of supportive policies continue to impede their entrepreneurial ambitions. Future research should aim to develop comprehensive strategies to tackle these challenges, including policy recommendations that promote gender equity in entrepreneurship. Educational interventions targeting female students can boost their entrepreneurial aspirations. Programs that focus on building self-efficacy, business skills, and resilience can empower women to pursue entrepreneurial ventures (Olakitan, 2021).

Recent studies suggest several practical steps to enhance female entrepreneurship in South Africa:

Implement policies that address barriers faced by women, such as access to finance and support services. Gender-sensitive funding programs should prioritize female entrepreneurs.

Expand entrepreneurship programs in higher education to provide comprehensive support for female students, including mentorship and networking opportunities.

Promote female entrepreneurship through community awareness campaigns that challenge traditional gender roles and highlight successful female entrepreneurs as role models.

The relationship between gender and students' entrepreneurial aspirations is intricate. Significant obstacles still exist despite notable progress in encouraging women to pursue entrepreneurship. Socio-cultural influences, institutional support, individual agency, mentorship, and networking shape the entrepreneurial landscape for women in South Africa. Programs that teach entrepreneurship in South Africa need to incorporate gender perspectives into their courses to solve gender inequities. This may entail preparing teachers to identify and counteract prejudices that could impede the involvement and ambitions of female students. The gender gap must be taken into account by policymakers when creating programs to encourage entrepreneurship. One way to decrease the gender gap in entrepreneurship is to develop policies that are tailored to meet the requirements of female entrepreneurs, such as funding opportunities and mentorship programs.

Overcoming barriers requires a multifaceted approach that integrates these elements. By creating a supportive environment, South Africa can leverage the potential of female entrepreneurs to drive economic growth and social change. The desire of students to pursue entrepreneurship at South

African higher education institutions is significantly influenced by their gender. Even while entrepreneurial education programs are essential in forming these goals, obstacles based on gender still stand in the way of advancement. A more equitable entrepreneurial landscape in South Africa can be achieved by stakeholders through the integration of gender-sensitive initiatives and the creation of supportive conditions.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the intersection of gender and entrepreneurial aspirations in South African higher education, revealing the complex challenges and opportunities for female entrepreneurs. Sociocultural influences often discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurship due to entrenched gender norms. However, higher education institutions play a crucial role in overcoming these barriers by offering tailored programs, mentorship, and resources.

The findings highlight the importance of networks and mentorship in fostering female entrepreneurship. Women who engage with mentors and supportive networks are more likely to succeed, as these relationships provide guidance and opportunities. Enhancing individual agency and self-efficacy through educational interventions is also vital for empowering women to overcome societal constraints and pursue their business aspirations confidently.

Despite ongoing challenges for women entrepreneurs in South Africa, recent studies emphasize the crucial role of sociocultural change, institutional support, mentorship, and individual agency. By addressing these areas, we can enhance women's participation in entrepreneurship, driving both economic growth and social equity.

Despite progress, significant challenges remain in creating an equitable entrepreneurial landscape in South Africa. Addressing these issues requires collaboration among policymakers, educational institutions, and community organizations to develop inclusive strategies that promote female entrepreneurship. By prioritizing gender-sensitive policies, expanding educational initiatives, and fostering community engagement, South Africa can harness the potential of women entrepreneurs, contributing to economic growth and social equity.

While the journey towards gender equality in entrepreneurship is ongoing, concerted efforts and supportive frameworks can transform the aspirations of female entrepreneurs into reality. This study provides a foundation for future research and practical applications to enhance the entrepreneurial landscape for women in South Africa.

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