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Business Leadership and Gender Equality: Engaging Women from Developing Countries in Digital Entrepreneurship

Ravinder Rena¹, Fiona Langry²

Abstract: Women in business leadership play a crucial role in improving organizational performance, innovation, and collaboration and driving economic growth and development. However, numerous challenges such as cultures, traditions, education and gender limit the women's opportunity to participate in civilian entrepreneurship. In addition, developing countries are facing serious challenges in this digital economic arena. **Objective:** this article analyzes business leadership, gender equality, and women's engagement in digital entrepreneurship. It focuses on how digital technology was used to grow their business. **Methodology/Approach:** a questionnaire was designed to collect data from 50 female entrepreneurs in the urban area of Durban, South Africa, in August 2023. The methodology used in this study was exploratory research and thematic analysis. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used to ascertain digital technology usage among women entrepreneurs. The study is also based on secondary data from various documents, like a systematic analysis of scholarly articles, financial reports, and case studies retrieved from government sources and academic platforms. **Results:** the analysis draws from NVivo for qualitative synthesis, and the study uses descriptive statistical analysis to evaluate digital women's entrepreneurship. The key findings of the study reveal that there are low levels of representation of women in entrepreneurship. The study found that 72.1% of respondents do not have the skills needed to use current technology, which will lead to low levels of adoption rates of digital technology. Subsequently, 74.5% of participants reported that they do not

¹ Professor, Department of Public Management and Economics, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa, Corresponding author: ravinder.rena@gmail.com; ravinderr@dut.ac.za; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4156-8693>.

² Ph.D. Student in Entrepreneurship, Department of Public Management and Economics, Faculty of Management Sciences, Durban University of Technology, South Africa, E-mail: fiona.langry56@gmail.com.



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possess the requisite skills to operate the most recent technologies. Indeed, women cannot fully benefit from this expanding industry, which would be closed by increasing the proportion of women working in ICT. Based on the obtained results, this study further investigates the strategies for women business leaders in the context of women entrepreneurs in South Africa. **Implications:** it recommends that there are tremendous opportunities for business leaders among women entrepreneurs, and **Value:** therefore, the government of South Africa should encourage and support the women entrepreneurs with the necessary financial support to develop its digital economy.

Keywords: Digital entrepreneurship; digital technologies; emerging economies; ICT infrastructure; innovation

JEL Classification: J16, L26, O1, O33

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship, in its broadest sense, is an essential pillar of economic growth and social development. It acts as a catalyst for innovation, the development of new jobs, and overall economic growth (Rena, 2009; Hamdan et al., 2022). For women, engaging in entrepreneurial activity is a path to economic autonomy and a strategy for combating gender inequality. Women entrepreneurs not only contribute to economic growth and job creation but also challenge conventional notions of women's business leadership and stereotypes (Byrne et al., 2019).

The low participation of women in the digital economy, a significant driver of growth in the twenty-first century, is put at risk by the discrepancy between the demand for ICT employees and the supply of job seekers with the required technical abilities. The challenges that women entrepreneurs must overcome include a lack of access to the most advanced technology and sophisticated telecommunications infrastructure, limited computer literacy, and various cultural and socioeconomic variables.

In emerging and market economies, women have historically been subjected to a variety of socio-cultural barriers that have limited their participation in traditional business enterprises (Rena & Nettem, 2007; Kushwah & Sharma, 2020; Bentancor, 2022). These limits have hindered the economic independence of women and their business leadership. Their journey to economic independence and business leadership roles was frequently hampered by the expectations of society, biases based on gender, and a lack of access to resources (Kushwah & Sharma, 2020; Rena & Mbukanma, 2023).

However, the digital revolution is rewriting this narrative, presenting a new horizon where women may harness the power of technology to redefine their economic possibilities, and this will eventually foster business leadership for women in South Africa (Rena, 2008; Rosca et al., 2020; Ajani et al., 2021).

This new horizon offers women the opportunity to harness the power of technology to reshape their economic prospects. Despite the significant beneficial impact that women company entrepreneurs have on economies worldwide, they continue to face a wide array of barriers in their daily lives as business owners. Regarding the challenges they face, women entrepreneurs in emerging nations are confronted with issues that are much more severe than those their counterparts experience in industrialized economies (Rena & Nettem, 2007; Ughetto et al., 2020). These issues consist of cultural prejudices and discrimination, limited access to networks and markets, limited access to educational and training opportunities, limited access to financial resources, and limited access to networks (Rena, 2009; Haase et al., 2011; Goyal & Yadav, 2014; Rosca et al., 2020).

Digital entrepreneurship offers a transformative pathway for women to overcome many of the traditional barriers. It involves identifying and pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities based on creating digital artifacts, platforms, and infrastructures that provide services through technology (Schmidt, 2011; Giones & Brem, 2017).

Digital artifacts consist of applications or any media component that offers a specific function to users (Ekbja, 2009; Kallinikos et al., 2013). A digital platform is the collection of a common and shared set of digital artifacts that provide entrepreneurs with a venue for production, marketing, and distribution processes (Ratzinger et al., 2018; Rahayu & Ellyanawati, 2023).

In the last two decades, digital entrepreneurship has opened new venues for entrepreneurial activities and has transformed the nature of uncertainty inherent to entrepreneurial processes and outcomes (Nambisan, 2017; Al-Qahtani et al., 2022). Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine how digital entrepreneurship can serve as a strategic vehicle for women's economic empowerment in emerging economies.

2. Literature Review

The participation of women as business owners is essential to the continued expansion and growth of economies in developing countries (Rena, 2008).

According to a survey published by the International Finance Corporation, women-owned firms make up around 31% of the total number of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in emerging countries. These small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) help fuel innovation, generate employment opportunities, and contribute to the general economic prosperity of their respective nations. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) found that the rates of female entrepreneurship varied around the world, with the highest in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the lowest in the Middle East and North Africa.

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, Sub-Saharan Africa has the world's highest rates of female entrepreneurship, with 25.9% of women participating in early-stage entrepreneurship. On the other hand, in Latin America, women constitute only 17% of the total entrepreneurial activity. Nevertheless, women-owned firms continue to face substantial challenges in emerging economies. Only 46% of female entrepreneurs report having access to finance, in comparison to 61% of male entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in emerging economies for various reasons. It brings about positive social, economic, and developmental impacts that contribute to the overall growth and sustainability of these nations:

Economic Growth and Job Creation. Women-owned businesses contribute significantly to economic growth by creating jobs, stimulating innovation, and fostering competition. In emerging economies, where unemployment and underemployment can be issues, women entrepreneurs play a vital role in generating new employment opportunities.

Diversification of Industries. Women entrepreneurs often venture into sectors that might be underrepresented or overlooked, leading to the diversification of industries. This diversification can lead to a more balanced and resilient economy, reducing the dependence on a single sector.

Poverty Alleviation. Women's business leadership through entrepreneurship can help lift families and communities out of poverty. When women are empowered to start and run their businesses, they can generate income and improve the living standards of their families. This, in turn, contributes to poverty reduction.

Empowerment and Gender Equality. Women's entrepreneurship promotes gender equality by allowing women to participate actively in economic activities and

decision-making processes. As women gain economic independence, their social status and bargaining power within households and communities also improve.

Social Change and Cultural Shifts. Women's entrepreneurship challenges traditional gender roles and norms, leading to positive shifts in societal attitudes and perceptions. Stereotypes about women's roles and capabilities can be dismantled as more women become business leaders.

Access to Finance and Resources. Enhancing access to financial resources, training, mentorship, and networking opportunities can result from supporting female entrepreneurs (Rena & Nettem, 2007). This assistance can aid in closing the gender disparity in resource access that is frequently present in developing nations.

In developing countries, digital technology can significantly change the environment for female entrepreneurship (Dy et al., 2017; Aly, 2020; Al-Qahtani et al., 2022). Thanks to the developments in mobile technologies and internet usage, women interested in launching their own enterprises now have access to a multitude of information, resources, and networks that were previously unattainable.

Digital technology has facilitated women's establishment of new ventures and broadened their prospective customer base beyond their local area. E-commerce platforms, for example, have eliminated the need for traditional storefront locations and allowed female entrepreneurs to market their goods and services globally. Digital technology has completely changed many facets of contemporary life, and it has greatly influenced women who want to start their businesses (Paul & Rena, 2024). Women may now launch and grow their enterprises in previously unheard-of ways thanks to the new opportunities, lowered barriers, and tools that have been made available to them.

Access to Markets. The advent of digital platforms, e-commerce websites, and online marketplaces has allowed women entrepreneurs to reach a wider audience and access both domestic and foreign markets.

Lower Entry Barriers. Starting a digital firm typically takes less upfront money than traditional brick-and-mortar enterprises. Women entrepreneurs can lower entry barriers by using digital technology to produce and market goods and services without requiring a physical storefront.

Access to Information and Learning. The expertise, skills, and information that female entrepreneurs need to operate successful enterprises can be acquired through

webinars, online tools, and educational platforms. By providing women with necessary skills, this access to learning opportunities helps level the playing field.

Networking and Collaboration. Digital technology makes it easier to network and work with investors, consumers, mentors, and other business owners worldwide. Networking can result in collaborations, partnerships, and mentorship opportunities that support the expansion of businesses. Many digital tools and services are available to women entrepreneurs, helping them to overcome the challenges they have in running their enterprises.

Mobile Banking. Mobile banking is a helpful tool for female entrepreneurs since it allows them to manage their finances and access financial services from their mobile devices (Paul & Rena, 2024). This is very useful for women since they cannot access traditional financial services or live in remote areas.

E-commerce Platforms. Women entrepreneurs can reach a wider audience of potential customers outside of their local area by offering their products and services online, thanks to e-commerce platforms like Amazon, Etsy, and Shopify.

Online Marketplaces. Online marketplaces such as eBay and Alibaba have provided women entrepreneurs with a global market and a platform to sell their products and services.

Education and Training in the Digital Age. By engaging in virtual courses and training courses, prospective female entrepreneurs can obtain the skills and knowledge required to establish and grow their businesses.

Social Media. Social media websites and apps like Facebook and Instagram allow female entrepreneurs to market their products and services and establish connections with prospective customers.

2.1. The Challenges of Female Entrepreneurs in Digital Technology

Despite the many advantages of digital technology, female business leaders continue to encounter major challenges. Among these are a lack of access to financial resources, cultural biases and discrimination, and restricted access to networks and marketplaces (Dy et al., 2017; Paul & Rena, 2024). The use of digital technology can assist women business owners in overcoming some of these obstacles by giving them access to a wider range of financial services, markets, and networking opportunities.

For instance, mobile banking and online marketplaces can assist female entrepreneurs in gaining access to financial resources and expanding their consumer base beyond their geographical location. The use of social media platforms can be of assistance to women entrepreneurs in the process of building networks and establishing connections with other business owners, mentors, and prospective clients.

3. Methodology

This paper aims to investigate the impact of digital entrepreneurship among female entrepreneurs and highlight the challenges and opportunities females face in the digital landscape. This was completed and presented through the framework as outlined in Figure 1.

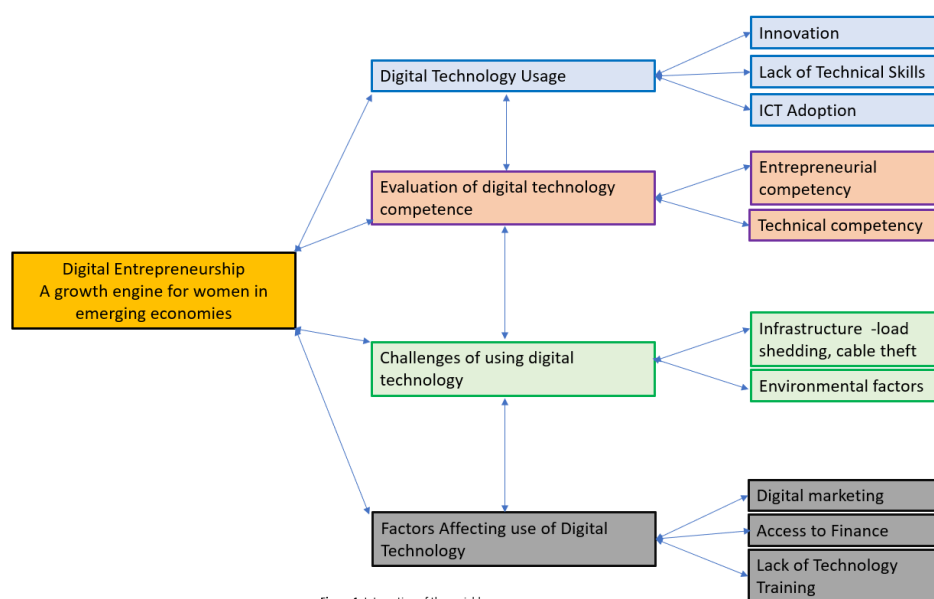


Figure 1. Interaction of the variables

Figure 1. Digital Technologies Framework

Source: compiled by the authors

Figure 1 explains the digital technologies framework and highlights that this serves as a catalyst for women's empowerment. It further provides a positive relationship that exists between digital entrepreneurship, innovation and entrepreneurial and technical competencies. It deals also with various challenges and factors affecting

digital technology. The study's results demonstrate a strong ICT competency and technical expertise among digital women who develop an entrepreneurial mindset. The researchers' conclusion from this study is that females' entrepreneurial attitudes shape their intentions to be entrepreneurial. The primary constraint of this study is that it focuses on female entrepreneurs in urban areas; future studies should focus on rural entrepreneurship for female entrepreneurs, as digital transformation can enable and grow rural businesses.

This study aimed to comprehend how women entrepreneurs in emerging economies like South Africa deal with digitalization by integrating theoretical ideas in researching entrepreneurship, gender, and ICT. Female entrepreneurs with a common business leadership level in their business organizations were interviewed to share their experiences in digital business transformation. The female entrepreneurs also act as change agents and observers of any challenges to business operations. As a result, they are knowledgeable of the challenges encountered in implementing digital entrepreneurship in their business leadership. Regarding women's entrepreneurial activity and the rise of digital technology, a qualitative research method was adopted, and a questionnaire was distributed to 50 female entrepreneurs in Durban areas of South Africa. A non-probability, convenience sampling technique was used with a questionnaire as the primary data collection tool.

Data was gathered from the selected fifty female entrepreneurs who were chosen from Durban, South Africa. The researchers identified potential participants for the qualitative study by identifying SMME enterprises on the SEDA database to ensure appropriate representation.

4. Results

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between the research objectives, research questions and the subsequent findings and identified themes.

Table 1. Relationship Between Research Objectives, Research Questions, and Findings

Research Objectives	Research Questions	Findings/Themes
Implication of digital technology use in female entrepreneurship	How is digital technology used by female entrepreneurs to grow the business?	Innovation Lack of technical skills ICT adoption

Evaluate the factors contributing to the use of digital technology	What are the factors that impact the use of digital technologies?	Access to finance Lack of technology training
Evaluate the awareness and knowledge of female entrepreneurs in using digital technology	What are the characteristics of the female entrepreneur when embracing digital technology?	Entrepreneurial competency Technical competency
Examine the challenges experienced in using digital technology	What are the challenges experienced when using digital technology?	Infrastructure issues such as load shedding and cable theft External environmental factors Digital marketing

Source: compiled by the authors

As indicated in Table 1, the research objectives and research questions with findings were self-explanatory. Table 2 reflects the data collected from the respondents and displayed as percentages as per each identified theme.

Table 2. Response Rate

Respondents	Findings	Frequency	Percentage
50	Innovation	20.74	45.1
50	Lack of technical skills	36.05	72.1
50	ICT adoption	36.05	72.1
50	Entrepreneurial competency	31.9	63.8
50	Technical competency	37.25	74.5
50	Infrastructure - load shedding, cable theft	43.45	86.9
50	Digital marketing	31.25	62.5
50	Access to finance	37.65	75.3
50	Lack of technology training	37.25	74.5

Source: compiled by the authors based on primary data

As shown in Table 2, the results indicate that while 73.45% of the participants possessed a mobile device and a laptop, just a small proportion utilized technical instruments to advertise their business to leverage growth. Introducing new technological capabilities primarily drives innovation, and as such, successful innovation is necessary to achieve long-term corporate growth. The expanded skill sets of educated people were found to be critical for successful entrepreneurship, innovation, and business growth (OECD, 2018, p. 20). The results of this study show that 45.1% of respondents believe that businesses promote and encourage innovation. According to the results of this study, 72.1% of respondents thought that people do not have the skills needed to use current digital technology, which will lead to a low adoption rate of ICT in business. Subsequently, 74.5% of participants

reported that they do not possess the requisite skills to operate the business with the latest technologies. The results of this study demonstrate that 75.3% of all respondents agree that one of the elements influencing female entrepreneurs' adoption of digital technology is their ability to obtain financing. This study shows that a sizable portion of participants (72.1%) think that staff members lack the necessary skills to use digital technology. This can be attributed to a lack of training, which can impact on the effectiveness of ICT adoption. According to the empirical results, 86.9% of people think the local municipality does not offer enough digital technology infrastructure. This is one of the elements that encourages businesses to use digital technologies.

The findings further demonstrated that 63.8% of participants thought an entrepreneur's leadership abilities were crucial to the smooth operation of the business. The literature review cited by Robles and Zarraga-Rodrigues (2015, p. 828) supports this conclusion. They contend that three core competencies –motivation and attributes, social roles, and self-concepts – are the foundation for modeling the endogenous elements of an entrepreneur. Robles and Zarraga-Rodrigues (2015, p. 828), Msamula et al. (2016, p. 253) assert that people are inspired to act in a particular way by the dominating values and aspects of their character. The fact that a sizable portion of respondents (63.8%) agreed that having entrepreneurial traits is essential for ICT adoption serves as evidence of this. The study states that 62.5% of South African business owners have adopted online selling and digital marketing techniques, such as social media marketing, company websites, and online retailing.

4.1. Availability and Accessibility of Digital Infrastructure

Access to digital infrastructure is a factor that positively influences female entrepreneurs' capacity to participate in digital entrepreneurship and achieve success in the sector. A more developed digital infrastructure enables female business leaders as entrepreneurs to access a bigger audience, not only in their own country but also around the world. They can access potential clients, suppliers, and partners online, eliminating the need to be physically present in such relationships. The availability of digital infrastructure makes it easier to network and collaborate with other business owners, mentors, and potential investors, which in turn opens the door to meaningful relationships and assistance.

H1. Female entrepreneurs' access to digital infrastructure positively influences their participation and success in digital entrepreneurship.

It can be concluded that there is a connection between adopting digital technology and learning technical skills through education, which affects how women business leaders use digital technology. The more training there is on digital technology, the more online markets are promoted and the opportunity to embrace digital entrepreneurship is fostered.

4.2. Gender and Female Entrepreneurship – Entrepreneurial Intention

The inclination of female entrepreneurs in South Africa to participate in digital entrepreneurship is hindered, to a certain extent, by cultural conventions and gender roles. Conventions of the local culture and expectations regarding women's and men's roles in society act as a barrier to some degree for female business owners in developing countries who are interested in participating in digital entrepreneurship. To some extent, female entrepreneurs in developing countries interested in participating in digital entrepreneurship face an obstacle in the form of the cultural norms and expectations that prevail in their societies regarding the respective roles of women and men in the workplace and society. Women can encounter rejection or stigma from their communities or families if they want to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors, particularly in technology-related industries, which are frequently perceived as male-dominated fields.

H2. Cultural norms and gender roles negatively affect female entrepreneurs' willingness to engage in digital entrepreneurship in South Africa.

ICT makes it possible for women micro-entrepreneurs to maintain community ties swiftly and affordably by lowering barriers to connection. ICT affordances (e.g., WhatsApp, email, text messaging, Facebook) allow women micro-entrepreneurs to contact strangers, something they might not have done otherwise.

4.3. Digital Skills and Education

The growth and long-term financial success of digital firms run by women can be positively impacted by the ability to read and produce digital content and specific training in business management. The success of female entrepreneurs can be

positively impacted by higher levels of digital literacy and training explicitly tailored to entrepreneurship in the following ways:

Utilization of Digital Tools Efficiently. Digital literacy enables female entrepreneurs to use digital tools and platforms for a range of business activities, including online marketing, e-commerce, and data analysis, with effectiveness.

Innovation and Adaptability. Entrepreneurship-focused training equips women with the ability to identify market opportunities and create and modify their business models to meet the always-evolving needs of clients and market trends.

Digital Marketing Competence. Female entrepreneurs may create effective online marketing strategies to reach their target audience, raise their brand's visibility, and boost sales with the right digital literacy and training.

H3. Higher degrees of digital literacy and training tailored to entrepreneurship increase the likelihood that female entrepreneurs will launch and grow profitable digital enterprises.

Qualifications did matter a lot regarding the respondents' ability to operate a smartphone or other technological devices to access the internet. It has been observed that a respondent's proficiency with digital technology is closely associated with their educational attainment. Enhancing the financial resources and support available to female entrepreneurs can increase the development and success of their digital enterprises. The expansion and scalability of female-led digital firms can also be significantly impacted by their access to other critical resources, including technology infrastructure, business networks, mentorship, market intelligence, and skilled labor. Other resources besides capital can have an effect like this. More agencies can be granted to female entrepreneurs by having greater access to resources, which can boost their confidence and willingness to take calculated risks in the pursuit of business growth.

H4. Improved access to capital and resources positively impacts the growth and scalability of female-led digital startups in emerging economies.

It can be concluded that infrastructure availability and access to finance have a strong influence on how respondents use digital technologies to promote their business.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that 45.3% of respondents generally concur that environmental issues affect a business's ability to operate and remain competitive. In addition to the challenges posed by a lack of broadband facilities and load shedding, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMMs) located in urban areas must contend with other obstacles, including a deficient infrastructure for telecommunications, an absence of management and marketing expertise, insufficient understanding about entrepreneurship, and incompetent management. While there has been some progress over the last 3 decades, South African women in business leadership still face numerous challenges. The legacy of apartheid on one side and societal norms on the other continue to present hurdles for women. It is, therefore, imperative to address these challenges through government support for women business leaders and promoting gender diversity in businesses and the economy.

Education is a crucial component of the human capital that contributes to the success of the entrepreneurial process. Education is also commonly associated with the long-term growth and development of an individual's profession. However, most of the research on digital entrepreneurship has focused on businesses rather than individual entrepreneurs.

Future research must investigate the processes and effects of long-term, persistent, and serial entrepreneurship in the digital setting to add complexity and contemporary relevance to understanding education's role in this developing field. The online environment reflects racial and class divides, resulting in unequal resource access. They contend that the potential for digital entrepreneurship to emancipate marginalized women in wealthy nations may be exaggerated. The findings presented provide fresh insights into how technological affordances interact with social and cultural environments to make it possible to identify and carry out digital entrepreneurship. Many women entrepreneurs in South Africa, especially in rural areas, face challenges in financing, education, and business skills. However, there are tremendous opportunities for women to engage in business leadership roles, which ultimately enhance efficiency, adopt innovation, develop collaboration, and thus contribute to a more inclusive and equitable business landscape in the country.

Authors' Declaration

Funding: This research did not receive any funds from any university or organization.

Ethical Approval: This research does involve human participants, human subjects, or personal data collection. A stratified random sampling method has been used to recruit participants from diverse demographic backgrounds. It's research that we did on our personal interest and hence it's not required any approval from an ethics committee or institutional review board.

The study maintains strict data privacy and confidentiality, adhering to ethical guidelines for responsible research conduct.

Informed consent: This study applies the principle of informed consent' is used. Data does involve human participants, human subjects, or personal data collection. The age group was 18-50 years; the informed consent was obtained via online platform.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement: The study has used questionnaires/ surveys for data collection for privacy issues and maintaining the confidentiality information is not shared.

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