

Research Article

Exploring Women's Self-Employment in Mzuzu, Malawi: Catalysts and Barriers to Socioeconomic Empowerment

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Abstract

Introduction: Women's engagement in self-employment is an important component of economic development, yet their experiences and challenges in this sector are often overlooked. This study explores the experiences of women involved in self-employment in Mzuzu City, Malawi, focusing on the challenges and benefits of their economic participation.

Methodology: The study employed a mixed methodology, utilizing a sequential explanatory research design to investigate the experiences of 25 women engaged in self-employment activities in Mzuzu City. This design involved initially collecting and analyzing quantitative data through structured questionnaires, followed by the collection and thematic analysis of qualitative data from in-depth interviews.

Results: The majority of women in self-employment were aged 31-45, with limited access to education. Many were single parents or widowed, driven by the need to support their families. Challenges included restricted access to capital and markets, difficulties in balancing business and family, high taxes, intense competition, and exposure to gender-based violence. Despite these hurdles, self-employment contributed to household food security, reduced dependence on men, and empowered women in family decision-making.

Conclusion: The study highlights the importance of addressing the challenges faced by women in self-employment in Mzuzu City. The findings call for inclusive economic policies and support systems to promote women's self-reliance and financial independence, benefiting both gender equality and economic growth in Malawi.

Keywords: Women, Self-employment, Gender inequality, Economic empowerment and Malawi.

1. Introduction

Self-employment, characterized by individuals working for themselves, not as employees of others, plays a crucial role in stimulating economic development. It is a significant source of employment, particularly in developing nations, where it acts as a driving force behind economic development, fostering job creation and poverty reduction [1, 2]. In the context of Malawi, this mode of work has witnessed considerable prevalence, with data from 2021 revealing that 61.4% of the Malawian workforce engaged in self-employment [3].

This study focuses on a specific and underrepresented demographic within the self-employment landscape, women. Over the past three decades, there has been a growing emphasis on empowering women economically. This increased focus has led to various changes in the labor market. One significant aspect of this transformation is the rise of self-employment, which offers greater temporal and spatial flexibility compared to full-time employment [4]. As a result, women find it easier to strike a balance between their work and family obligations [5]. This shift towards self-employment

has made women more inclined to pursue self-employment opportunities rather than traditional full-time employment.

Self-employed women innovate, start, interact, and manage businesses to contribute to the domestic development [6]. Despite their invaluable contributions, self-employed women face a number of challenges. Ghore document these challenges, which encompass issues such as negotiating for city vending spaces, accessing affordable loans for agricultural purposes, identifying suitable markets and efficient transportation networks for perishable goods, facing instances of gender-based violence in both public and private domains, and dealing with the adverse impact of unpredictable rainfalls and recurrent droughts [7]. These challenges underscore the pressing need to address the systemic barriers that impede the economic empowerment and overall success of self-employed women across varied industries. To provide the theoretical underpinning for the study, we employed the Feminist Economic theory developed by Waring, which postulates that economic systems and policies are not gender-neutral but are instead deeply intertwined with gender

dynamics [8]. It underscores the importance of understanding how economic structures and practices affect women's economic opportunities and challenges.

Within this research, feminist economic theory sheds light on the ways in which gender, economics, and self-employment interact, highlighting the ways in which systemic injustices and societal norms influence women's roles in this industry. The study uses this framework to apply a deep analysis of the underlying mechanisms that underlie the advantages and challenges faced by women in Mzuzu City, who work for themselves. This underscores the importance of recognizing the gender-specific hurdles that self-employed women face and, in turn, calls for the development of policies and interventions tailored to address these challenges. Furthermore, this study seeks to offer pragmatic recommendations that are precisely tailored to the unique nuances of the Malawian context. This could act as a spur for progress and gender parity in the field of self-employment.

2. Methodology

The study employed a mixed methodology and adopted a sequential explanatory research design to investigate the experiences of 25 women engaged in self-employment activities in Mzuzu City, Mzimba District. This design involves a sequential process in which quantitative data is collected and analyzed first, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data [9]. Purposive sampling technique was used to recruit actively engaged women in self-employment within the study area. The sample size of 25 participants was determined based on the availability and willingness of eligible participants.

Structured questionnaires were administered to all the 25 participants to collect quantitative insights into the challenges and experiences of women in self-employment activities. These questionnaires were designed to stimulate precise responses that would facilitate a robust understanding of the topic. Using SPSS, quantitative analysis was performed on the quantitative data collected from the questionnaires. The analysis encompassed the computation of descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages. These statistical metrics provided a clear summary of the gathered data by condensing the quantitative data.

In addition, qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews with the participants. Beginning with eight participants, data collection continued until data saturation was reached, ensuring that no new information or themes emerged from the interviews. This approach helped ensure that a comprehensive range of experiences and perspectives were captured from the participants, strengthening the validity of the qualitative findings. Thematic analysis was applied to this qualitative data, which involved identifying recurring themes and patterns in the dataset. Thematic analysis revealed nuanced narratives, shedding light into the varied experiences of women engaged in self-employment activities.

The use of both quantitative and qualitative data facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by women in self-employment. It uncovered the fundamental causes of these problems and shed light on possible legislative fixes to increase women's engagement in self-employment. This methodological approach also ensured academic rigor and a robust exploration of the research problem. Ethical considerations were of paramount importance throughout the research process. All participants gave their informed consent prior to data collection, and their confidentiality and anonymity were strictly protected. The University of Livingstonia Undergraduate Research Evaluation Committee also examined and approved the research protocol to make sure it complied with ethical guidelines.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Demographic Data

This section provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participating women in this study. The demographic information encompasses age, marital status, educational background, number of children, and occupation.

Age Analysis: To analyze the age distribution of the respondents, the study classified them into five categories: below 25, 26-30, 31-40, 41-45, and above 46 years. The results are presented in Table 1, indicating the number and percentage of respondents in each category. Notably, the majority of women in self-employment activities fall within the 31-40 age group, representing 40% of the total respondents.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
Below 25	1	4
26-30	2	8
31-40	10	40
41-45	8	32
Above 46	4	16
Total	25	100

This distribution is consistent with findings from Gavigan, which suggest that older women tend to embrace entrepreneurship [10]. This observation also prompts a further inquiry into the specific motivations and challenges faced by women in different age groups as they venture into self-employment.

Marital Status: The study collected data on the marital status of the respondents. Table 2 presents the distribution of respondents by marital status. The data reveals that single parents, including divorced and widowed individuals, constitute the majority, representing 28% and 24%, respectively. Only 20% of the women were married.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Marital Status.

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
Married	5	20
Widowed	7	28
Divorced	7	28
Single (never married)	6	24
Total	25	100

The prevalence of single parents engaging in self-employment activities indicates that many women turn to self-employment as a means of providing for their households. Understanding how marital status influences women's entry into self-employment can offer valuable insights for support programs and policies targeting this demographic.

distribution of respondents by the highest level of education attained. The majority of women, accounting for 48%, reported having no formal education. Approximately 32% had received primary education, while 12% had attained secondary education. A mere 8% of respondents had tertiary education qualifications. On the contrary, Struckell observes that self-employment has a stronger positive correlation with financial literacy [11].

Education Analysis: Data was also collected on the educational background of the respondents. Table 3 displays the

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Highest Level of Education.

Education	Frequency	Percentage
Primary	8	32
Secondary	3	12
Tertiary	2	8
None	12	48
Total	25	100

Poor business performance is caused by a lack of management competencies and classroom learnt skills such as bookkeeping, marketing, inventory control, and resource management [12]. This underscores the need for exploring alternative ways for skill development and knowledge transfer to this population group.

Many are involved in businesses that cater to local demands, such as food sales, reflecting the adaptability and diversity of their business ventures.

Occupation Analysis: The respondents were asked about their types of businesses. The study found that 10 (40%) women were involved in retail shops, such as cosmetics and clothing stores. 9 (36%) women engaged in service-rendering businesses like food preparation, while 5 (24%) were in livestock-related activities. This data indicates that women often participate in businesses that rely on their skills and talents, which do not necessarily require formal education.

Number of Children: The study also gathered information on the number of children each respondent had as presented in Table 4. The data shows that women with more children tend to be more involved in self-employment activities. For instance, 32% of respondents had 5-6 children, while 36% had above 6 children. In a study examining the correlation between female self-employment and the presence of children in households, Noseleit observed that an increase in the number of children in a family is positively associated with an increased likelihood of women pursuing self-employment as a career choice [13].

Table 4: Distribution of Respondents by Number of Children.

Number of children	Frequency	Percentage
1-3	3	12
4-5	5	20
5-6	8	32
Above 6	9	36
Total	25	100

These findings highlight the importance of self-employment in helping women provide for their families and meet the needs of their households. The data further suggests that women often engage in self-employment to support their families, particularly in terms of food security.

3.2. Challenges that Self-Employed Women Face

In this section, we delve into the challenges faced by women participating in self-employment activities. The discussion revolves around the identification and examination of several prevailing themes:

Lack of Access to Capital and Loans

A prevailing challenge identified by most women is the limited access to capital for starting and expanding their businesses. Many women expressed their frustration with the difficulty of accessing loans due to stringent collateral requirements imposed by financial institutions. As one respondent noted, *"Most women struggle to secure the capital needed to start and sustain their businesses. The conditions set by financial institutions make it especially hard for women to access loans, hindering business growth."* A similar study by Mashapure in Zimbabwe mirrors these findings, underlining the lack of collateral security to obtain funding as one of the main challenges impeding the sustainability of women-owned businesses [14, 15]. To address this challenge, it is essential to consider policies that increase the availability of loan guarantees and reduce the barriers to accessing capital for women entrepreneurs. This would provide a much-needed boost to their self-employment activities.

Difficulty in Obtaining Vending Places

Some women bemoaned the difficulty with securing permanent vending places, which affects their ability to properly render their services and products. This challenge was particularly pronounced for those who sold items outside of established markets. For example, one woman shared her experience, saying, *"I struggle to sell my merchandise as I do not have a fixed vending space to set up my shop. I'm forced to lower my prices to ensure quick sales, which ultimately hinders my business progress."* Addressing this issue requires initiatives that create better market access for women entrepreneurs, ensuring they have fair opportunities to acquiring vending spaces.

Balancing Business and Family Life

Another significant challenge highlighted by married women participating in self-employment is the difficulty of balancing business and family life. Managing the demands of running

a business with family responsibilities poses a substantial challenge. As one participant explained, *"I find it challenging to provide for my family while managing my business. I constantly worry about taking care of my family's needs, especially when my husband expects me to fulfill my traditional roles."*

This probably explains the initial discovery why married women exhibit a lower propensity to embark on self-employment ventures in comparison to their single-parent counterparts. To solve this challenge, strategies should be developed to support women in managing their businesses and family responsibilities effectively.

High Tax and High Competition

Most participants complained about the high taxes imposed by the city council, emphasizing that the taxes do not correspond to the services and products they offer on the market. Participants reported paying daily taxes even when they had not made any sales. Additionally, high levels of competition in their businesses, particularly in price competition, were a significant concern. One participant voiced her concern: *"High competition, especially with fellow women, makes it challenging to sell my products. I often go home without making any sales, which, combined with high taxes, seriously hinders my self-employment activities."* Policy measures to address this challenge include reviewing tax structures and providing support to mitigate competition, allowing women entrepreneurs to thrive without excessive financial burdens.

Gender-Based Violence

Some women revealed that they experienced gender-based violence in the form of spousal abuse and the misuse of their earnings by their husbands for personal satisfaction, such as alcohol consumption. One respondent disclosed, *"My husband physically abuses me to discourage me from engaging in business. He believes that women should solely focus on taking care of the family, which has seriously hindered my business progress."* To counteract gender-based violence, comprehensive support systems and policies should be established to protect women's freedom and empower them to engage in self-employment activities without fear.

Benefits of Women Participation in Self-Employment Activities

This section discusses the positive impacts of women's participation in self-employment activities on their lives.

Improving Household Food Security

The majority of women involved in self-employment activ-

ities reported that their participation had a positive impact on household food security. They were better able to provide food for their families and pay for other household expenses using the profits from their businesses. By participating in self-employment activities, women actively contributed to their households' well-being. One of the women detailed that *"I am a single parent, my husband divorced me and left me alone with children, I engage myself in business of selling clothes so that I provide for my family despite the challenges I face in this market, I am able to earn profits and take care of my children, she also stated that: my children do not starve because I am able to provide them with food through the small business I run."* Encouraging and supporting women's self-employment can further enhance their contribution to household food security and overall family welfare.

Reducing Women's Dependency on Men

Women who engaged in self-employment activities reported reduced dependency on men for financial support. Many women were proud of their ability to be financially independent and take care of their families without relying on men's income. Some women had even purchased cars and homes, all with the profits from their self-employment businesses. Empowering women through self-employment can help reduce their dependency on men and enhance their financial autonomy.

Promoting Women's Involvement in Decision Making

The data revealed that women's participation in self-employment activities positively affected their involvement in household decision-making processes. Women who were once excluded from decisions now had a voice in family matters, including those related to family finances. As one woman noted, *"Self-employment activities have empowered me to contribute to family decisions. I now actively participate in discussions about income management, purchases, and renovations."*

This shift highlights the importance of encouraging women to participate in self-employment activities as a means to promote their involvement in family decision making.

3.3. Policy Solutions to Address Challenges

In response to the challenges faced by women engaged in self-employment activities, it is important to develop and implement comprehensive policy solutions and interventions that will create a conducive environment for women in the self-employment sector. First and foremost, to enhance women's access to capital and loans, financial institutions and governmental bodies should consider offering financial products with more flexible collateral requirements and establish loan guarantee programs tailored to the needs and capacities of women entrepreneurs. These measures can make it easier for women to secure loans without the burden of unattainable collateral.

Addressing the challenge of inadequate market access for women entrepreneurs requires governments and local authorities to designate and develop women-friendly market spaces and establish market information centers that pro-

vide women with information about market opportunities, trends, and consumer preferences. Furthermore, to assist women in balancing business and family life, the implementation of work-life balance initiatives, family-friendly policies, along with the provision of affordable childcare services, can be instrumental. These interventions would support women in managing their dual responsibilities without compromising their family's well-being. Lastly, to tackle the issues of high taxes and competition, governments should review and reform the existing tax structure, making it more equitable for women entrepreneurs. Additionally, providing training and support to women entrepreneurs on how to navigate and succeed in competitive markets can empower them to compete effectively.

3.4. Limitations of the Study

This study, while offering valuable insights into the lives of self-employed women in Mzuzu City, comes with some limitations that should be considered. First, the relatively small sample size of 25 participants may restrict the generalizability of the findings to a larger population. Additionally, relying on self-reported data could introduce biases, as participants may recall and report their experiences differently. The geographical focus on Mzuzu City also limits the extent to which the findings can be applied to self-employed women in other regions of Malawi. Finally, since the study employed a qualitative approach based on interviews, the findings may be subjective and influenced by individual perspectives.

4. Conclusion

This study unveiled the complex landscape of women's self-employment in Mzuzu City, Malawi, shedding light on the challenges and benefits they encounter. The findings underscore the importance of tailored policy interventions to address the challenges such as limited access to capital, vending place difficulties, business-family balance, high taxation, competition, and gender-based violence. These policies have the potential to unlock the full economic potential of women entrepreneurs, fostering not only their financial independence but also contributing to broader goals of gender equality and socio-economic development in the country.

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