

# **Barriers to Women’s Entrepreneurship: SME Sector in Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of the paper is to address the issues of barriers to success of female entrepreneurship within Sri Lanka. The research methodology/design is based on a qualitative study of fourteen Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs in large and growth (SME) categories. In-depth and focus group interviews were carried out using a semi-structured questionnaire. Maximum variety and intensity sampling was used in selecting the respondents. The research findings point to particular barriers to women’s career advancement in entrepreneurship such as lack of government incentives, labour scarcity, difficulty in providing collateral, access to low interest credit facilities, low access to advanced technology, sexual harassment, and involvement in traditional female type businesses, and the adoption of an “androgynous” leadership style. The paper imparts light on the limited knowledge that exists with regard to the life and behavior of women entrepreneurial orientation in Sri Lanka and highlights the marginalized attention received on extended research about women entrepreneurship as a whole. The practical implications of the study are that policy planners and legislators can make improvements to existing social and labour policies and tax structures that act against emerging women excelling in entrepreneurship. Suggestions for empirical research on a broader basis encompassing the entire island are also stated.

**Key words:** Women entrepreneurship, Barriers to success, Strategic, Individual characteristics, SMEs

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## **Introduction**

Small and Medium scale Enterprises (SMEs) play a key role in an economy in enhancing the level of human development through the generation of employment, improvement of income distribution, poverty reduction and development of the rural economy among a myriad of other factors. SMEs are also considered crucial for development of women especially in the rural areas through participation in economic activities as entrepreneurs. Although more than half the Sri Lankan population consists of women, of the total employed population, female representation in the employer category is only 0.9% (The Department of Census and Statistics Annual Report of 2011).

The subject of women entrepreneurs has been studied only in a very limited way in Sri Lanka (Abeysekara, 2000; Amarasiri 2002; Kodithuwakku & Perera, 2003). In other countries, according to Gunrdy and Welsch (2001), research on women entrepreneurship is still too sparse to expand our knowledge of the underlying factors that support ambitious expansion plans. This study is designed to answer the question as to why the majority of Sri Lankan women do not reach the pinnacle of growth, and the impeding factors underlying the growth of women entrepreneurship in SMEs.

Although it is noted that SMEs account for nearly 70% of employment in Sri Lanka and the average annual turnover across sectors increased by 14% in 2005 (Survey of the International Financial Corporation), the contribution from women entrepreneurs to the economic development of the country is very poor. According to Tambunan (2008) of the Centre for Industry, SME & Business Competition Studies, University of Trisakti, Indonesia, SMEs' contribution to total value added or gross domestic product (GDP) is much smaller than their share of total employment especially in developing countries, where contribution through output is not considered important due to the low productivity exhibited by these SME's. This could be mainly attributed to the fact that a majority of women entrepreneurs are involved in the informal sector.

As globalization proceeds, developing countries face major challenges to take advantage of trade and investment opportunities. Cheaper imports and foreign competition through trade liberalization are common constraints faced by developing countries. It is SMEs that play a key role in the economy of developing countries accounting for more than 90% of all firms outside the agricultural sector,

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and constituting a major source of employment, generating significant domestic and export earnings (OECD, Istanbul, Turkey, 2004). The way the governments, development partners and the private sector address the constraints in trade and investment has major implications for the economic development of a country.

In Asian developing countries, as in any other part of the world, the entrepreneurial process is considered equal irrespective of gender. However, in practice, there are barriers to the growth and survival of women-owned businesses of varying dimensions and magnitudes. In Bangladesh, a large number of women enterprises are operating on an informal basis, and are not identified in the economy, and they lack the basic forms and information, marketing opportunities, regulatory and social supports (ADB, 2001). In Indonesia, exporting their products overseas and increasing the volume of production, both being considered important to be competitive in the global market, are identified as difficulties in the growth of women entrepreneurship (Gordon, Whelan-Berry, and Hamilton, 2007). Mayasami (1999) found that general financing was the major constraint faced by women at the start up stage in Indonesia. It was also found that lack of confidence in female business owners' abilities on the part of banks, suppliers and clients alike and family issues, marketing and labour difficulties, and disagreements with associates, were found to be common problems after the start up phase. In Vietnam, Barwa (2003) found that difficulties in accessing credit from formal institutions was due to their limited access to formal education, ownership of property and social mobility. Other factors such as unequal access to markets, poor business experience, limited knowledge of marketing strategies, weak business associations and poor access to education and training programmes were identified as the main constraints. According to an Asian Development Bank study (1999), problems faced by women entrepreneurs in Nepal and Sri Lanka are mainly low access to credit and marketing networks, lack of access to land and property, and reduced risk-taking capacity, lack of access to modern technology, lack of personal security and risk of sexual harassment, severe competition in the domestic and international markets, low level of self-confidence and social and cultural barriers such as exclusive responsibility for household work and restrictions on mobility.

Having noted the barriers women entrepreneurs experience in other developing countries, the present study is designed to answer the research questions: "What are the barriers to successful women entrepreneurship?" and "To what extent do these barriers operate in the growth and survival of women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka?", with the objective of exploring the factors that act as impediments to

women entrepreneurial success in SMEs. Attempts are also made to find out whether if the identified factors are eradicated it will contribute towards growth of SMEs in Sri Lanka.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: review of literature on the factors that act as barriers to growth of women entrepreneurship, research design with the profile of the sample of the study along with the conceptual framework, highlights of the findings of the study and finally concluding remarks, recommendations for future research and implications of the study.

## **Literature Review**

An entrepreneur has been defined in various ways in the literature: as an innovator (Schumpeter, 1934); as one who allocates and manages the factors of production and bears risks (Marshall as cited in Technonet Asia, 1984, p.1); as a market maker, someone who is able to identify suppliers and customers and act as an intermediary and as a calculated risk taker, with the ability to evaluate alternative opportunities for profit arising from the uncertainty surrounding change (Kirzner, 1997); as an entrepreneur and as a person with the ability to make judgments and co-ordinate scarce resources (Casson, 2005); and as a proactive person, tolerant of ambiguity, achievement oriented and committed to others (McClelland, 1965).

Entrepreneurial success, according to scholars, especially those focused on developed countries, is measured in terms of growth in profit, added value, total turnover, market share and asset growth (Majumdar, 2008). According to Lerner, Brush, and Hisrich (1997), business performance parameters are somehow the same as growth parameters, like growth in revenue, sales, income, profitability and the number of employees.

In organizing the characteristics of the entrepreneur and firm's performance, studies have been carried out in relation to competitiveness and competency through the arguments and theories put forward by Cooper and Gascon (1992) and Murphy (1996). Competitiveness has been described in terms of large organizations and economies, a concept which is related to long-term performance. Competency is described in research as an individual's characteristics which lead to the accomplishment of organizational success. According to Cooper and Gascon (1992), the entrepreneur's demographic, psychological and behavioral characteristics

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as well as his or her managerial skills and technical know-how, are often cited as the most influential factors in the performance of an SME. Further, Kim and Mauborgne (1997, as cited by Gundry and Welsch, 2001), found that the difference between high growth companies and the less competitive low growth companies lay in each group's strategy. Roomi, Harrison, and Beaumont-Kerridge (2009) found that the entrepreneurs' strategic motivations, intentions and aspirations play a vital role in the performance of their businesses. Further, other researchers believe that manager motives (push and pull factors) and personal goal ambitions, intentions and competencies affect an individual's small business orientation towards growth (Morrison, Breen, and Shameem (2003); Brush, 2006; Brush and Gatewood, 2008; Roomi et al., 2009).

In his model, Schein (1978) proposes that certain aspects of a person's career self-image serve as a guiding force in career decisions. Part of this image may be based on individual assessment of competencies and their motives or goals. Because there are various types of entrepreneurs with varying levels of motivations (e.g., strong achievement orientation, moderate level of independence, etc), it is important to measure the degree of commitment of the entrepreneur (Gundry and Welsch, 2001).

Apart from managerial competencies, organizational structure is said to have an impact on a firm's performance (Covin and Slevin, 1995). In their study, Covin and Slevin (1995) found that organically structured entrepreneurial firms showed the highest performance. A study by Caruana, Morris and Vella (1998) on organizational structure led to the belief that increased centralization limits entrepreneurial behavior.

Shane, Kolveried, and Westhead (1991, as cited by Anna, Chandler, Jansen and Mero, 1999), found that it is likely that within gender there may exist different motives for new formations that are related to the type of business started. In the vocational literature, Brooks and Betz (1990) found marked and consistent gender differences in outcome valences and the likelihood of selecting specific male- or female-dominated occupations, which varied according to the traditionality of the occupation. This aspect is linked to entrepreneurial success and the industry in which the entrepreneur operates, and also to the level of masculinity that needs to be exerted on the specific industry. Women have also been viewed as deficit in objective, in forcefulness and tough-mindedness in leadership ability and the skills in business matters, believed to be important for succeeding in managerial roles (Schein, 1973,

1975; Heilman, Block, Martell & Simon, 1989; Powell, 1993 as cited by Heilman and Chen, 2003). Further, women in society are seen as peaceful human beings with values such as equity, fairness and intolerant of conflict, distancing themselves from the virtues men see as essential to successful entrepreneurship and firm growth, such as assertiveness, acquisitiveness and ruthlessness (Chitsike, 2000).

The influence of social factors on a firm's growth of SMEs can be related to the "social networks" of the entrepreneur and the importance placed on relationships between individuals to the firm's growth. Studies have shown that having an extensive social network is a valuable asset that can help an entrepreneur obtain access to information (helping in identifying profitable business opportunities) as well as resources such as credit (Nichter and Goldmark 2009). Nichter and Goldmark (2009) have also pointed out that social networks can act as downsides for SME growth, since in some cases they can be too expensive or inaccessible for the poorest entrepreneurs or may provide unequal access to resources.

The literature suggests that due to cultural aspects, difficulties in access to growth capital exist as both lenders and investors are reluctant to provide capital to women (Allan and Truman, 1993; Brush, 2006). MSEs in developing countries rely mainly on types of credit such as overdrafts and informal loans (Bigsten, Collier, Dercon, Fafchamps, Gauthier, and Gunning, 2003). According to a study in Nairobi and Kenya conducted by Akoten, Sawada and Otsuka (2006), it was shown that the factors affecting credit access are different to those affecting growth and profitability of garment firms and that credit is not a significant detriment to a firm's performance.

Career outcomes are the result of the interactions of occupational, personal and family factors throughout a lifetime (Ferandez, 1981). According to him, for men, career choice is assumed to be an integral part of their lives, while many women view personal goals separate from career goals.

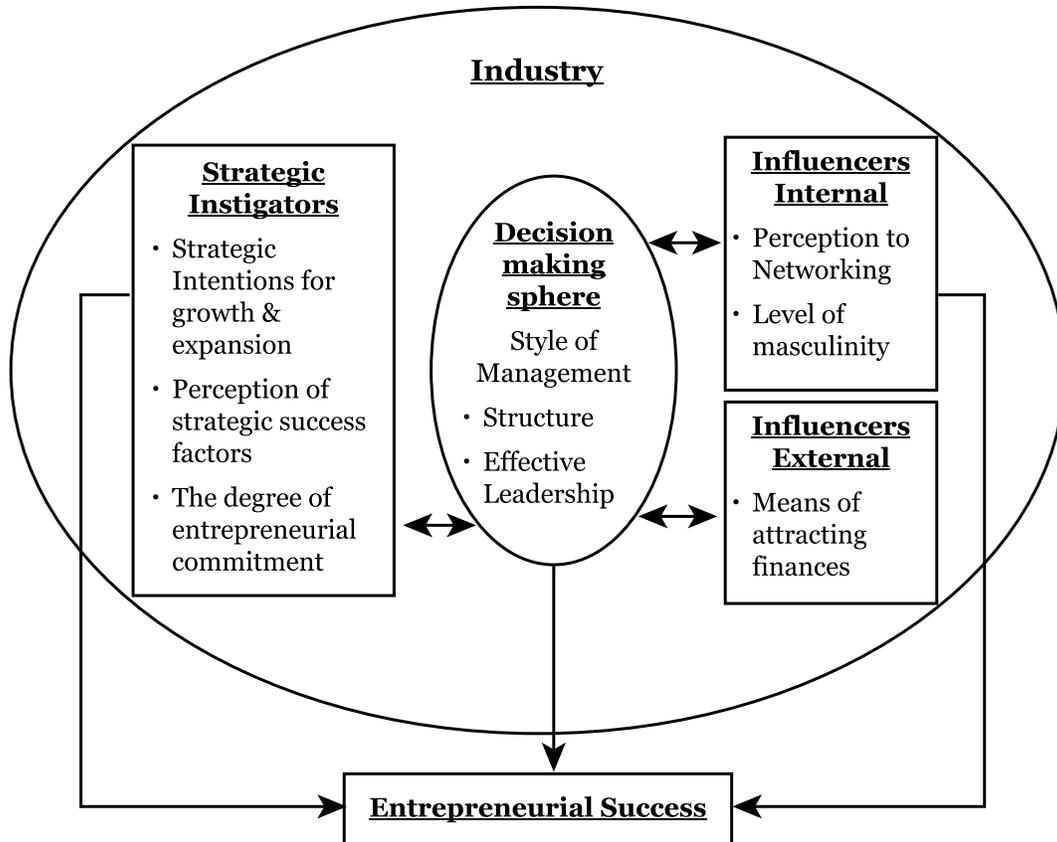
### **Research proposition**

Entrepreneurial success and performance are directly proportional to the individual characteristics of the entrepreneur such as strategic instigators (intentions for growth and expansion, perception of strategic success factors and the degree of commitment), which, in turn, is affected by the nature of the decision making of the entrepreneur related to her style of management and leadership and organizational structure.

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Internal influences on organizational success through networking and the ability to counter barriers, termed as level of masculinity, has an effect on entrepreneurial success, while means of attracting finances act as an external influence.

**Figure 1: Conceptualization of Internal and external influences of women entrepreneurs on venture performance.**



Source: Author

### Method

Qualitative methodology, which is a method where the information processing characteristics of the researcher are very much a part of the credibility of the data, was adopted for the study. The sample study consisted of successful entrepreneurs in the large category of enterprises and a sample of SMEs in the low growth category. Primary sources of data included in-depth interviews. The semi-structured interview guide was based on the Entrepreneurial Profile Questionnaire (EPQ) which has

been successfully implemented in a variety of research sites in the United States, Mexico, Russia, Poland, Romania and Hungary (Welsch and Pistrui 1993; Welsch and Robberts 1994; Pistrui, Liao, and Welsch 1998). The areas covered include strategies followed with regard to market expansion, technological changes, methods of financing, operational planning, organizational structure, perceived importance of management and leadership style, competent staff, reputation and image, networking, commitment in relation to opportunity costs and work-life balance. The demographic profile of the respondents was gathered through a close-ended questionnaire.

The unit of analysis in this example is text-based on 14 reflective dialogues (individual) and four focus group dialogues along with observational notes. The interviews were carried out in the workplaces. All interviews and focus group discussions were tape recorded with the prior consent of the participants. In the qualitative content analysis, concepts related to the quantitative tradition such as validity, reliability and generalisability are still commonly used (Down-Wamboldt, 1992; Olson et al., 1998; Shields and King, 2001, as cited by Graneheim, and Lundman, 2003). In qualitative research the concepts of credibility, dependability and transferability have been used to describe various aspects of trustworthiness (Guba, 1981; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 1987, Berg and Hansson, U., 2000). Credibility deals with the focus of the research and refers to confidence in how well the data and processes of analysis address the intended focus (Polit and Hungler, 1999). Credibility is assessed through the selection of the context, participants and the approach to gathering data. Choosing participants with various experiences sheds light on the research question from a variety of aspects (Patton, 1987; Adler and Adler, 1988). The participants representing different industries, of varying age groups with differing periods of experience, provided a rich variation in the phenomenon being studied. Transferability, a measure of trustworthiness which refers to the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other settings (Polite and Hungler, 1999, p 717), is provided through the description of sample selection and analysis.

The sample was selected by way of maximum variety and intensity sampling (a purposeful sampling strategy); "One selects the participants who are experiential experts and authorities about particular experiences for the particular text under construction, reflecting the greatest intensity" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This was achieved through selecting a sample from a large category of successful entrepreneurs who have extensive experience in successfully overcoming barriers through the

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SME stages they have already surpassed. Snowball sampling, a form of intensity sampling, was also used where interviewees were asked to recommend the "most informed and knowledgeable" on a given subject. For example, large category WEs were selected through WCIC, Women's Chamber of Industry & Commerce (through past presidents and those who had won awards for exceptional performance) and personal networking. SMEs were selected mainly through banks; those who have acquired SME loan facilities. Determining the adequate sample size, according to Glaser and Staruss (1967) in qualitative research, is ultimately a matter of judgment and experience, and the researchers need to evaluate the quality of the information collected in the light of the uses to which it will be put. Sampling was continued as long as new insights were obtained until theoretical saturation. For maximum variety, a heterogeneous sample from different industries, with different periods of experience and differing age groups, was selected and similarities and differences in their experiences observed, isolating a given text.

Data triangulation in order to capture the individual's practices in an organizational context was done through the selected sample of focus groups. This data triangulation is done for promoting conformability in reducing the effect of investigator bias. Further, they provided an interactive context, which is the hallmark of a focus group (Morgan, 1988), and may have captured some of the group processes of the workplace (Bloor, Frankland, Thomism, and Robson, 2001). Two focus groups within the same organization of two different strata, managers and employees, were selected in order to capture a complete picture of the entrepreneur's behaviour. They were able to build upon their own thoughts and experiences with reference to others and were able to establish a link between individual and collective experiences (Smithson, in press as cited by Brannen, and Pattman, 2005). As Ritchie and Lewis, 2003 stated, group homogeneity was aimed at with respect to the same occupational level. Except for one focus group which had five members, the other three focus groups had six members each, as advised by some researchers such as Krueger, 1994. Here, the importance of in-depth interviews and focus groups can be attributed to the research encounter itself, where validation and authenticity of data is ensured, which is mingled with expressions of feelings. A comparison of successful, high growth entrepreneurs with low growth (SME) entrepreneurs provided more details about women's experiences and decisions influencing the sustenance and growth of ventures. The qualitative data that was gathered was used to put forward a more meaningful discussion and conclusion with factors affecting their growth that were identified. Recommendations are made for future research at the end along with implications of the study.

## **Data Analysis**

The analysis of data was carried out based on the conceptual framework through which barriers to successful entrepreneurship were identified, in order to find out the extent to which barriers operate in Sri Lanka. To make complex reality into an abstract category a grounded theory approach was taken for the analysis of data. According to Strauss, and Corbin, (1994, p273), grounded theory is "a methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed". Essentially, grounded theory is a way of thinking about and conceptualizing data that involves an inter-play between data collection, coding and analysis that entails coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and verification (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). This approach is adopted since there is a close fit in the substantive area it is being used in and allows at least partial control by researchers over the structure and process of situations (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p 237).

As suggested by Mertens (1998), the unit of analysis in the study is the person, the entrepreneur. Constellations of sentences or paragraphs which relate to the same underlying meaning are taken as coding units, as stated by Baxter (1991), and abstraction of data into categories and sub categories is performed. A category is a group of content that shares a commonality (Krippendorff, 1980). This attribute is gained by moving back and forth between the whole and parts of texts. Exploration of variations of phenomena by comparing categories, sub-categories and dimensional locations is done for the emergence of patterns and conceptualization.

## **Results**

Eight in-depth interviews in the successful category, and six in the growth (SME) category who have sustained their businesses for more than five years were conducted. The success of entrepreneurs is identified through the growth in the number of employees, as suggested in the literature.

The sample profile consisted of successful women entrepreneurs from the manufacturing as well as service sectors who have expanded the employee cadre over the growth cycle of their businesses. Mrs. Mallika Hemachandra of Mallika Hemachandra Jewellers, Mrs. Ramya Weerakoon of Trendy Garments (Pvt) Ltd., Mrs. Yahampath of Kandygs, Mrs. Wanduragala of Selyn, Mrs. Dehara Gomez of Westgate International (Pvt) Ltd. and Mrs. Kathriarachchi of Three star Organic

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Farms (Pvt) Ltd. were the selected entrepreneurs who belonged to the manufacturing sector, while Mrs. Ramani Fernando of Ramani Fernando Salons and Mrs. Wijebahu from Building Maintenance & Services (Pvt) Ltd. were from the service sector. The SMEs were involved in the service and trading business with a fewer number of employees. The businesses of SMEs were of differing nature, namely, medicated spices and herbs, bottling and distribution of water, bakery, tailoring, hardware and trading of spare parts.

The sample profile was clearly divided into successful (large enterprises) and growth (SMEs) categories. The successful category of entrepreneurs ranged between 40 - 70 years with an education level of O/L to B.Sc., and service in employment of 14 - 35 years. Of the sample, one respondent holds a degree while two have professional qualifications. Entrepreneurs of the low growth category were from the age group 40 – 55 years, with a majority having an education level of O/L except for one having professional qualifications with a service in employment of 6 - 28 years.

### **Strategic Instigators**

The strategic instigators refer to the entrepreneurial attributes inherent in the individuals, expressed and influenced by the environment in a form of behavior specific to the entrepreneur, towards the growth and success of the enterprise. The study showed that the educational level of the entrepreneur does not seem to have an effect on growth. However, the results pointed to education having an additional advantage in dealing with managerial skills. For example, Mrs. Dehara Gomez, being a professional accountant, follows a lean strategy with a male workforce in order to increase productivity and implement cost savings, and Mrs. Wanduragala, being a professional lawyer, thinks her profession has helped her gather managerial skills. Gathering knowledge of the relevant industry was common among all entrepreneurs. Although previous research states that men tend to have stronger business backgrounds and experience, whereas among women, although educated, their education is less related to business management (Clifford, 1996). The research findings highlight the fact that the successful entrepreneur possessed the necessary management skills required through explicit ways making her way to success.

Perceived ability to recognize opportunities was seen among the prominent characteristics of all the entrepreneurs. During the era when handloom factories were closing down due to the economy being opened up, two interviewees got into

the field bravely without any experience, recruiting the laid down staff, and gathering knowledge through experts to run the businesses. As stated by Mrs. Yahampath,

“.....I am very thankful to him,.....I have been just weaving without much knowledge”. ”.....Then in the training college, the handicraft / weaving lecturer.....she gave me books, she took me to the library showed me a lot of things.....Then this experienced person, he became our manager.... he's from India and he taught me how to run a factory, a textile factory. Weaving is intricate. So I didn't have any other knowledge.....”

Productivity was a concern for growth. Low productivity results in slower growth, as experienced by Selyn and Kandygs. But strategies such as outsourcing have tight monitoring systems and incentivizing the workforce has helped overcome the barriers to some extent. Small scale producers make rational choices based on their own perception of their needs and the resources available to them (Gamser, Appleton, and Carter, 1990). This can be inferred from the complacent low performance of some of the SMEs.

Lack of government incentives is identified as another major barrier considered under the construct, strategic intentions for growth and expansion of enterprises which is the first construct of strategic instigators. Mrs.Weerakoon, describing the way she benefited, states,

“I participated in the Frankfurt Spring Fair in 1976. That time it was organized by the Department of Small Industries..... Though it was from small industries, it was the commercial attaché or the commercial counselor in that country who took care of us and organized everything at that end. I think still if you do that, it saves a lot of money rather than sending a person from here who does not know anything, where we have to guide her/him. But my thinking is why do we have a trade commissioner there or a trade counselor there. We should make use of them. Those days we got free stand space, the rest was comfortable to our pockets....” “Now what EDB organizes is quite costly; we have to pay for the stands...anyway EDB does not organize now for the garment industry, where my business is concerned”.

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As Mrs. Yahampath described,

“.....When President Premadasa was there they had a scheme where the government reimbursed 20% of the value of exports. That was a huge facility for us where we made all our investments with that money, building the factories, buying the machinery...”

The literature states that in Oral's (1986) model of the competitiveness of industrial firms, competitiveness is a function of the firm's industry mastery, its cost superiority and the political-economic environment around it. This implies the importance placed on external government support to be on a par with internal competencies for a firm to grow.

Research indicates that the previous experience of the founder/owner, the ability of the entrepreneur to set realistic, measurable goals and effectively manage conflict have been identified as individual factors that increase or decrease the willingness of the entrepreneur to grow their business (Gundry and Welsch, 2001). Those who are motivated more by the desire to meet a challenge or get rich seem more interested in growth (Morris, Miyasaki, Watters, and Coombes, 2006). Other researchers suggest that manager motives (push and pull factors) and personal ambition, intention and competencies will lead to a firm's growth (Brush, 2006). A majority of the participants wanted the challenge of being independent; achieving it no matter what barriers came their way. The researcher has treated this attribute as self-actualization. The attribute of setting measurable goals was seen clearly in the successful category. For instance, Mrs. Mallika Hemachandra says,

“.....The jewellery business was managed only by men. I was the first lady to start this. They were all against me. It's a men-dominated industry you know”. “.....the most important thing is you have to decide what you intend doing”.

This factor can be related to the social learning theory of Bandura (1977), which states that self-efficacy is a specialized judgment producing the desired effect. In relation to self-efficacy in owning and running one's own business venture, it mentions assessing several types of skills and abilities. One of the attributes of self-efficacy which can be termed as venture-efficacy in the entrepreneurial context is management competencies. The employee cadre of all successful WEs who manage their workforce efficiently and delegating work among groups, is evidence of the high level of competency they possess.

The importance placed on research and development and innovation was a major contributory factor of strategic intentions for growth. Many were thinking differently at the start-up phase. To state a few examples, instead of marketing a product such as traditional handloom fabric, Mrs. Wanduragala of Selyn thought of specializing in toys for the export market as a strategy to outcompete others. Mrs. Kathriarachchi of Three Star Organic Foods brought in a differentiation strategy of introducing the long forgotten traditional healthy diet to the housewife, of being truly organic with proper certification, and this created the demand for the products locally and overseas as well. Further, innovation through supply of ready-to-cook green leaves is a novel strategy of penetrating the market. Mrs. Ramani Fernando, who is into the hair and beauty salon business, believes in being up to date with technology and in continuous innovation. Advanced technology to link with customers was seen as a factor for lean order processing.

Mrs. Ramya Weerakoon, links technology to overcome barriers of high cost of inputs, stating,

“...electricity is going up and it’s difficult, but those are challenges, without blaming anybody, we should find ways and means to overcome those problems”.

When asked about her strategy to overcome, whether she burdens the customer with higher prices, she refutes that statement, saying,

“No we can’t....” “....We form our own strategies by trying to curtail on electricity to find different ways, we tried solar, and the ROI is not effective for an industry. What we do is machinery etc which does not consume, we are concerned when we buy, the incorporation of consumption of power into that. Then like boilers we have done away with, like kerosene and diesel, we are trying certain things such as charcoal”.

Having strict budgetary control in all steps in the production process including quality control measures is thought to be important.

In summary, strategic intentions for growth and expansion of the WE were possible through the inherent ability to recognize opportunities, competency level of the entrepreneur, strict budgetary control and clear goals in the pursuit of self-actualization. Lack of support by the government was highlighted as a major barrier.

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Looking at the perception of strategic success factors, the second construct of strategic instigators, psychology literature has explored the relationship between self-efficacy relationships and behavior (Fishhein and Ajzen, 1975). They state that intentions are hypothesized to be the link between beliefs and subsequent behaviour. As Mrs. Kathriarachchi stated,

“.....I believe in Dhamma....”. “.....from the very beginning, I have been very honest to everyone. If you serve society in the right way, according to your conscience, it is certain that you will never fail”.

Related to the beliefs, settlement of EPF/ETF and looking into the welfare of employees were priorities in her path to success, as she viewed employees as a valuable asset and treated them as part of her family.

A good business plan was found to be a strategy adopted by a majority of entrepreneurs. For instance, Mrs. Wanduragala, being a social entrepreneur, has flexible working hours for older women and economically disadvantaged and fixed hours for the younger ones, overcoming labour problems to meet targets. As a focus group of Supervisors at Westgate International pointed out, Mrs. Dehara Gomez applies a business plan of sharing profits with the employees of all categories and it is a strategy to improve productivity and retaining workers. At Trendy Wear, apart from the five factories they operate, outsourcing or sub-contracting to 25-30 other factories is carried out to spread the risk of labour scarcity. This is referred to in the literature as ideas of flexible specialization (Piore and Sabel, 1984).

The strategic success of the enterprises was associated with highly organized process and product layouts. As Dehara mentioned,

“Now we have changed the layout so the processes can go clean, cutting, routing all those with 5S implemented to a certain extent.....it's time saving. We have now connected stores to the machine, machine to the construction, construction to the painting and out. So it's more organized.....”

Certification as a marketing strategy is also used by some of the entrepreneurs such as Fair Trade certification and Organic Food certification.

Trust and confidence build up with customers and suppliers are thought to be important by a majority of the entrepreneurs. Quality, timely delivery and customer flexibility in maintaining competitiveness are considered as priorities in the growth of business. Research conducted by Cliff (1998) notes that women business owners tend to maintain a balance between economic goals such as profit and growth and non-economic goals such as product quality, personal enjoyment and helping others, thus placing less value on growth and success of business than male entrepreneurs. As one of the participants stated,

“... I used to take the children to school in the morning and pick them up also, I didn't want to let go that part because you can have everything, but if you neglect your children and your husband, what's the idea? You know you are doing this for them.....and I am proud that I was there for them”.

“...No, now I am not going further, now I get the satisfaction of giving employment to a lot of people and to see their lives are comfortable...”

Lack of trust in the level of competency in getting through government approval processes was another factor acting as a barrier that was brought out by many of the WEs. As Mrs. Weerakoon stated,

“... they wanted me to get rent control approval, GCEC approval because we belonged to the GCEC, a lot of paper work and red tape I had to go through. I applied for the loan somewhere in 1987 November and I got the loan in 1988 May and I got down the machinery, I was paying on a bridging loan. So it's very difficult”.

When asked whether the difficulties she faced were because of being a woman, she stated,

“Could be because I was a woman and I was doing this alone...”

An SME participant also faced difficulties in obtaining government approval for the distribution and sale of products due to a three-year delay and was forced to sell without approval as her loans and leases were overdue. Another participant when seeking advice was discouraged by a government institution on grounds of possible failure.

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In summary, perception of strategic success of enterprises is identified through a belief in honest conduct, having an effective business plan with organized layouts of products and processes for productivity improvement, confidence build up of customers and suppliers through certification and other means. Cumbersome business approval procedures and not having the correct strategic thinking to foster the above attributes will invariably act as barriers to success.

The third factor under consideration regarding strategic instigators is the degree of entrepreneurial commitment. As Shane, Locke, and Collins (2003) suggest, the transition of individuals from one stage of entrepreneurial process to another is the result of a combination of motivation and cognition. Furthermore, environmental conditions and entrepreneurial opportunities matter, while the motivation and ability of particular people might lead to different types of entrepreneurial actions under the same environmental conditions.

As Ramya Weerakoon stated,

“..... I was a timid housewife, you know. It is just courage and determination...I had to sacrifice a lot in my personal life”.

Dehara says,

“...Sometimes I used to go to Kotmale at 3-4 in the morning and come back at 11 o'clock in the night you know, only now, for the last 5 years that I've employed X, Y and Z so I can sit back and relax a bit”.

Mrs.Wanduragala says,

“You really have to be passionate about what you do...I put myself last in the line you know...”

A majority located the business to facilitate family life while looking into business matters. The sacrifices made were for a vision of making others happy. For instance, Mrs. Wijebahu provides employment to over 800 people who are from the poorest segment of society; evidence of the energy and motivation they possess towards the commitment to a cause.

The strategic instigators consisted of three constructs: strategic intentions for growth and expansion, perception of strategic success factors, and level of entrepreneurial commitment. The major barriers identified were lack of government support inhibiting opportunities for product and market expansion, labour scarcity which is aggravated through government employment schemes operating through Provincial Councils, as stated by one participant, and lack of trust placed on WEs where business approval procedures come into effect. Lack of an effective business plan and low access to advanced technologies were found to be barriers among SMEs.

### **Decision making sphere**

There is a general perception that an organization's culture can neither be developed nor changed quickly and that it is represented by a tightly connected system of artifacts, espoused values and assumptions (Zahra, Hayton and Salvato, 2004 as cited by Jack, Hyman, and Osborne, 2006). Organizational culture can be related to a set of complex and multi faceted network of values and symbols (Schein, 1992). In entrepreneurial organizational ventures, the culture that is created is highly influenced by the personal and direct management, interest and stewardship of the owners.

An organizational culture depicting a learning organization with easy access to the top management was found to be common in all the organizations visited, a factor contributing to the success of the entrepreneur. The culture is linked to how people are managed in the enterprise, leading to the perception that the probability of success increases with the development of people and effective utilization of them (Rauch, Freese and Utsch, 2005). For instance, according to Selyn's practice, Mrs. Wanduragala states,

"I have taken so many people who started with me, trained and developed through external courses and they have come up to be managers. So like it's a big family you know....".

Therefore, leadership and management style become crucial aspects for venture growth, and are also believed to influence a firm's culture. A majority of the enterprises were organized well into work groups, in order to promote autonomy, and were rewarded for performance. Excellent monitoring of work was practised. For example, one entrepreneur states,

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“...we give them a work study. So we know how much time they take exactly to produce something”... “they get rewarded with other facilities as well such as insurance and travelling”.

As a focus group of Westgate executive grade states,

“....There is a multi-skilled performance chart in the factory. There are different tasks assigned according to the machinery that is there. If an individual shows a special talent for doing more than one task independently, this is highlighted, and they are rewarded annually with higher increments”.

The employees were motivated to work willingly and productively with a feeling of belongingness through training and development. Promoting innovation within the firm provided a sound environment, facilitating employees to come out with their inner talents. As research indicates, high growth oriented entrepreneurs engage in research and development efforts, and invest in new innovations for growth (Dickson, Weaver and Hoy, 2006). Investing in technological improvements have enabled product range expansion as well as saving costs, as a respondent states,

“... we had the normal wooden machines, then we had the bicycle winders but later on we mechanized the entire pre-loom stage,.....the machines have saved costs and where productivity is concerned, it is fast”.

In summary, among the prominent characteristics of success factors the culture of decision making in the organization plays a major role. Autonomy (along with accessibility of the entrepreneur), and creating a sense of belongingness through organized work groups for productivity improvement is believed to lead to success. Employees are encouraged and developed to inculcate the bold attributes of independent decision making, being strong and courageous through training and development.

### **Internal Influences; Networking**

From an entrepreneurial perspective, the support construct has focused primarily on networking or obtaining information and resources that are important to starting a business (Brush, 1992). For many business owners, a spouse or significant other is

an important factor in maintaining a successful business (Nelson, 1989). This was made clear empirically as there was unwavering support given by the spouses and family members, who invariably made success a reality in the successful as well as growth categories.

It was found that expansion to rural areas providing livelihoods to many individuals and penetrating into overseas markets has been possible through networking. As shown by the following phrase in an extract of the interview with Dehara,

“Ah, yeah., in Vavuniya, two factories, one in Kilinochchi, we do the factory installations”.

Asked whether this was possible through known contacts, she stated,

“Of course..... they go to those areas for their tax benefits. So then they tell me to do the interiors. Yes, own contacts, friends, associates, you know because to do a business really, you can be so good. But if you don't know anybody, you'll never be given the job”.

Mrs. Kathriarachchi of Three Star Organic Products stated,

“We export through a known friend. They have introduced me to super markets and restaurants in the UK, Maldives and Dubai”.

The entrepreneurs seem to allocate budgets for exposure locally as well as overseas in the form of seminars, workshops and customer relations development, where the feedback has helped the organizations make critical decisions towards success.

### **Internal Influences; Level of masculinity**

As stated in the literature, the nature of the industry a woman entrepreneur is involved in has a great impact on the kind of barriers faced in relation to the sustenance of the business towards growth. The very fact that one has chosen the respective industry as a career depicts the kind of toughness needed in dealing with matters related to the business, and this fact can be inferred from the level of masculinity possessed by the entrepreneur.

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To state a few examples in order to elaborate this fact, Mrs. Dehara Gomez of Westgate, being in the joinery industry, states how she deals with different matters.

“.....Actually the disadvantages if I say, you can be so good, your price will be good, but sometimes the world is corrupt. You lose the job, so I can't pin point and say, but it is happening...” “...” Yeah that's the downside of our industry, actually may be of every industry, I suppose. If you are doing export market it does not matter, you have your own client base”.

However, she stated how she overcomes barriers bravely,

“..... No, I am proud to say my retention has all been collected. There are one or two clients who try to be funny...when you ask for your retention....defects come up because of the retention. I am very aggressive that way, it's a bad marketing tool to be aggressive to a client, but sometimes when they try dirty tactics, we also cannot be humble you know. They are trying to avoid not giving you. One or two people have tried to play us out, but they have not got away with it”.

Sexual harassment was also stated as one barrier in getting different approvals from authorities. Successful endurance of these barriers was seen in the successful entrepreneurs.

### **External Influences; Means of Attracting Finances**

The general perception according to all the entrepreneurs is that borrowing from banks or financial institutions is easy for women, since the level of credibility of women is thought to be high in settling loans and meeting the requirements. However, lack of micro-finance schemes at low interest rates and other benefits make the entrepreneurs reluctant to expand and grow their businesses, which are seen as downfalls in all the industries as a common factor. The literature states that subsidized financing programmes and tax incentives have resulted in dramatic increases in self-employment and new venture activity in the UK (OECD, 1991). The government schemes introduced to support the village economies were not effective as means of financing for growth, since approval procedure was cumbersome to the entrepreneur as loans were given to groups of people. Low access to collateral was also

seen as a hindrance in the SMEs. An interesting finding is from one participant, Mrs. Mallika Hemachandra, who states that having finances is not a must for starting or expansion of a business since there are ways of generating your own finances, if one acts intelligently. This is in accordance with the study by Akoten, Sawada and Otsuka (2006), where it was shown that the factors affecting credit access are different to those affecting growth and profitability. According to the participant, the correct vision will take one towards the required goal.

In conclusion, the choice of business start up seems to play a crucial role in the growth and success of the entrepreneur. Regardless of whether an entrepreneur is educated or not, the correct vision has taken the entrepreneur towards higher growth phases of the life cycle. However, financial management skills were shown to be giving additional leverage to success due to stringent waste management, and budgetary control parameters operating throughout the organization. The strategic approach to expansion, however, seems to be hindered by lack of external support extended through the government, export facilitation and opportunities in the form of low interest credit lines. Labour scarcity is seen as a threat to success in the near future. Management and leadership style had a crucial role to play in the success of ventures.

### **Discussion and managerial implications**

The results of this qualitative study point to the complex nature of an individual's instigative characteristics for self-renewal as operating as the chief ingredients of success of a firm. The successful entrepreneur is focused on in the study for the purpose of bringing forward the barriers that they have successfully overcome, and a comparison is made with the low-growth (SME) sector for confirmation of the results. These characteristics are grouped into four constructs, namely, strategic goals and aspirations / strategic instigators, the approach to organizing the business/ decision making sphere, perceived influences with regard to networking, and level of masculinity towards the growth of the business (internal influences), and influences on growth of the business with regard to means of attracting finances (external influences).

A contrasting difference that was apparent in comparing the successful (large category) and growth (SME) category is the ignorance felt about growth by the SMEs especially the rural women, as they consider their needs are met at a certain

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level of achievement. Their vision was to provide for the basic needs of the families such as educating the children, providing food and shelter while being of help to the village folk in providing employment at a micro level. In contrast, successful entrepreneurs felt a strong need for achievement, for self-realization of mainly being independent and working towards achieving a cause of serving society, such as employment generation in the difficult rural areas of the country at a macro level. The general view of defining the traditional producers in the literature is as resisting change; small scale producers make rational choices based on their own perception of their needs, and the resources available to them (Gamser et.al, 1990). This lack of need for achievement has resulted in stagnant or slow growth in the growth or SME category.

According to the literature, previous experience of the founder/owner, the ability of the entrepreneur to set realistic, measurable goals and effectively manage conflict, have been identified as individual factors that increase or decrease the willingness of the entrepreneur to grow their business (Gundry and Welsch, 2001). This attribute can be referred to as ignorance of the need for growth by the growth category, (SMEs) mainly due to lack of information that has come about through low access to networking. The lack of information has resulted in failure to set realistic goals that match their potential. The study reveals that there is a vast potential for growth of the SMEs through access to advanced technology (e.g., Priyanka Foods where bottling is done manually), access to low interest credit facilities (lack of finances for expansion and sustenance of businesses felt by all the SMEs), and through means of providing collateral for loan facilities. A mentor network such as the network currently in operation for men entrepreneurs seem necessary, and are crucial for the development of this important sector. Barriers such as low access to advanced technology and low access to markets could be overcome through an efficient mentor network.

Support extended by the government through facilitation of opportunities for export promotion would help expand the successful large-scale entrepreneurs, as well as promote the low-growth SMEs to develop their potential. Such facilitation would open up avenues for access to new markets, the latest information on advanced technologies or new methods of production at low cost, and new products among a myriad of other advantages such as providing a vast amount of foreign exchange to the country through development of women entrepreneurs, especially SMEs, which account for more than 90% of all firms outside the agriculture sector in developing

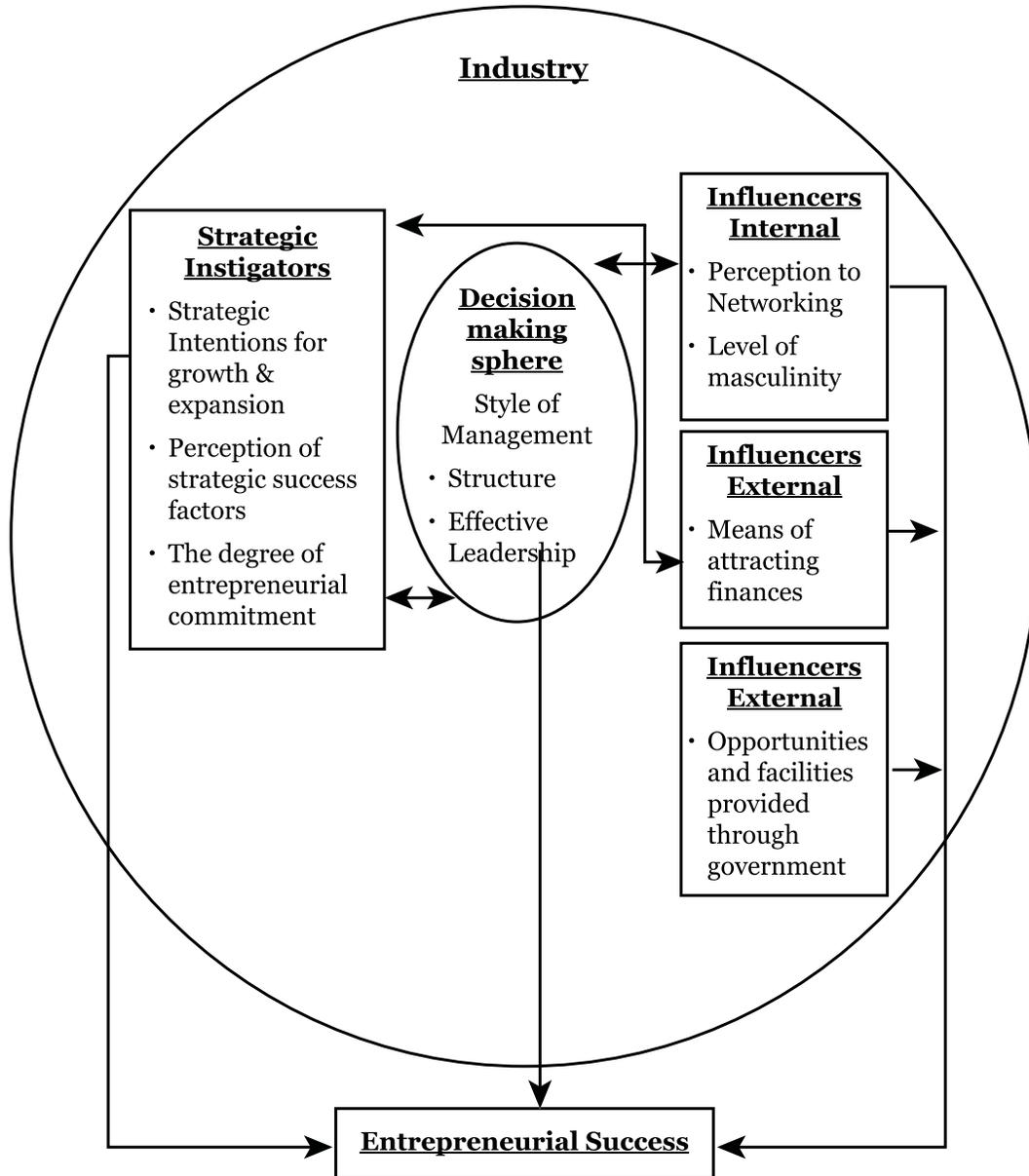
countries (OECD, Istanbul, Turkey, 2004). Facilitation of tax reliefs provides major benefits in terms of expansion through re-investment in the businesses as shown by the successful category. As indicated in the study, whatever benefits available are reaped by the public sector through Provincial Councils and WEs in the successful and growth (SME) sectors are neglected; they are forced to attract labour at high cost, non-availability of attractive micro finance schemes and lack of facilitation of collateral, which are felt as major barriers for growth by the SMEs are overlooked. Women are affected negatively as government approval systems are not in order where they face immense difficulties in various forms as delays and harassment. Sexual harassment is also prevalent and acts as a hindrance to growth and development.

This factor of facilitation of government support for strategic intentions for growth and expansion, although considered as an internal characteristic of the entrepreneur, according to research findings, it can be categorized under the construct external influences, since the factors that act as barriers relate to the external political environmental conditions for growth and sustenance of the businesses, resulting in an emergent model slightly different to the proposed model in the study. The conceptual framework is thus modified considering the findings of the study as depicted in Figure 2.

The research proposition that evolved through the conceptual framework stating that individual characteristics of the entrepreneur are directly proportional to entrepreneurial success or performance is supported by the findings. The indirect relationship between growth of a venture and means of attracting finances, although supported positively, the research findings indicate that the influence of the entrepreneur plays a crucial role here as well.

Where growth is concerned, Loscocco and Robinson (1991) suggest that women-owned businesses are concentrated in traditional female-type fields, such as retail and service sectors, with lower average business receipts than in male-type fields such as manufacturing and high tech sectors. The study included successful female entrepreneurs in the manufacturing and construction fields, as well as in the service sector. For instance, the company, Building Maintenance and Services (Pvt) Ltd. and Ramani Salons, identifying the need of the modern consumer, provide a product of necessity. This can be attributed to the cultural influence of the West as seen by the present mod-tradi culture prevalent in the country. Among the SMEs, growth is hindered as a majority of them are in female-type services and retail trade showing poor potential for growth in agreement with the literature.

**Figure 2: Emergent model of Conceptual Framework: Conceptualization of individual characteristics of women entrepreneurs on venture growth influenced by external factors.**



Source: Author

The study also revealed that the WEs lead their firms in a collaborative manner with an androgynous style of leadership, possessing a mix of task-oriented and relationship-oriented leadership styles concurrently for successful goal achievement. The relationship-oriented style can be seen in the representation of subordinates'

interests, taking decisions in consultation with subordinates, open communication and recognition of subordinates' contribution while task-oriented style deals with clarifying subordinate roles, directing, controlling, problem solving, criticizing poor work for efficient utilization of human and material resources leading to effective goal achievement. This style of leadership can be attributed to a combination of "masculine" and "feminine" leadership styles, that derives, by and large, from the strong male-dominant values in developing nations, coupled with women's own tendencies and needs (Oplatka, 2006).

The key business management issues depicted as key findings of the study such as finding good employees, managing cash-flows, maintaining profits for sustainability and an economy and legal environment conducive for growth, have to be addressed for entrepreneurial performance.

### **Limitations and directions for further research**

Although the study revealed the contextual features that positively influence venture advancement such as family support, government's facilitation of programmes and self-motives, the practical knowledge for development and implementation of programs for promoting careers for women in schools and village economies is limited and a systematic large study based on extensive empirical evidence is suggested.

The national and cultural contexts shape the realization of goals as well as career experiences of individuals in a certain society. The impact of role conflicts on the lives, career and leadership orientation of women entrepreneurship needs to be further researched to understand the impact on the pace of growth.

Self-efficacy is an individual's cognitive estimate of his/her "capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources and courses of action needed to exercise control over events in their lives" (Wood and Bandura, 1989). Hence cognitive features of venture performance among women need to be further studied in different contextual settings, especially in developing policies in the post-war era of the country.

The results show that there are interrelations operating within the identified factors of the conceptual framework and social and cultural background of the entrepreneur. It is important that these relationships are further studied in order to identify the

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impact of these integrated characteristics operating on the entrepreneurial behavior. Further, the psychological aspects that persist in raising finance internally, leading to a firm's growth vs. external borrowings, need to be researched, as at a time of high cost of inputs, finances for growth aspects becomes important and the impact of finances on growth orientation needs more attention.

### **Conclusion**

The study reveals facts of the development process where one's personal change plays a major role in dealing with unique leadership challenges and strategies for success. The barriers brought to light help in the reconciliation of ideas and experience in the endless quest to resolve doubts by finding convincing explanations for career advancement of women. As the Sri Lankan woman entrepreneur is a strong individual with "androgynous" i.e. a combination of "masculine" and "feminine" leadership styles with potential for self-actualization and economic advancement through independent business ownership, it is the duty of the legislators and policy makers to be mindful of tax structures and social and labour policies that exist which act against emerging women who wish to achieve financial independence. Proactive policy changes are needed for women to excel in their chosen career paths without sacrificing their dreams.

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