A Critical Analysis of the Networking Experiences of Female Entrepreneurs: A Study Based on Small Business Tourism Sector in Sri Lanka

Nadee Sheresha Surangi Hapugoda Achchi Kankanamge (✉ surangins@kln.ac.lk)

Research

Keywords: Female entrepreneurs, networking, social constructionist, narratives, tourism

Posted Date: November 23rd, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-1085497/v1>

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. [Read Full License](#)

Abstract

This study goes on to expand on current knowledge through the way it accounts for how female entrepreneurs form and develop their networks in the Sri Lankan context. It adopts social constructionism philosophy and narrative design to explore the female entrepreneurs' networking behaviour. Thematic analysis is used to understand the life stories of fourteen women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector. Findings suggest that female entrepreneurs are likely to rely on more informal recruitment methods and informal training practices. They have strong relationships with local communities, but they focus on customers beyond the locals. Seasonality within tourism has been the emphasis of tourism literature due to its disruptive effect on economic transactions. However, less of the literature has examined the social effects of seasonality, which is where this study can contribute by exploring how gender roles related to social and domestic responsibilities are renegotiated during the low and high seasons when tourism entrepreneurs re-adjust to new time-demand realities. Yet, the narrative research design is not widely used in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, this article attempts to add to the entrepreneurial networking knowledge by analyzing stories towards female entrepreneurs' experience and social constructionist perspective.

1. Introduction

Research focusing on female entrepreneurs in other socio-cultural contexts is relatively new and limited in number (Kirkwood 2009, Roomi 2009). This study contributes towards filling this gap by focusing on the networking experiences of female entrepreneurs in small businesses in the tourism sector in Sri Lanka. This research demonstrates that female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka face different constraints and opportunities from developed countries, either in absolute or relative terms, and these might make their networking experiences different from female entrepreneurs in developed countries.

Throughout this article, the author uses the term entrepreneurs' networks; networks can be defined as entrepreneurs' relationships or connections with external parties (Premaratna 2001, 2008). The external parties would be individuals or organizations. Furthermore, the author uses the verb 'to network' and the participle form 'networking', both meaning the actions by which an entrepreneur creates and develops contacts. Entrepreneurs form and develop such network relationships to acquire required resources and identify business opportunities. Those who perform and control the resources are called network actors; they can be informal units or formal organizations. According to the nature and objectives of the firm, network actors can be divided into four categories: social network, inter-firm network, supporting network and business network actors. Social networks of contacts are made informally through social or non-business activities. These contacts may comprise family, relatives, friends and acquaintances. Inter-firm networks of actors consist of other firms, for example, small, medium and large companies. Supporting networks of actors consist of government bodies, private supporting organizations, NGOs and banks. The supporting network actors' main purpose is to provide various types of support to small businesses. Finally, business networks may include membership of various professional bodies, attending seminars and trade fairs etc.

Most of the small firms owned by women cannot achieve their goals by themselves (Premaratna 2001). To grow, small firms need support and resources from outside organizations (Robinson and Stubberud 2009) and relatives and friends (Klyver 2011). Consequently, researchers have argued that small business's success and survival mainly depend on networks' supports (Robinson and Stubberud 2009). Social network theory describes the various relationships between people and focuses on understanding how relationships connecting individual people, groups or organizations generate benefits and opportunities for human behavior (Premaratna 2001). Some research findings reveal that small business entrepreneurs use networking to improve marketing activities and innovations (Robinson and Stubberud 2009), meaning that networks are precious to small businesses.

There is a strong relationship between women and the tourism sector. Women participation in entrepreneurial activities in the tourism sector is high compared to other industries. For example, Latin America has the highest proportion of female employers in tourism, more than double the rate in other sectors (UNWTO 2011). In Sri Lanka, finding information on gender participation in the tourism sector is somewhat challenging, as little information is available. Nevertheless, an unpublished report from the Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka reveals that female entrepreneurs were particularly prevalent in the tourism sector (42%) compared to other industries (30%) in 2016. The tourism sector is characterized by seasonality and informality, and the majority of tourism employment is low-paid and part-time (Yunis 2009).

Regarding the high number of women working in tourism, there is a relationship between this type of work and feminine subjectivities (Bakas 2014). This circumstance makes one wonder if women's presence within the tourism sector is a "chicken and egg" situation, whereby dominant gender structures push women into tourism, and whether, in turn, tourism encourages gendered labour (Bakas 2014). A report (UNWTO 2011) into the tasks that women perform within the tourism and how tourism affects women reveals that tourism provides many opportunities for women to become employed, as there are low entry barriers and there are options of part-time work, informal work or home-based businesses.

The connection between the invisibility that women experience when completing domestic tasks and when working is significant, as this is internalized as a way of being and subsequently transcends the domestic boundary, contaminating women's entrepreneurial intentions. In Bakas's (2014) study, many of the female entrepreneurs in Italy show signs of how their natural role as domestic carers affects their interpretations of entrepreneurship by, for example, projecting how significant it is for them to help their family by becoming involved in entrepreneurship. The importance of building networks, relationships, exchange resources, mutual support and developing trust in tourism activities has been emphasized in many studies. Further, building a networking relationship for women to be active in the tourism sector is consistently highlighted in the literature. As women are not only faced with the challenges of dealing with economic activities but often also with the challenges of shifting their traditional gender roles in their communities by making incomes, becoming "businesswomen" in the tourism sector, there is an essential need for identifying networking experiences of women and networking strategies to meet these challenges. In this setting, the study seeks to answer the research question: how do female entrepreneurs form and develop their networks in the small business tourism sector in Sri Lanka?

2. Literature Review

Much entrepreneurship literature highlights a link between masculinity and entrepreneurship, leading to the conclusion that women who want to be entrepreneurs must also follow these ideals, as feminine ideals of passivity, collectivity and caring are regarded as weaknesses in entrepreneurship theorizing (Brush 2006). More recent studies which focus on female entrepreneurship from a feminist approach underscore how different conceptualizations of entrepreneurship are viable, such as a recent study challenging women's "underperformance myth" (Marlow and McAdam 2013). Today, it can be seen that female participation in entrepreneurial activities is increasing gradually; however, female entrepreneurship is still under research area (Brush and Cooper 2012). Researchers in this area mainly focused on addressing women's financial constraints, issues related to competing in a business and family, and gender differences in entrepreneurial characteristics. In most cases, researchers reveal that women are complex, multi-tasking persons who contest traditional gender identities, and women's subordinate role is consistently highlighted.

Researchers have found that gender differences in entrepreneurs' constraints in terms of forming and developing networks, and these differences may lead to different economic and social consequences in any particular society (Sonfield and Lussier 2009). Several studies have shown that women networks include more strong ties (Greve and Salaff 2003, Moore 1990, Klyver 2011, Watson 2011). Their networks composition and content are considered less powerful and less wealthy, and less heterogeneous than their male counterparts (D'Exelle and Holvoet 2011). In networking literature, some findings revealed that both men and women have a strong desire to network with the same gender (Garcia and Carter 2009); contrastingly, others find that both genders need to have primarily men (Aldrich et al. 1989, Shaw 2006). The networking relationship would be more important for women in the early stages of the business (Garcia and Carter 2009), giving emotional support and providing solutions to the particular problems that challenge women, such as business-family conflict or lack of acceptability of women being headed (Roomi 2009). Further, it can be seen that men hold positions of higher status and fewer family responsibilities in many social structures compared to female entrepreneurs (D'Exelle and Holvoet 2011).

Moreover, other authors argue that an extensive support network can create conflicting demands on the socio-emotional attention of female business owners (Batjargal et al., 2009). In this setting, female entrepreneurs are more expected to struggle to meet the expectations of both those who compliment them for being successful and encourage them to be responsible mothers, spouses and daughters simultaneously. This norm can result in an inconsistency in women's commitment to a venture, thereby negatively affecting their business growth. Therefore, some authors conclude that an extensive network may constitute a disadvantage for female entrepreneurs.

As tourism is "created of human networks" (Aitchison 2001), female entrepreneurs network experience in the tourism sector is an interesting and under-researched area. The role of gender plays in the tourism sector shreds of evidence, as women are more likely to enter the tourism sector due to its flexibility and suitability for them to be engaged without challenging social norms regarding women's roles as housewives (Bakas 2014). An example of women in tourism businesses that follow societal expectations related to feminine predispositions of care is women's involvement in making craft products to sell to tourists, as is the case with Mexican weavers (Cohen 2001) and Mayan craftswomen (Cone 1995). As these women can work on their craft production at home, they are perceived as also being able to combine a business activity with childcare; thus, they conform to feminine subjectivities connected to care. Some women convert part of their house into a guesthouse or restaurant for tourists, thereby simultaneously staying at home and engaging in business. In effect, most women who engage in tourism undertake work that is a "natural" addition to their daily housekeeping, such as cleaning, cooking and welcoming guests (Bakas 2014).

Despite the potential that exists for female entrepreneurs in the tourism sector (Khatiwada and Silva 2015), women are facing unique issues and challenges such as social and cultural norms, than men in starting and running their businesses, as well as in accessing economic resources (Jiyane et al. 2012). Female tourism entrepreneurs face unique problems such as seasonality and long days, both of which affect

how they negotiate the activities needed to continue domestic life daily and inter-generationally (Bakas 2014). Besides, the gender norms rooted in societies limit women's participation in social and business activities (Bakas 2014).

Therefore, it is essential to explore further the underlying grounds that determine gendered choices regarding participation in tourism activities. Gender forms part of the main problems addressed by Kinnaird and Hall (1994), who argue that constructions of gender relations are context-specific. Aitchison (2009), Pritchard (2008), Tucker and Boonabaana (2011) and Khatiwada and Silva (2015) are examples of academics who critically review the role gender plays within tourism, adding to the body of literature that Swain (1995) and Kinnaird and Hall (1994) started. Aitchison's (2009) focus on "socio-cultural relationships" follows the cultural trend within tourism studies, proposing a focus on both the material and the culture as the spaces where gender identities and connections are re-worked. Supporting the call for more critical analyses of tourism, Pritchard (2008) argues that tourism research must address the social relations, such as gender, that strengthen tourism processes by connecting empirical examples to theory. However, focusing more specifically on the role that gender plays in tourism research, few academics have embraced this subject, apart from Tucker's (2003, 2011) longitudinal study on female entrepreneurs in Turkey.

Moreover, the literature reveals that women's contribution to business and economic growth is almost certainly underestimated. Many women work in the informal sector, and their business activity is not reflected in national statistics, particularly in developing countries such as Sri Lanka. In general, women's businesses have high failure rates and are fewer success in terms of financial performance than their male counterparts. Further female entrepreneurs engage in specific low-value sectors such as tourism, handicraft, garment and other service sectors. Further, women face various gender-specific obstacles when starting their ventures. The literature relating to women and tourism has been reviewed and expanded. It is particularly relevant to examine how gender functions within tourism, as the tourism sector is highly gendered, with women engaged in feminized positions such as hosts, cleaners and cooks (Kinnaird and Hall 1996). However, relatively few researchers have examined this subject since Swain's (1995) seminal article, which brought attention to how gender often shapes tourism's processes. The majority of these studies focus on the economic impacts of seasonality yet nevertheless overlook the influences of seasonality on women's domestic activities. Researchers from different academic disciplines have discussed the concept of networking, particularly those of Business, Economics and Sociology. However, a general conceptual framework for investigating networking is still absent. While the studies reviewed here have certainly been informative in terms of revealing the different ties involved in the female business and the structural dimension of networking, there is little qualitative information available as to how the entrepreneur form and develop their networks, and what they bring to the entrepreneurial venture through networks.

Moreover, it is clear that these studies suffered from methodological biases and limitations; many of these studies were quantitative and did not explore in depth the research participants' inner feelings, attitudes, and behaviour. As this research is qualitative, using in-depth narrative interviews and observations, there is potential here to address the limitations of previous research. In this context, minimal empirical studies have been conducted in developing countries in this regard. Therefore, there remains an opening for theoretical and empirical research in the field of female entrepreneurs' networks.

3. Methodology

This study reflects the idea that entrepreneurs' networking is likely to be a subjective behaviour, and the insights are arguably unable to be caught by the questionnaires of quantitative studies used by the majority of researchers in networking, where the respondents figure scales or tick boxes as ways of trying to gain a deep understanding of relationships, feelings and emotions (Hardwick 2010). This study adopts the social constructionist approach within interpretive research to obtain a deep understanding of female entrepreneurs' experiences of their networks. This philosophical perspective concentrates on the ways people make sense of the world and emphasizes sharing experiences with others through language (Gergen 2009, Berger and Luckmann 1966). Narrative inquiry as a research design can therefore be considered an integral part of the production of new knowledge, allowing the depth of women's experiences to be better understood.

The study was conducted in Sri Lanka because of the researcher's familiarity with and exposure to the Sri Lankan environment. Therefore, female entrepreneurs were selected who are involved in the tourism industry in the Southern Province, where most tourist arrivals occur and where many tourist activities are catered for. The purposive sampling method was used to choose study participants. The key informants in this study included, and these key informants mainly provided preliminary information about the research participants of the community and the general background of the area.

For this study, in-depth conversational interviews (narratives) were proposed to "tap" the female entrepreneurs' voices. The researcher was able to complete the 14 interviews which took place in Sri Lanka from July to November 2016. The interviews were conducted in their place of business and lasted between one to one and a half hours. The majority of the interviews were carried out during evening sessions, except for two interviews when an alternative time was more convenient for the respondents. Further, the second interview took place one or two months after the first interview. In between, it was possible to read and re-read the interview transcript data from the first interview, which

helped in identifying critical issues, contradictions, inconsistencies and evasions before going on to the second interview as a new session. Between July 2016 and November 2016, the researcher visited all of the female entrepreneurs selected for this study. The researcher was able to get first-hand experience of their business place surroundings and their networking relationships. Moreover, observation offers an excellent opportunity to obtain detailed and authentic insights into real situations, including actions, conversations and physical descriptions.

In data analysis, the first step in data reduction is transcribing the recorded interviews to a level of detail that is necessary for the research. Extracts are reduced essentially to exclude unnecessary discussion, repetition and examples provided by the participants. A stepwise procedure of qualitative text reduction is recommended by many researchers (Birch 2011, Bauer 1996). Some researchers propose a practical method regarding the text arrangement: the text can be arranged in three columns, with the first column covering the transcript, the second the first reduction and the third column comprising only keywords (Birch 2011, Bauer 1996). The second stage involves identifying where the female entrepreneurs returned to a theme within their story. The third stage of analysis consists of seeking commonalities and differences between the cases related to each theme.

4. Results And Discussion

How Do Female Entrepreneurs Form and Develop Their Networks? - Themes Derived from women narratives.

How female entrepreneurs form and develop network relationships during their business life cycle has been the focus of interest of many researchers. The analyses of the different narratives of female entrepreneurs have produced six themes.

Parents' relocation due to seasonality

Tourism's seasonality affects the distribution of domestic activities and hence the negotiation of related gender roles. Participants rely not only on help from their immediate family members, such as their partners or children but also from their parents. As many of the respondents' parents often live in different cities with their children, relocation of domestic activities occurs. The parents come to live with the female entrepreneurs for four to six months during the high season to help their children with household and business activities. This situation is noticeable for study respondents with small kids. My field experience evidenced this:

I went to meet Kumudu on the 13th of July 2016, and she asked me to wait for her for another few minutes; meanwhile, her mother talked to me. She said that every high season she comes to live with her daughter for a few months in order to help her with domestic and business activities. (field notes).

This is an example of "temporary migration" and the consequent seasonal relocation of domestic activities. Deepa is a guest house owner in Hikkaduwa whose parents (who live permanently in Baddegama) relocate to Hikkaduwa for the high season to help their daughter with domestic activities such as childcare. Her parents take on what Deepa calls the responsibility of "*child parking*". They do more than just "child parking"; they carry out various social and domestic activities such as caring for the young children, taking the children to schools and classes, feeding them, cooking, cleaning and paying bills on Deepa's behalf. They also provide emotional support for their daughter in the busy and often stressful high season.

A similar trend in parental relocation from their permanent residence to provide domestic assistance is observed in Kumudu's story, when her mother comes to help out during the high season months, relocating from her home. During the high season, as Kumudu says, domestic tasks such as "*cleaning, the clothes, the food are all responsibilities of my mother- when she is here*".

The extracts above show the restructuring of social and domestic duties on a seasonal basis caused by tourism, an aspect that is absent from most tourism literature (Bakas 2014). Whilst invisible, this tourism-related relocation of domestic duties displays how tourism encourages female entrepreneurs to negotiate their gender roles by effectively off-loading these activities onto a relocated parent. As the relocated parents are only seasonally available to take over domestic responsibilities, they temporarily disrupt negotiations of domestic activities' gender roles by taking responsibility for their children's domestic welfare. While this may reduce negotiations of domestic activities-sharing within the family, upon their parents' departure, the female entrepreneurs are left to renegotiate these activities and their related gender roles. This adds complexity to how gender roles are transformed, as the tourism entrepreneurs can take up productive roles more effectively as they delegate domestic and childcare responsibilities to their parents.

Access to networks beyond local customers- a focus on international customers

Relationships with international customers were regarded as part of their everyday lives by these female entrepreneurs. Relationship with customers was further developed through extending reciprocity and hospitality. This reciprocity and the appreciation of relationships with

international customers, such as gift-giving, free meals and socializing with customers (organized fun activities, pleasure trips), were evident throughout the narrative interviews and the researcher's fieldwork observations. Such reciprocal behaviour demonstrates these entrepreneurs' close relationships with international customers. Deepa described her experience:

Our guests are primarily repeated customers. Most guests are British or Russian, and they call or email to make a reservation. They have trust in us and are assured of good service here. Some call this their second home.

According to the above extract, having repeat customers is a sign of business success in relationships. Furthermore, these women thought about keeping quality relationships to make their international customers happy by giving a good service. The researcher's field experience confirmed this:

I stayed three nights in three different guesthouses. All the rooms I stayed in were arranged with care, and they are of an excellent standard. They maintain reasonable standards of cleanliness, sanitation, quality food etc., as they mainly focus on international customers. I saw international tourists enjoy homemade local dishes during a homestay (Field notes, the 11th of August 2016).

All the women confirmed their knowledge of their customers' needs, desires, dislikes and so forth, which enabled them to keep intimate relationships with customers. This is how one of the respondents (Seethani) told her knowledge about international customers: "*What Brittan's like is not what Americans like. Russians' likes are different from others*". Even though none of the women had participated in intercultural awareness training, everyone has adequate knowledge about cultural diversity and understanding of their international customers.

All the participants were aware of their cultural values, beliefs, social norms, traditions, and artefacts that appeal to international customers. These women's products and services were in line with cultural values and elements such as art, design, and materials unique to the country. Chaya (the tourist shop owner) stressed that her products are unique to Sri Lanka, and she used such uniqueness to attract customers:

You know, Sri Lanka's best brand name in batik today... its mine... Customers from different countries such as Germany, Sweden, France, UK, and the USA so on come to my shop, and they are delighted with my products (Chaya).

There are some souvenir shops with masks, puppets, shells, corals, batiks, paintings, to Sri Lankan tea to target international customers. Jewellery is adapted here to western tastes; it is not of the vulgar, golden type, but the simple, silver type with beautiful semi-precious stones.

Close relationships with locals

Dramatic changes and development of the rural areas in recent years have introduced a new development model, theorized by Ray (2001) as "neo-endogenous development", based on local development by connecting endogenous material and cultural potential (Ray 2001). According to the "neo-endogenous" development model, social and cultural capital is the main driving force for economic development (Ward et al. 2005), and the value of local institutions and resources and awareness of business opportunities in the same locality is considered as crucial (Bosworth and Farrel 2011).

An example in the Sri Lankan tourism sector is maintaining healthy relationships with other local businesses such as greengrocers, fishmongers, beach vendors, craft sellers, taxis, local authorities and the local NGO, resulting in better sales opportunities for locals and quality services for tourists (Kousis 1989, ILO 2013).

Hotels and restaurants focus on the cost advantages of using local labour and supplies, and guests were motivated to enjoy local activities.

I also try to help street vendors and small businesses. So the fishmonger and the greengrocer are friendly with me (Kishani).

Tourism business owners maintain good relationships with three-wheel drivers. When a driver takes a guest to a particular place, they usually receive extra payment. Three-wheeler taxis, or '*Tuk Tuk*', are a vital part of Sri Lanka's transport network. They operate similarly to taxis and are usually a convenient and highly cost-effective way to get around. Many foreigners find it an easy and cheap way to travel short distances during their stay, as they have an open roof, allowing viewing the surroundings, and enjoy the wind blowing by.

The hotel owner, Kishani, maintains a good relationship with the taxi drivers. The hotel allows drivers who want to register at the hotel and is limited to 15 drivers. Further, the hotel provides an identity card and a uniform for drivers with the hotel logo. The Kishani Hotel does not need to intervene to decide in the charges of rides but provides the drivers and their customers a hint about a fair amount. As Kishani explains:

This is a perfect method, and the hotel has a positive relationship with the three-wheel drivers. It is suitable for all the parties. When other three-wheel drivers bring in guests, I pay them a commission.

Some female-owned hotels in this study have an agreement with few three-wheel drivers waiting at the hotels. For example, Seethani hotel repainted the vehicles in the same colour to show that the vehicles are only for hotel guests. As Seethani explains:

In the beginning, it seemed like an effective strategy, as the drivers get rides from the hotel guests, and the hotel knows with whom their guests were going. After complaints of charging and some other bad experiences of guests with drivers, I had to advise my guests not to use these vehicles. After that, I had to face a lot of problems from three-wheel drivers. So, we always try to keep a good relation with them.

Seethani's hotel is located in the Hikkaduwa town area, and there are many three-wheel parking areas everywhere. Therefore, the hotel guests will not essentially get a taxi from in front of the hotel. Though Kishani and Seethani's hotels' initiative are examples of positive three-wheeler regulation, they provide reliability and safety with the hotel registration.

Informal recruitment

The importance of local relationship is seen in recruitment, especially tourism-related businesses, depending on local resources (Bosworth 2012). All the women in the study also mentioned that recruitment typically happens from the local community by word of mouth through personal networks such as current staff members, fishmongers, greengrocers, etc. For many areas, seasonality continues to be an essential aspect of life, and they need staff that can fit in around this peak demand. Indrani relates:

The employees are different every year because we can't employ anyone permanently as the business doesn't function for half the year. We speak to the fishmonger, the man who sells vegetables or ask around for employees.

Informal recruitment tends to be connected with low-skilled labour (Bosworth 2012). In line with this, most women in this study actively hired individuals without good prior qualifications or relevant work experience. This method eliminated a significant barrier to recruitment, in which applicants would otherwise have to invest in capability and gain experience to meet even essential requirement. This is critical for recruiting underprivileged individuals from the local community because creating pre-requisite qualifications for jobs (as many large tourism organizations currently involve) almost excludes more impoverished people from entree to even the lowest-skilled jobs. Furthermore, employing local staff and recruiting informally is typically cheaper for the company than bringing in outsiders, which is why Sri Lankan tourism has a substantial impact on reducing poverty. While jobs in the tourism industry are often considered unskilled and seasonal, the importance of the income generation to local economies should not be taken lightly. This was evidenced by my fieldwork experience, as follows:

Many employees are local, and very few trained staff members come from areas outside of Hikkaduwa. A local community labourer is paid around RS1000 daily. Trained staff members' daily pay is between 2,500.00- 3,000.00 (Field notes, the 9th of September 2016).

One of the biggest challenges faced by hotels and other tourism-related businesses stemmed from social issues due to local and informal recruitment. In general, employees from the local area prioritize family and community over job responsibilities, challenging employers' different expectations about ethical work behaviours such as attendance, punctuality, and time off. Moreover, most of the staff members of these female-owned businesses do not usually have prior job experience and learning by doing was used as the only method to training.

Membership of various tourism-related organizations

One of the most effective ways for an entrepreneur to build and develop weak ties is through membership in various societies (Premarathna 2001). Belonging to similar social groups, for example, having a membership of professional groups, is an essential connection for organizational networking. Therefore, researchers argue that such professional ties involvement is significant to small business female entrepreneurs due to their lack of resources and knowledge.

Hikkaduwa Tourism Service Providers' Association (HTSPA) is a thriving organization in the town of Hikkaduwa. The organization has 23 parties, including three-wheel drivers, minivan drivers, guesthouses, tourist shops, guides, restaurants, hotels, etc. The programme was introduced by the Divisional Secretarial office because there were numerous problems reported in the sector in Hikkaduwa. The HTSPA was established to overcome such issues and ensure the safety for tourists, increase the living status, and keep sustainable tourism in the area.

In a few cases, I found that female entrepreneurs were members of various organizations. Kumari owns a travel and tour agency, and her business is at the developing stage. Unlike other women, her network consists of professional ties as well. As Kumari explained:

There is also a TAASL members' night held annually, and I attend that because many agents attend that. There we can make contacts and, based on these connections, we receive beachside tours and surf riding business opportunities.

She further explained that, by taking membership of several organizations, women could develop their business networks and make contacts with different business owners who are ready to share their experiences and expertise. More specifically, they can learn from each other as they provide information and tangible resources needed in the entrepreneurial process. This finding is consistent with Granovetter's weak tie theory: the more weak ties business owners have, the more connected to the world we are and the more likely we are to receive critical information about ideas and opportunities in time to respond to them.

Attending seminars, conferences, trade fairs and training programmes

Generally speaking, events such as trade fairs, conferences and training programmes bring together individuals with a common interest in technology, products or services for a specific industry. Specifically, as a start-up company seeking to get the business's name 'out there, one needs to gain influence through these trade show events to the business's advantage.

Chaya runs a tourist shop in Hikkaduwa; it has been four years since she started this business, and now there is a good demand for her clothes. Chaya gave her thoughts about attending events such as trade fairs, exhibitions, conferences and training programmes:

I am a member of ASMTE, and I participate in their workshops and training programmes. I am also registered with the Department of Textiles and did a course in fashion design. It was beneficial to understand how they attract customers and use new fashion etc.

This quotation from Chaya shows two critical thoughts. First, she related new knowledge gained (current trends in the fashion industry) to discuss the importance of participating in training programmes. Second, she was able to get a deeper understanding of why the new knowledge and skills were essential by participating in the training programme. Practicably in this way supported her use of her new knowledge and skills to increase her customer base.

Another respondent, Kumari, explained her experience of participation in training in terms of her business's development:

After the training programme, I introduced a self-service coffee machine to the restaurant. During the training programme, we talked not only about our businesses, but also a book we have read, a movie we have watched. So everybody can learn from each other.

In line with the community of practice theory, Kumari's idea makes known the mutual exchange of participation in a community of practice. She describes her approach being changed even as she, through her participation, changed the community. In other words, participation changes the community as the community changes the participant.

Attending social gatherings

Another way of evolving the network is by attending social gatherings organized by various communities, forums, neighbourhoods etc. The most common approach adopted by female entrepreneurs is attending religious and cultural events organized by people of the same ethnicity (Werber, Mendel and Deroose 2014). Contacts through social gatherings have always played an influential role in business success, and those with an extensive network of contacts are usually exposed to more opportunities and better leads (Lechner, Dowling and Welpel 2006).

When people attend a live event such as a social gathering, they have access to other attendees. These events are an excellent opportunity to make connections, share information, learn about peers and the sector, etc. During social gatherings, networking is not limited to entrepreneurs, and these informal connections are often invaluable. Anoma related her experiences and how she tries to contact different people in social gatherings:

I look at every social gathering as an opportunity to find out how other people think, what they do for a living, and what they know about me. Furthermore, if I can assist them, I like to do so.

In line with Wenger's (1998) COP theory, Anoma's explanation refers to the importance of being mutually engaged in activities. She is happy to share information and resources and be responsible for others.

Another respondent, Kishani, revealed that relationships with different types of people in her daily routine influence the smooth running of her business. As she explained:

I also try to help street vendors and small businesses. So the fishmonger and the greengrocer are friendly to me. The people in "Galwala" in Galle are thugs, but they too are friendly with me. I visit them and participate in their weddings and funerals because we need people from

all walks of life, without which it would be difficult to run this business.

This quote from Kishani illustrates the idea of emphasizing the importance of informal networking, which has been invaluable to running her business. By engaging in casual conversation with others, she learns a lot about people and who they are. She finds informal networking to be a much more effective way of running the business, mutually beneficial to a relationship. Furthermore, it illustrates how networking can arise anywhere and how one does not need to be in a professional setting to network and meet people who will support your business activities, and vice versa.

5. Conclusion

This article provides in-depth information about how female entrepreneurs form and develop their networks, with a focus on the structural dimensions of networking, and thus it contributes knowledge to the extant literature. As highlighted in the literature, many researchers focused on quantifying the network size, frequency and density, yet little attention has been paid to analyzing the actual contribution and involvement of network actors in female-owned businesses. Therefore, the findings of this study are anticipated to fill a further gap in the literature.

Findings suggest that, in Sri Lanka, small female businesses depend on more informal recruitment, and they have strong relationships with local communities, but they focus on customers beyond the locals. Female tourism entrepreneurs face unique challenges such as seasonality and 14-hour workdays, affecting how they negotiate the activities required to perform daily and which, inter-generationally, include household duties. Identifying a liminal gender re-negotiation period in the end and the beginning of the season, stimulating seasonal gender role negotiations, adds an exciting dimension to the perceived impacts of seasonality. Whilst seasonality has been examined from various directions as a structural cause of disruption to economic processes; little has been written on the effects of seasonality on women's domestic tasks. By revealing how seasonality acts upon the relationship between entrepreneurship and gender roles, this study contributes to knowledge on tourism seasonality's socio-economic impacts. What emerges from this study is that female tourism entrepreneurs' parents temporarily move location to support their children in their domestic tasks. Whilst generally invisible within the tourism literature, this tourism induced seasonal relocation acts as a rearrangement of household responsibilities, as female entrepreneurs off-load such tasks onto relocated parents, resulting in a temporary disruption of gendered negotiations surrounding domestic duties.

The findings of the study send a clear message to entrepreneurs and policymakers, and supporting organizations. Over the past twenty years, small business development has been the central area of donor support for developing economies. This traditional support system has focused on providing more software (training and consulting) and hardware support (loans) for small enterprises. However, they should focus their consideration and programmes not only on providing increasing resources but also on providing more facilities and input regarding networking. Therefore, networking is one of the answers, even though it is not a magical solution, because through established network relationships businesses can gain access to external resources and encouragement and influence. It was identified in the study that the interactive effects of actors of networks and resources stimulate the development of businesses, but not the resources alone. Therefore, entrepreneurial development programmes should extend support to female entrepreneurs to establish and develop effective relationships with external actors. Thus, several collective organizations of entrepreneurial women could help promote entrepreneurship among women and thereby empower them to join the economic mainstream, leading to the social development of Sri Lanka.

There are few limitations linked with this study, some of which originate in constraints on time and money. Some of these, whilst limitations, provide paths for future research. The data collected for this study depended on the responses from one party (an entrepreneur) and can be viewed as somewhat subjective. Preferably, a second party would validate at least part of the information collected about the entrepreneurs. Data collected from these women's husbands, other family members, or employees could have been used to confirm the business's information if more time and resources had been available. Moreover, this study focuses on female entrepreneurs' networking experience in Sri Lanka, and there are various conclusions from the study. Even though some researchers suppose their findings of a single country are generalizable to other countries, these findings cannot be generalized as a global phenomenon. Similarly, some of the aspects of this research are not necessarily globally applicable, but they may be known in patriarchal societies.

Abbreviations

ASMTE- Association of Small and Medium Tourism Enterprise

COP- Community of Practice Theory

HTSPA - Hikkaduwa Tourism Service Providers' Association

NGO- Non Government Organizations

TAASL- Tavel Agents Association Sri Lanka

UNWTO- United Nations World Tourism Organization

Declarations

Availability of data and materials -The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available as this is a qualitative research but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests -Not applicable

Funding -There has no financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome

Authors' contributions – single author

Acknowledgments -Not applicable

Authors' information- Dr H.A.K.N.S. Surangi is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. She completed her PhD at the University of Lincoln, United Kingdom. She has a longstanding interest in female entrepreneurship, gender, ethnic minority entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial networking and small business development in Asian countries. H.A.K.N.S. Surangi can be contacted at:surangins@kln.ac.lk

References

1. Ahl, H. J. (2002) *The Making of the Female Entrepreneur: A Discourse Analysis of Research Texts on Women's Entrepreneurship*. PhD. Jönköping International Business School
2. Aldrich, H., Rosen, B., and Woodward, B.L. (1987) 'The Impact of Social Network on Business Founding and Profit: A Longitudinal Study', *Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research*, Wellesley, MA, Center for Entrepreneurship Studies Babson College, pp.154-68.
3. Anna, P., Eileen, S., Anne, H., Fuller-Love, N. and O'Gorman, B. (2012) 'Gender differences in early group formation', *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 4.(2), pp. 128-152.
4. Ascigil, S.F. and Magner, N.R. (2009) 'Business incubators: leveraging skill utilization through social capital', *Journal of Small Business Strategy*, 19(20), pp.16-27.
5. Brush, C.G. (1992) 'Research on women business owners: past trends, a new perspective and future directions', *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 16 (4), pp.5–30.
6. BarNir, A. and Smith, K. A. (2002) 'Inter-firm alliances in the small business: The role of social networks', *Journal of Small Business Management*, 40(3), pp 219-227.
7. Blisson, D. and Rana, B.K. (2001) 'The role of entrepreneurial networks: the influence of gender and ethnicity in British SME's', *46th ICSB World Conference*
8. *SMEs in a Traditional-and-New-Mixed Era*. June 17-20, 2001, Taipei, Taiwan.
9. Brush and Cooper (2012) 'Female entrepreneurship and economic development: An international perspective', *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 24(1), pp. 1–6.
10. Cheryl L., Sumaria M. and Gerald H. (2010) 'National culture, market orientation and network-derived benefits: conceptual model for service SME's', *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal*, 16 (1), pp.23-37.
11. De Mel, N., Peiris, P. and Gomez, S. (2013) 'Broadening gender: why masculinities matter - attitudes, practices and gender based violence in four districts in Sri Lanka', *CARE International Sri Lanka*, Colombo 07, Sri Lanka.
12. D'Exelle, B. and Holvoet, N. (2011) 'Gender and network formation in rural Nicaragua: a village case study', *Feminist Economics*, 17(2), pp. 31–61.
13. Domenico, M.D. (2008) 'I'm Not Just a Housewife': Gendered Roles and Identities in the Home-Based Hospitality Enterprise', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 15(4), pp.313-334.
14. Don, Y.L. and Eric, W.K.T. (2001) 'The effects of entrepreneurial personality, background and network activities on venture growth', *Journal of Management Studies*, 38(4), pp. 583-602.
15. Duberley, J. and Carrigan, M. (2012) 'The career identities of 'mumpreneurs': Women's experiences of combining enterprise and motherhood', *International Small Business Journal*, 31(6), pp. 629– 651.

16. Ekinsmyth, C. (2013) 'Managing the business of everyday life: the roles of space and place in mumpreneurship', *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*, 19 (5), pp. 525-546.
17. Fiona, B. (2017), 'A beautiful mess': reciprocity and positionality in gender and tourism research", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, Special Issue: A Critical Lens on Hospitality and Tourism Work, Vol. 3, pp. 126-133.
18. Foss, L. (2010) 'Research on entrepreneurial networks: The case for a constructionist feminist theory perspective', *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 2 (1), pp. 83-102.
19. Gregory, A. and Milner, S. (2009) 'Work-life balance: a matter of choice?', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 16 (1) pp. 1-13.
20. Henry, C., Foss, L. and Ahl, H. (2013) 'Parallel Lines? A Thirty-Year Review of Methodological Approaches in Gender and Entrepreneurship Research', *ISBE Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship*. Cardiff, UK. November 2013. Available at: <https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCEQFjAAahUKewjJw5DcyqPIAhUL1xoKHYOEc&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww> (Accessed: the 20th of September).
21. Hytti, U. (2005) 'New meanings for entrepreneurs: From risk-taking heroes to safe seeking professionals', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 18(6), pp 594-611.
22. Jean, M. and Forbes, C.S. (2012) 'An Exploration of the Motivations and Expectation Gaps of Mompreneurs', *Journal of Business Diversity*, 12(2), pp. 112-132.
23. Johnston, D. and Swanson, D. (2006) 'Constructing the 'good mother': The experience of mothering ideologies by work status', *Sex Roles*, 54(7-8), pp. 509-519.
24. Keerthi P, Saswata N.B. (2011) 'Effect of entrepreneur network and entrepreneur self efficacy on a subjective performance: A study of handicraft and handloom cluster', *Journal of Entrepreneurship*, 20(2) ,pp. 227-247.
25. Klapper R. (2008) *The role of social capital in French entrepreneurial networks at the pre-organization stage*. PhD. The University of Leeds.
26. Klyver, K. (2011) 'Gender differences in entrepreneurial networks: adding an alter perspective', *Gender in Management*, 26(5), pp. 332 - 350.
27. Klyver, K. & Hindle, K. & Meyer, D. (2008) 'Influence of social network structure on entrepreneurship participation—A study of 20 national cultures', *International Entrepreneurship Management Journal* , 4, pp. 331-347.
28. Kirkwood, J. (2012) 'Family Matters: Exploring the Role of Family in the New Venture Creation Decision', *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship*, 25(2) , pp. 141-154
29. Kodagoda, D. T. D. (2011) *Gendered moral rationalities in combining motherhood and employment a case study of Sri Lanka*. PhD . Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Bradford, UK.
30. Liao, J. and Welsch, H. (2005) 'Roles of Social Capital in Venture Creation: Key Dimensions and Research Implications', *Journal of Small Business Management*, 43, (4), pp. 345-357.
31. Liamputtong, P. (2006) 'Motherhood and 'moral caree: Discourses of good motherhood among Southeast Asian immigrant women in Australia', *Qualitative Sociology* , 29(1), pp. 25-53.
32. Leung, A. (2011) 'Motherhood and entrepreneurship: gender role identity as a resource', *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, 3 (3), pp 254-264.
33. Loscocco, K , Monnat, S.M., Moore, G. and Lauber, K.B. (2009) 'Enterprising Women : A Comparison of Women's and Men's Small Business Networks', *Gender & Society*, 23 (3), pp. 388-411.
34. Marlow, S. and McAdam, M. (2013) 'Gender and entrepreneurship: Advancing debate and challenging myths; exploring the mystery of the under-performing female entrepreneur', *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*, 19(1), pp. 114-124.
35. Mason, C.M., Carter, S. and Tagg, S. (2011) 'Invisible businesses: The characteristics of home based businesses in the United Kingdom', *Regional Studies*, 45, pp. 625-639.
36. Mukhopadhyay, A. (2012) 'Emotional labour in transcending the feeling rules of the Kesarwani community', *Int. J. Work Organization and Emotion*, 5(1), pp. 41-56.
37. OECD (2010) *Entrepreneurship and Migrants: Report by the OECD Working Party on SMEs and Entrepreneurship*. OECD.
38. Olawale F. (2011) 'The Impact of Firm and Entrepreneurial Characteristics on Access to Debt Finance by SMEs in King Williams' Town, South Africa', *International Journal of Business and Management* , 6(8), pp. 170-179.
39. Premaratna, S. (2001) 'Networks, resources and small business growth : the experience from Sri Lanka', *Journal of Small Business Management*, 39(4), pp. 363-375.

40. Rae, D. (2005) 'Entrepreneurial learning: a narrative-based conceptual model', *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 12(3), pp.323-335.
41. Renzulli, L.A. and Aldrich, H (2000) 'Family Matters: Gender, Networks, and Entrepreneurial Outcomes', *Social Forces*, 79 (2),pp. 523-546.
42. Roomi, M.A., Harrison, P. and Beaumont-Kerridge, J. (2009) 'Women-owned small and medium enterprises in England : Analysis of factors influencing the growth Process', *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 16(2),pp. 270-288.
43. Shan, B.A., Caili, Zhou, L.Y. and Wang, Y.S. (2010) 'Literature Review on Entrepreneurial Network: A Comprehensive Frame', *3rd International Conference on Information Management, Innovation Management and Industrial Engineering*. Kunming, China.26th-28th November 2010.Available at : <http://www.gbv.de/dms/tib-ub-hannover/655828095.pdf> (Accessed : the 13th of March 2013).
44. Sharafizad, J. (2011) 'Determinants of business networking behaviour of women in small business', *Small Enterprise Research*, 18(2), pp.158-160.
45. SLTDA (2014) *Annual Statistical Reports*: SLTDA.
46. Sonfield, M.C, Lussier, R.N. (2005) 'Family business ownership and management: a gender comparison', *Journal of Small Business Strategy*,15(2), pp.241-255.
47. Ssendi, L.B. (2013) *Entrepreneurship activities in rural Tanzania: understanding women's micro businesses*. PhD . Robert Gordon University.
48. Stanger, A., Roffey, B., Forsaith, D., McInnes, E., Petrone, F., Symes, C. and Xydias, M. (2002) 'Gender differences in small business owner managers', *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 3(2), pp.93-107.
49. Stephanie M. H.F. (2010) *Female entrepreneurs making connections: networking by women small business owners*. PhD .Capella University.
50. Surangi H.A.K.N.S (2018), What influences the networking behaviours of female entrepreneurs?: A case for the small business tourism sector in Sri Lanka", *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJGE-08-2017-0049>
51. Swail, J. and Marlow, S. (2017), "Embrace the masculine; attenuate the feminine' – gender, identity workand entrepreneurial legitimation in the nascent context", *Entrepreneurship and RegionalDevelopment*, pp. 1-44.
52. Vадnjal,M., Tajnikar, M. and Vадnjal, J. (2009) 'Female start-ups in the light of crisis: emotional versus traditional support', *8th International Conference on Challenges of Europe*. Split-Bol, Croatia. 21-23 May 2009.pp.243-259.
53. Welter, F. (2004) 'The environment for female entrepreneurship in Germany" *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*', .11(2), pp.212-221.