

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS AND THEORETICAL ANCHORS: WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN TAMIL NADU

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Introduction

Women's entrepreneurship over the years, has emerged as a key driver of inclusive economic growth and social transformation in India. While women constitute 14% of total entrepreneurs in India (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2022), Tamil Nadu is among the states with the highest proportion of women-led enterprises (IIT Madras, 2019). However, their contribution often remains invisible in formal economic metrics, particularly in rural and peri-urban districts such as Madurai and Dindigul.

This chapter blends qualitative narratives and theoretical frameworks to uncover the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs who have navigated socio-cultural constraints, patriarchal structures, and resource limitations to build sustainable enterprises. The discussion connects individual stories to conceptual anchors like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Self-Determination Theory, Resource Mobilization Theory, and the Knowledge-Based View (KBV). Thus, the chapter seeks to illustrate how localised agency, innovation, and resilience can contribute to regional development.

Literature Context

Studies on women entrepreneurs in South India reveal a complex interplay of **push factors** (economic necessity, unemployment, household financial needs) and **pull factors** (market opportunities, autonomy, social recognition) (IIT Madras, 2019; News18, 2021). Tamil Nadu's micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) sector has been a fertile ground for women-led initiatives, particularly in agro-based processing, handicrafts, and eco-friendly products (International Journal of Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity, 2021). However, despite policy initiatives and microfinance programs, rural women still face systemic challenges such as restricted mobility, limited access to markets, and deeply embedded gender norms (The Hindu, 2023).

Women Entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu: A Qualitative-Theoretical Reframing

The chapter on 'Women Entrepreneurs: Qualitative Insights and Theoretical Anchor' is an attempt to expose the qualitative narratives of women who became notable entrepreneurs in the regions of Madurai and Dindigul.

The narratives in this chapter are drawn from purposively selected women entrepreneurs with over five years of entrepreneurial experience in Madurai and Dindigul. Data is based on publicly documented case studies, local field accounts, and organisational reports. The focus is interpretive, aiming to connect lived experiences with theoretical constructs rather than to produce statistically generalisable findings. Their experiences as an

entrepreneur may be a guiding tool for others to learn and grow. This is an attempt to uncover women's transition from a personhood to societal person, from domestic to professionalism, from private to public living. When placed in a situation of need, these women internalise their strengths, demonstrating remarkable courage and personal mastery when decided to step into entrepreneurship.

Women entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu, though represent a smaller share statistically, their contributions cannot be denied in the development indicators. Their segment of work may not have counted in terms of numbers and economy but in the qualitative terms, their confidence, competencies, self-evolving role models built around themselves in the society cannot be neglected. Their narratives reveal unique agency and resilience.

Lived stories from rural and peri-urban Tamil Nadu, in the districts of Madurai and Dindigul show that entrepreneurship for women is not merely a business venture: it is a transformative act that:

- Reclaims Economic Development Over Social Approval
- Navigating Patriarchy through Opportunity
- Building social capital and Networking
- Agencies of paths for younger generations
- Synthesizing resilience, innovation, and cultural wisdom.

Motivation and Identity: Economic Development Over Social Approval

The primary driving force for women in entrepreneurship is that they wanted to expand their economy to fulfil the family needs. They wanted to be self-sustaining and economically independent. This drive brings them with the social recognition and status emerging as secondary outcomes. This aligns with the Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, where financial stability precedes with the self-esteem and Self Actualisation. This also coherent with the Self-Determination Theory, which distinguishes intrinsic motivation (self-growth) from extrinsic (social validation). Thus, the social approval falls in line when women start working for the economic independence and when attempt to achieve self-sustaining economic life.

The same was supported by a research study by IIT Madras, which shows that Tamil Nadu women entrepreneurs are motivated by both "pull" and "push" factors. The pull factors they highlight are the autonomy, recognition, creativity and market opportunity. The push factors are economic necessity, survival and self-sustainability (India Today). These dual drivers fuel resilience and intrinsic motivation among women entrepreneurs that align with the Self-Determination Theory, where internal passion merges with survival needs. So, women are travelling from the known need to the unknown status from the 'house of necessity' to the 'unexplored tours of opportunities.

Navigating Patriarchy Through Opportunity

For centuries neither in the Federal nor in the Agricultural or Industrial sector, women's labour participation was never been counted. But they never took off their hands from these

fields and they continue to serve the patriarchal masters over centuries. Operating under the patriarchal constraints, these women were persistently waiting for the opportunities to reveal their strengths and resources. When situation brings them to the forefront, they drive their resources fully and started working with conviction to prove their self and to stand unique in the society for the entire womanhood to succeed amidst the patriarchal structure. This behaviour resonates with Resource Mobilization Theory, which emphasizes how social actors leverage favorable conditions to overhaul limiting structures. Here the marginalized women leverage collective resources to challenge patriarchal structures.

Understanding these lived experiences calls for recognition: women innovating amid child-rearing, household roles, rural constraints, and limited formal education deserve celebration. They embody resilience, turning restricted circumstances into platforms for income generation, social mobility, and community leadership.

Building Social Capital and Networking

Women entrepreneurs, in their journey from domestic to social life, they became social icons which positioning will not let them to go back or never want to be again in the closed shell. They wanted to be socially connected and so continue doing the meaningful work by fulfilling their personal need and simultaneously serving the society as well. This reflects in the story of Chinna Pillai, social grassroot organiser from Madurai, not only brought out environmental reformation through solid waste Management but also mobilised adjacent village members – women towards Savings, Micro credit and in establishing wage fairness system. These women are building collective ownership on issues of safeguarding the environment, Sustainable enterprising and fair labour practices.

In the same way, the life of Josephine Arockia Mary from Madurai Vadipatti Taluk, Founder of *Vibis Natural Bee Farm*, also gives lessons of social capital. she transformed traditional apiculture using plastic hive technology and producing value-added honey. She now markets more than 30 types of herbal honey variants. She further offers free bee-sting therapy and beekeeping training to interested rural women who wanted to take up this enterprise for their livelihood. She has enabled over 420 rural women to set up their own mini-apiaries, delivering livelihoods across 23 districts in Tamil Nadu and beyond. (Better India). This case of entrepreneurship should be recognised for its masterful use of low-cost tech and establishing holistic value chain. She has development from personhood the development of the neighbouring community and in turn serving the society.

Leaders from the grassroots are standing examples illustrating the skills of agency formed within patriarchy and institutional voids, underlining the institutional capacity required for sustained grassroots entrepreneurship. These women leaders are not the mark of success of a single womanhood but are epitomes of collective empowerment representing women living in such rural communities. Moreover, when women led venture succeeds, they multiply incomes across households of the follow communities instead of hoarding benefits.

Agencies of paths for younger generations

Ordered by societal and economic deprivation, women in entrepreneurial efforts combine pain, resolve, pleasure, and reformation. Their skills emerge from the field of domestic knowledge, which is so connected with the Grounded theory, where their real-world experiences surface new thematic constructs like “post-domestic courage” and “economic-first identity,” built inductively from their stories.

Many entrepreneurs face constraints relating to gender, cultural norms and social stereotypes underscoring their efficiencies. The situation drives them unconsciously and they often wait for favorable conditions before asserting themselves – a behavior that embodies **Diffusion of Innovation Theory**, marking early-stage adoption when visibility and support increases.

From the case studies we can also relate with the themes such as “tradition-to-value chain agency”. The inner strength – the hidden domain came out with much more an innovative thought which is very inductive in nature.

They again help in rebuilding the knowledge system which is termed as Knowledge-Based View (KBV) by converting tacit domestic skills into marketable assets. This reflects with women entrepreneurs who are registered as MSMEs, upscaling their domestic skills, creating knowledge of their respective enterprises and marketing through the broader banner of Green Fem in Madurai District by an organisation called VAPS (Voluntary Association for People’s Service)

Trained in tailoring by a community skills school, Shanthi launched a tailoring micro-factory from her home, serving panchayat orders and local events. With support from the matching grants scheme, she grew revenue by 40 %, hired 3 other women, and now handles deliveries via Social Media based marketing such as Insta, Facebook and WhatsApp. The training started with a “Zero fixed cost” and now her unit stand as a ‘Digital Started model’

Synthesizing resilience, innovation, and cultural wisdom.

Neelavathi (Nilakottai, Dindigul District) Living with a diagnosed learning disability (LD), she co-founded a reusable pad (napkin) unit employing women with disabilities. With support from Society for Rights of All Women with Disabilities (SFRAW) Trust, she conducts training and sells reusable pads across south India. Through networking and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) she demonstrates inclusive enterprise and circular waste management (sfrawd.com). We know that there are lots of Socio - cultural taboos attached to the mensuration of women. Imagine handling those challenges are even difficult for so called normal people, think of women with disabilities, where their mobility and usage of rest rooms are at greater stake.

Empathising with the need and demand of the fellow community, Neelavathi has not only initiated the organic reusable napkins but also transferring her act by sharing and training such womenhood.

In the similar way, Ponnarasi from Dindigul also intertwines her personal development with the collective working model. In her life moments Ponnarasi cannot believe that she will be soon awarded by the Collector of Trichy and will be honoured as “*Murungai*

Arasi' (Moringa Queen) when she started her Moringa farming in 2019. Farming has always been her passion and so she could not fit herself in formal schooling. Being a drop out from school, she continued doing farming with the family until she got skill training from Tamil Nadu Agricultural University and sharpened her ideation from Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) officers. by the who has been offering an impressive range of 36 products from Moringa tree (Drumstick or horseradish tree) scientifically known as *Moringa Olifera*. With her business based on Moringa tree, her product portfolio ranges from Soup powder, Tea powder, Oil, Soaps, Shampoos and even as lip balms. The business generates Rs 12 lakh as an annual revenue, covering customer base of over one lakh people over a period of six years. (the better india, February, 2025) Her business, doesn't stop locally, she has expanded internationally, exporting her moringa-based products to countries like Malaysia, Singapore, the United States, France, and Muscat, primarily placing their orders via Facebook and WhatsApp.

"It was Kalaiarasi, her neighbour SHG friend, who came up with the idea of adding moringa in *idly podis* and it came out well," shares Ponnarasi, highlighting the sharing the business ownership and extending the business enterprise to the like-minded people realising the importance of collective effort. Her goal remains ambitious – introducing 10 new products each year, and constantly innovating to meet the needs of her growing customer base. These products have captured the attention of health-conscious consumers worldwide, and Ponnarasi's ability to maintain high-quality standards has made her a trusted name in the market, earning her several awards and recognitions.

Final Thought

In Dravidian districts like Madurai and Dindigul, women-led enterprises are rewriting the script – from invisible labourers to community entrepreneurs. These few women-driven ventures show that innovation can thrive anywhere. Their stories reveal that entrepreneurship is not merely a survival strategy but a transformative act that blends local wisdom, digital tools, and collective networks.

Their motivations blend economic necessity and opportunity-seeking, supported by community structures, financial networks, and policy frameworks. By converting domestic skills into scalable ventures, they create not only individual prosperity but also pathways for the next generation of women leaders.

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