

Navigating the Strengths and Weaknesses of Small and Medium Enterprises of Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, Based on Profiles: Strategies for Sustainable Growth

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Abstract – The empowerment of entrepreneurs in the Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) sector in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, is critical for economic growth and development. This article examines the challenges faced by these entrepreneurs, beginning with a comprehensive literature review followed by findings from a study of 233 SME owners, identified through random sampling. Using a survey method, the study found that men own more SMEs than women, and that older entrepreneurs tend to dominate the sector. Despite the lower number of women-led SMEs, the number of female entrepreneurs is rising, though their success rate lags behind that of men. SMEs face numerous challenges, including financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and limited skills and knowledge. The article recommends addressing these barriers through targeted initiatives aimed at improving the survival and sustainability of SMEs in Masvingo. By focusing on both financial and non-financial issues, particularly those affecting women and younger entrepreneurs, the study aims to enhance SME performance and contribute to the region's overall economic development.

Keywords – Business Development, Economic Empowerment, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, Women Entrepreneurship, Masvingo Province

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1 Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of many economies, particularly in developing countries (Beisengaliyev et al., 2018). Watambwa and Shilongo (2021) point out that, in Zimbabwe, SMEs play a fundamental role in driving economic growth, employment creation, and poverty reduction. Masvingo, a province in southern Zimbabwe, is home to a significant number of SMEs that contribute to the local economy and provide essential goods and services to the community (Matura & Mapira, 2018). However, Hlungwane (2018) explains that SMEs in Masvingo experience several challenges that hinder their growth and sustainability. Investigating the strengths and weaknesses of SMEs in Masvingo could lead to the creation of a comprehensive profile of SMEs that highlights both their inherent strengths and limitations to navigate challenges and achieve sustainable growth.

Matsongoni and Mutambara (2021) found in their study that Zimbabwean SMEs are faced with a variety of problems that can broadly be categorized into financial and non-financial difficulties. The challenges they identified are related to limited access to finance, the legal and regulatory framework, research, development and marketing skills, entrepreneurial and management skills, and business structures, environment and location. They highlight that these difficulties have hindered the growth and development of the informal manufacturing SMEs in Zimbabwe.

Despite their importance, SMEs in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, face significant challenges that hinder their growth and sustainability (Chipuriro, 2024). These challenges include limited access to capital, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of skilled labor, competition from the informal sector, and government policies and regulations, among others. Matsongoni and Mutambara (2021) explain that SMEs in Masvingo struggle to access capital, which is essential for scaling up operations, investing in new technologies and expanding markets. The province also lacks adequate infrastructure, including reliable energy supply networks, transportation networks, and communication systems, which hinders the smooth operation of SMEs. SMEs in Masvingo often struggle to find skilled and qualified workers, which can lead to inefficiencies and reduced productivity. The informal sector in Masvingo is highly competitive, and SMEs often struggle to compete with informal traders, who operate outside the formal economy. The regulatory environment in Zimbabwe, characterised by complicated registration forms, too many rules, the associated costs and the absence of small firms support (Chundu, 2020; Gurure & Takavarasha, 2021), can create barriers to entry and growth for SMEs. These challenges have significant implications for the growth and sustainability of SMEs in Masvingo. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of SMEs in the region and to identify strategies for promoting their sustainable growth.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Strengths of SMEs

A strength of SMEs is their ability to quickly adapt to customer needs (Raihan, 2024). The size and scale of SMEs make them nimble and flexible, enabling them to explore new ventures and to pursue new market opportunities by adapting their business models based on market/customer needs and their relative state of maturity. The ability of SMEs to quickly adapt to customer needs is crucial in today's fast-changing market. SMEs must be agile and responsive to customer demands, which often involve new or tailored products and services. This requires a deep understanding of customer preferences, which can be achieved through active customer feedback and engagement. SMEs can leverage their proximity to customers to build closer relationships and tailor their offerings accordingly. Additionally, they can prioritize and test new products or services based on customer feedback, ensuring that they are aligned with customer needs. By adopting this approach, SMEs can stay competitive and relevant in a rapidly evolving market, leveraging their unique advantages to thrive in a dynamic environment.

SMEs have a distinct organizational structure that facilitates rapid decision-making (Gopaul & Rampersad, 2020). This is primarily due to the close relationships between management, employees, and customers. Van Wyk and Venter (2023) note that SMEs typically have fewer layers of management and a more flexible structure. This kind of structure enables quicker communication and decision-making. The decision-making process in SMEs is often characterized by high levels of flexibility and informality, driven by intuitive tendencies rather than formal analytical approaches. Leso, Cortimiglia, and Ghezzi (2023) explain that this agility allows SMEs to be more responsive to changing market conditions. Furthermore, decision-making in SMEs is often centralized. The owners or founders play a dominant role, which enables faster, more intuitive decision-making compared to the more distributed, formal processes found in larger firms.

During the initial stages of an SME, the organization typically exhibits a concentrated and intense focus on addressing a specific need or problem that it can effectively solve through its product or service offering (Naradda et al., 2020). This focus is often rooted in the founder's unique capabilities, experience, and expertise. By leveraging these founding principles, SMEs can identify and capitalize on profitable customer segments. Kuik, Kumar, Diong, and Ban (2023) note that in these early phases, SMEs can provide dedicated and focused attention to their customers, fostering strong relationships and leveraging these connections to expand the size and value of their customer accounts.

In several industries, SMEs are deeply embedded within their local communities (Maksum, Rahayu, & Kusumawardhani, 2020; Rungani & Potgieter, 2018). This close connection fosters a high level of trust and recognition among community members, which SMEs can leverage to build and maintain a robust customer base. This trust and recognition also

facilitate the sharing of resources, expertise, and support among SMEs, leading to a more resilient and interconnected business ecosystem. Furthermore, strong community ties enable SMEs to expand their networks, creating a powerful foundation for growth and success. By leveraging these community relationships, SMEs can create a strong foundation for long-term sustainability and growth.

SMEs can capitalize on opportunities for cross-selling and value chain partnerships (Siddiqui, Yusheng, Ravina-Ripoll, & Aden, 2024). One fundamental advantage is that they usually have established connections with other SMEs that offer complementary products and services. This allows them to form a network of SMEs that can collaborate and refer one another to customers, enhancing their collective offerings and increasing their market reach. Azizjon (2024) explains that when SMEs leverage these partnerships, they can expand their customer base and provide a more comprehensive range of solutions to meet the diverse needs of their clients. This collaborative approach can also foster innovation in that SMEs can learn from one another's expertise and adapt to changing market conditions more effectively. By forming these networks, SMEs can improve their competitiveness and contribute to the overall growth and development of the local economy.

According to Carvalho, Simões, Teles, and Almeida (2024), SMEs can further optimize their operations by leveraging the flexibility of their labor force. Since they typically employ workers who can perform multiple tasks without incurring additional labor costs, SMEs can increase labor intensity per unit of invested capital. This allows them to achieve more with less capital investment, thereby enhancing their operational efficiency and competitiveness.

2.2 Weaknesses of SMEs

SMEs face significant challenges in respect of accessing financial resources and securing financing (Joel & Oguanobi, 2024). Limited access to finance is a main obstacle for these businesses, inhibiting their growth and sustainability. SMMEs struggle to secure funding from traditional sources such as banks and yet they drive global economies and catalyse the process of industrialisation (Mmbengeni, 2021; Mbatha, 2023), constituting around 80% of all firms globally (Gurure & Takavarasha, 2021). Banks often perceive SMEs as higher-risk borrowers due to their smaller size, limited track record, and less collateral, making it challenging for SMEs to secure loans or credit on favorable terms. In addition, most SMEs lack the necessary collateral to meet the requirements of traditional lenders, further limiting their ability to secure financing. The high costs of financing and high collateral requirements also contribute to the low demand for loans among SMEs (Soleh, Apriliani, Santoso, Prakoso, & Erasma, 2024). These challenges are exacerbated by the complexities of obtaining loans, coupled with high interest rates and stringent requirements, which can stifle growth and innovation. To overcome these challenges, SMEs must explore alternative financing options, such as government grants, venture capital

funds specializing in SMEs, crowdfunding platforms, and angel investor networks. They must also work on improving their financial documentation, strengthening their business plans and seeking assistance from business mentors or consultants experienced in fundraising.

SMMEs experience significant challenges in relation to building trust with large customers. This trust is fundamental to their long-term success (Kindström, Carlborg, & Nord, 2024). One major weakness of SMEs is their limited capacity to deliver consistently high-quality services and products. This is often due to insufficient training, education, and resources, leading to poor management abilities and lower productivity (Serumaga-Zake & van der Poll, 2021). In addition, SMEs often struggle to establish robust internal controls, which can result in unethical business practices and higher costs. These limitations can make it difficult for SMMEs to establish trust with large customers, who typically require high standards of quality and reliability. Furthermore, SMEs often lack the financial resources to invest in technology and leadership skills, which are essential for effective management and business growth (Matsongoni & Mutambara, 2021). This lack of investment can negatively impact their capacity and productivity, making it harder to respond to customer needs quickly and to maintain a competitive edge. As a result, SMEs may find it challenging to build long-term relationships with large customers and to sustain their business over time.

Establishing trust with a large customer base can be a significant challenge for businesses, particularly new or relatively unknown ones in the market (Storbacka & Moser, 2020). Building trust is a crucial aspect of customer acquisition and retention since it directly impacts the willingness of customers to engage with a company, to try its products or services and, ultimately, to become loyal advocates. One primary obstacle to reaching and earning the trust of a large customer base is the sheer volume of potential customers. When a company is faced with a vast pool of individuals to connect with, it can be daunting to personalize the customer experience and to demonstrate the company's credibility and reliability. Effective marketing strategies, consistent branding, and a strong online presence can help to overcome this obstacle, but such an endeavor requires a significant investment of time, resources, and strategic planning, which SMEs struggle with (Yusupjonovich, 2024). Another key challenge for SMEs is overcoming the natural skepticism that many consumers have towards new or unfamiliar brands. Customers are often wary of companies they have not heard of or have limited experience with, and they are hesitant to take a chance on an unknown entity. Even though this aspect can be addressed by establishing a positive reputation through customer reviews, industry recognition, and social proof, it takes time and consistent effort to build a strong, trustworthy brand image. The diversity of a large customer base can present unique challenges in respect of understanding and catering to their specific needs, preferences, and concerns. Effective customer division, personalized communication, and a deep understanding of the target audience are essential to building trust and fostering long-term relationships with a diverse customer base. The difficulty in reaching and earning the trust of a large customer base is a common challenge experienced by SMEs, particularly

new ones and those operating in highly competitive markets (Thomas, 2023).

One significant weakness of SMEs is the higher costs they incur due to a lack of economies of scale (Johnson et al., 2024). Without the ability to purchase inputs in bulk, SMEs cannot negotiate better prices, which increases their costs. In addition, SMEs often lack the resources to invest in advanced technology and machinery, leading to higher production costs (Sultan, 2018). Furthermore, SMEs may not match the bargaining power of suppliers, which can result in higher prices for raw materials and other essential inputs. These higher costs can be particularly burdensome for SMEs operating in industries where economies of scale are crucial, such as manufacturing. Zhang, Veltri, Calvo-Amodio, and Haapala (2021) observe that the cumulative effect of these higher costs can be substantial, making it difficult for SMEs to remain competitive and sustainable in the long term.

SMEs are inherently vulnerable to economic downturns and crises. Some of their key weaknesses include limited access to finance, a lack of strategic planning and foresight, and difficulty maintaining operations and meeting financial obligations during tough times (Etemad, 2020). Weaven et al. (2021) indicate that these weaknesses make SMEs susceptible to competition, complacency, and an inability to diversify beyond their founding capabilities and offerings. A lack of resources and budget to continuously analyze historical performance causes SMEs to be reactive rather than proactive, leading to missed opportunities and increasing their vulnerability to market disruptions (Miklian & Hoelscher, 2022). As a result, compared to larger enterprises, SMEs often struggle more to innovate, to adapt to changing conditions and to withstand economic shocks.

SMEs often experience significant challenges when it comes to building a sustainable and scalable business (Ireta-Sanchez, 2023). One key limitation they typically face is a relatively small investment base. While SMEs can work to maximize the capital and resources available to them through various means, such as seeking out investors, taking out loans or reinvesting profits, the overall investment base for them is usually quite limited. A restricted funding pool can severely constrain an SME's runway, that is, the amount of time it has to achieve profitability and growth before running out of capital (Hofmann, Jacob, & Pizzingrili, 2022). The small investment base of SMEs also limits their ability to scale up their operations and to sustain themselves over the long term. Larger enterprises often have access to much greater financial resources that allow them to invest heavily in expansion, research and development, marketing, and other key drivers of growth. In contrast, SMEs frequently struggle to generate the capital needed to fund significant scaling efforts or to weather extended periods of low profitability. Hence, SMEs can face significant challenges in establishing a strong, durable competitive position in their markets. Their limited investment base makes it difficult to match the capabilities and resources of larger rivals, putting them at a structural disadvantage when it comes to long-term viability and growth. Overcoming this constraint is a critical challenge for many SMEs.

SMEs also experience significant hurdles when it comes to sustaining ambitious investments due to their inherent capital constraints and cash flow challenges (Iwu, 2018). They often struggle to receive timely payments from large customers, including state-owned entities, which hinders their ability to fund their operations and to maintain a stable workforce. They also experience significant challenges with respect to accessing the necessary service inputs that large businesses can easily obtain.

2.3 The ways in which large businesses can support SMEs

Large companies can greatly assist SMEs by forming collaborative partnerships and establishing comprehensive support networks (Bomani et al., 2022), as follows.

Forming meaningful partnerships: Meaningful partnerships can greatly benefit SMEs in multiple ways. Large businesses could establish long-term supply chain partnerships that provide SMEs with continuous access to market opportunities and could also consider how changes in their business may impact SME participation, allowing SMEs to plan and adapt (O'Dwyer & Gilmore, 2018). Once SMEs are part of these supply chains, it is important to monitor their performance and to provide ongoing feedback for purposes of improvement. Ensuring timely payments is key to sustaining these opportunities. Large businesses can also form production ecosystems with SMEs, thereby lowering their overheads and increasing employment. Beneficiation partnerships allow large firms to assist SMEs by leveraging them in their value chains or by establishing growth partnerships. Channel partnerships enable SMEs to access larger markets, while business adjacencies can lead to merger and acquisition opportunities.

Creating an end-to-end support ecosystem: Bashuri and Bailetti (2021) explain that large businesses can significantly assist SMEs by creating a comprehensive support ecosystem. This involves providing long-term opportunities, sub-contracting avenues, and export market support, ensuring SMEs have the necessary tools to maintain these opportunities. Bomani et al. (2022) note that large businesses can partner with government, other businesses, funders, and incubators to offer tailored support based on SMEs' maturity and challenges. This holistic approach allows for monitoring progress and planning supply chain integration based on SMEs' readiness. Entrepreneurs benefit from technical support, mentorship, and joint execution partnerships, while SMEs receive business capability support to operate at increased economies of scale and to leverage intellectual property for purposes of improved services and market access (Chipambwa et al., 2023). Supporting SMEs is a long-term journey that requires multiple forms of support to enable them to operate, evolve and continuously improve their capabilities to sustain and survive.

3 Methods and Data

A research methodology encompasses the research procedure that assists a researcher in gathering the necessary data for a study and the data collection instruments most suited to the aim of the study (Habib, 2020). This study was exploratory in nature and focused on demographic information of selected SME owners (Sakyi, Musona, & Mweshi, 2020). The population of this study comprised SME owners in Masvingo City. The researcher systematically sampled a participant from each stratum. According to Casteel and Bridier (2021), another method of probabilistically selecting a sample is systematic sampling, which entails selecting every 15th name on a list, every 10th house on one side of a street and so on. An element of randomness is usually introduced into this kind of sampling by using random numbers to pick up the unit with which to start.

4 Results

Variable		Frequencies	Percentage
Gender	Female	84	36.0
	Male	149	64.0
Age (in years)	19–30	75	32.2
	31–40	81	34.8
	41–50	55	23.6
	51–60	18	7.7
	Over 60	4	1.7
Highest qualification	No education	3	1.3
	Secondary education	66	28.3
	Certificate/Diploma	79	33.9
	Bachelor's degree	77	32.6
	Master's degree or higher	9	3.9
Experience in SME (in years)	0–5	103	44.0
	6–10	84	36.0
	11–15	21	9.0
	16–20	14	6.0
	Over 20	12	5.0

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

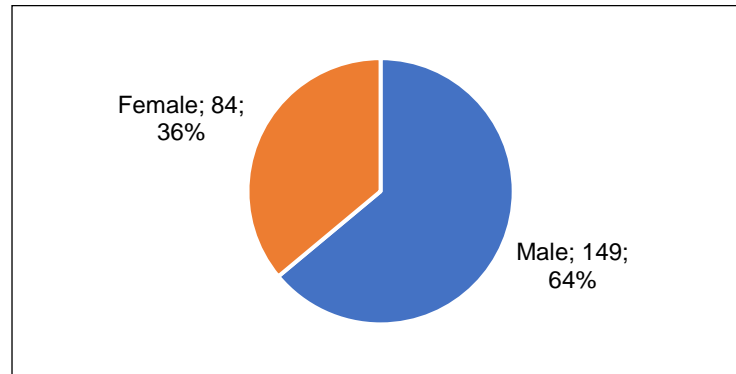


Figure 1: Gender distribution of SME owners

The study involved 233 participants who were owners of SMEs. Of these participants, 149 (63.95%) were males and 84 (36.05%) were females.

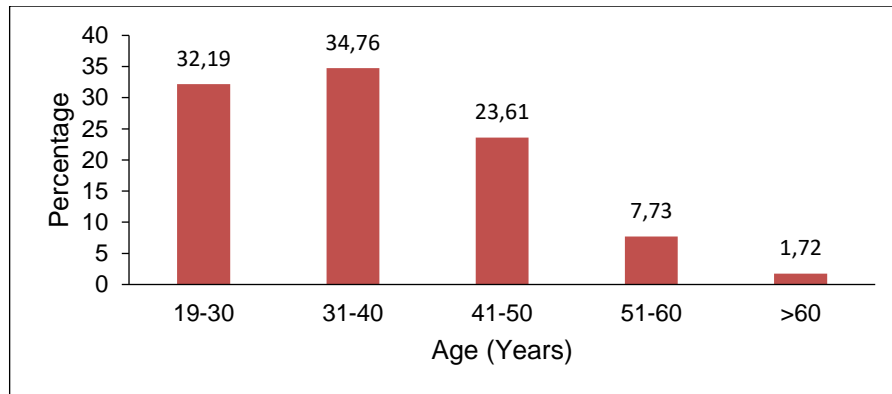


Figure 2: Age distribution in years

Concerning the age distribution of the participants, most of the participants, that is, 156 (66.95%) were 40 years and younger. Only four (1.72%) were 60 years and above.

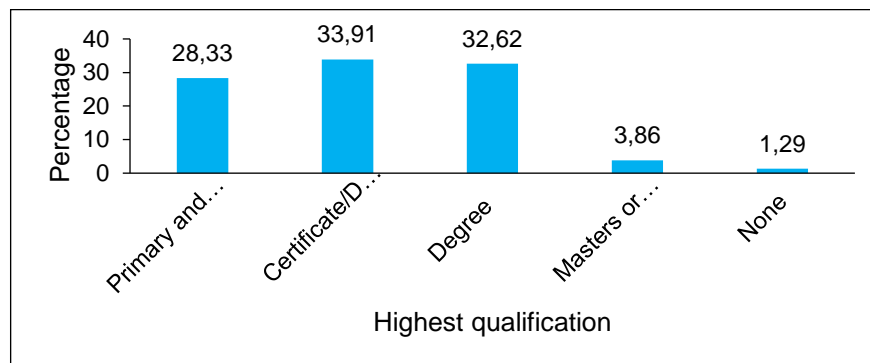


Figure 3: Highest qualification

Regarding highest qualifications among the study participants, 79 (33.91%) had either a certificate or a diploma, 76 (32.62%) had degrees, nine (3.86%) had either a master's degree or a higher qualification and three (1.29%) had no formal qualification.

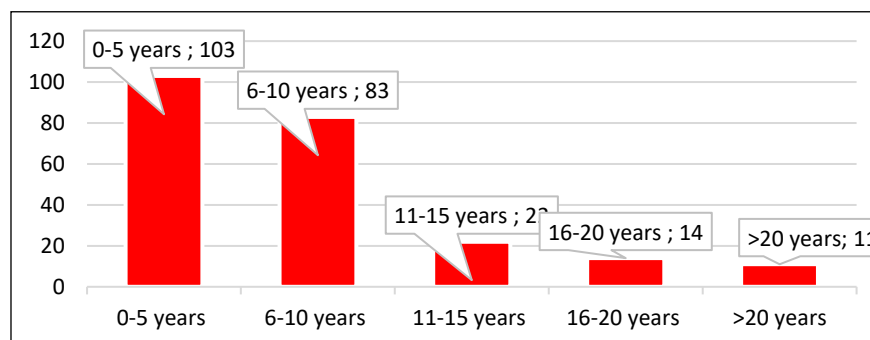


Figure 4: Experience in position

Interestingly, most study participants were in their early career years. A total 103 (44.21%) had zero to five years of experience in the positions they were occupying, while 11 (4.72%) had over 20 years of experience in their position.

5 Discussion

5.1 Issues related to gender

There were more male participants than women in the study, possibly reflecting under-participation of women in the licenced SMEs. Prior findings by World Bank (2022) and Makwara et al. (2023) ascribed the absence of women to lack of assets needed when applying for business loans. However, if the micro subsector is considered, most of which are unregistered, the World Bank pegs proportion of women-owned ventures at

53%, reflecting the SME ownership and participation landscape in Masvingo. The strengths and weaknesses related to this gender profile are as follows.

Strengths

A shortage of women SME practitioners can be noted since they are almost half the number of their male counterparts. Though women are still outnumbered by men entrepreneurs, the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development (MWACSMED) (2022) indicates that the number of women entrepreneurs in Masvingo City has grown significantly. Nyanga (2021) notes that women entrepreneurs in Masvingo are mainly involved in small-scale manufacturing, buying and selling, cross-border trading, and other businesses that require relatively small capital, with many being generally successful in launching, maintaining and growing their businesses. Some of the key strengths and strategies that have contributed to their success include buying raw materials or goods in bulk to benefit from economies of scale; pricing and selling products in US dollars to hedge against currency fluctuations; hiring competent staff and ensuring workers are appropriately motivated; and continuously scanning the business environment to identify new opportunities and threats (Dumbu, 2018). Bomani et al. (2022) point out that, compared to men, women entrepreneurs in Masvingo tend to be more involved in businesses that are less capital-intensive and require smaller initial investments, such as retail, services, and small-scale manufacturing, but they still face challenges like limited access to finance, markets, and business management skills.

Weaknesses

Women entrepreneurs in Masvingo exhibit several notable weaknesses that can hinder their business success. Many lack formal education and access to communication networks, limiting their ability to stay informed and to manage their enterprises effectively (Dumbu, 2018). They often struggle with human capital management, hiring semi-skilled workers without investing in training and development. Financial indiscipline, such as mixing business and personal finances, is another common issue (*Zimbabwe National SME Policy 2020-2024*). Additionally, women entrepreneurs in Masvingo tend to be risk-averse, which can constrain their capacity for innovation and growth. Deficits in managerial skills and an inability to adapt to changing market conditions also pose challenges. Fundamentally, women entrepreneurs in Masvingo have limited access to critical resources like capital, markets, and business management expertise, which undermines their potential for sustained success.

5.2 Issues related to age

Most of the participants were aged 31 to 40, followed by participants aged 19 to 30, and participants aged 42 to 50. The number of participants aged 51 to 60 was much lower, and only a small number of participants were over 60. This age profile presents certain strengths and weaknesses, as outlined below.

Strengths

The age profile indicates a significant age distribution among SME owners, which suggests that the majority of SME owners are in their prime working years, with a significant proportion in their early to mid-career stages (Mkhonza & Sifolo, 2022). This demographic structure can be beneficial for the growth and stability of SMEs since it allows for a mix of experienced and younger entrepreneurs who can bring different perspectives and skills to the businesses.

Weaknesses

The age distribution of SME owners can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a mix of experienced and younger entrepreneurs can bring diverse perspectives and skills to the businesses. On the other hand, this diversity may lead to higher failure rates among younger entrepreneurs due to factors such as limited financial capital, a lack of access to market opportunities, and insufficient support infrastructure. SME owners who are in their prime working years can contribute to the stability and growth of the businesses but may also face challenges such as high competition, inadequate equipment, and poor business locations, which can impact their performance (Prasanna et al., 2019). Younger entrepreneurs may have limited experience and underdeveloped skills to effectively manage and grow their businesses, leading to higher failure rates and lower performance compared to their older counterparts. The age distribution can also influence access to support infrastructure, networks, and financial resources, with younger entrepreneurs facing more significant hurdles in these areas, which can hinder the growth and stability of their businesses.

5.3 Issues related to education

Qualification-wise, most of the participants had certificates or diplomas, followed by participants who had degrees and participants who had completed primary and secondary education. A small number of participants had master's or higher degrees, followed by those with no formal qualification. The strengths and weaknesses associated with this age profile are as follows:

Strengths

The educational profile indicates that most SME practitioners are educated, even to the level of advanced postgraduate qualifications. A breakdown of the educational qualifications of SME owners is useful for policymakers, investors, and entrepreneurs looking to support and grow the SME sector in the region. Bvochora (2023) explains that a profile of the educational background of entrepreneurs helps to provide insight into the diversity of economic activities, the scale of businesses, and the challenges faced by SMEs, while Barney (2021) finds an organisation's human capital significantly influencing its overall growth.

Weaknesses

The educational profile suggests a lack of advanced educational attainment. Very few individuals hold master's or higher degrees, which could indicate challenges in accessing or completing higher education programs in the Masvingo area (Dube, 2019; Mabuto, 2019). Moreover, the fact that individuals with no education constitute a small but notable portion of the population points to potential issues regarding educational access and retention, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. These factors may limit the availability of highly skilled and educated professionals in the Masvingo region, which could have implications for economic and social development.

5.4 Issues related to experience

As for experience in SME business, most participants were in their first five years of experience, followed by those who had six to ten years of experience, those who had 11 to 15 years of experience, those who had 16 to 20 years of experience and, lastly, those who had more than 20 years of experience.

Strengths

Most SMEs in Masvingo are owned by relatively young people and are in their first five years of operation, followed by SMEs in the six-to-ten-year range (Nyanga, Tumo, & Mtisi, 2023). This suggests that SME owners in Masvingo have a strong entrepreneurial spirit. Many new businesses are started despite the difficulties that entrepreneurs face. The high proportion of SMEs in the early stages of their lifecycle also implies that these enterprises can get established and survive the critical first few years, which is often the most challenging period for small businesses (Mkhonza & Sifolo, 2022). Additionally, the data show that, while fewer in number, a significant number of Masvingo SMEs have been operating for over 10 years and even over 20 years. This indicates that many SMEs in Masvingo, once they are past the initial startup phase, can achieve longer-term sustainability and growth. Overall, the age distribution of SMEs in Masvingo points to an entrepreneurial, resilient small business sector that can weather challenges and establish itself, even if a significant number of businesses do not make it past the first five years (Bomani et al., 2022).

Weaknesses

The research results indicate that SMEs in Masvingo face significant challenges in their first five years of operation. According to Dlamini and Schutte (2020), over 50% of SMEs in Zimbabwe collapse within the first five years. The key weaknesses of SMEs in Masvingo during this critical early period include difficulty accessing finance from financial institutions, an inability to afford borrowed capital due to high costs, and a general shortage of working capital (Dlamini & Schutte, 2020). These SMEs also struggle with inadequate infrastructure, a lack of collateral security, and limited research, development and marketing skills. Additionally, poor business structures,

unfavorable operating environments, and deficiencies in entrepreneurial and management skills further hinder the sustainability of these young enterprises. Matsongoni and Mutambara (2021) found that SMEs in the exploitation phase that had gone beyond the first five years of operation, fared better than those in the venture ideation phase below five years of operation, while those in the established phase that had been in operation for more than 20 years were the most successful (Olumuyiwa et al., 2023). This finding suggests that SMEs in Masvingo are the most vulnerable in their initial years of operation, requiring targeted support and strategies to improve their chances of long-term survival and growth.

5.5 Implications for Practice

The weaknesses outlined above highlight the need for targeted support and policies that can help SMEs overcome challenges and achieve greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Strategies for sustainable growth are therefore needed. In general, SMEs should leverage their strengths such as flexibility and customer relationships, address weaknesses through partnerships with larger enterprises, improve their access to financing and capital, invest in strategic planning and market analysis, develop capabilities to serve evolving customer needs, and strengthen their bargaining power through SME networks (Quansah, Hartz, & Salipante, 2022). Addressing the identified weaknesses through targeted support and interventions will be crucial for empowering SMEs, particularly women-led SMEs, in Masvingo. Such support and interventions could include the following:

- **Enhancing access to education and training**

The scarcity of women entrepreneurs in Masvingo and their impressive performance when they enter the trade warrant that they receive proper education and training opportunities to improve their business management skills and to stay informed of market trends. In addition, women entrepreneurs need to be offered training programs focused on human capital management, financial discipline, and risk management to help them overcome challenges related to these aspects.

- **Improving access to capital**

Initiatives should be introduced to increase women entrepreneurs' access to loans and credit to address the significant gap in financial support. Financing schemes that cater to the needs of women entrepreneurs can ensure that they have the necessary resources to expand their businesses.

- **Addressing human capital management**

Women entrepreneurs could invest in employee training and development to improve productivity and efficiency. Additionally, they could develop strategies to enhance their own managerial capabilities, enabling them to adapt to changing market conditions more effectively.

- **Enhancing market access**

Women entrepreneurs should be supported in accessing formal markets by being provided with training on marketing and sales strategies. There is a need to develop infrastructure to facilitate the transportation of goods, with a view to reducing costs and increasing competitiveness.

- **Promoting financial discipline**

Financial literacy programs are essential to help women entrepreneurs manage their finances effectively, separating business and personal funds. Women entrepreneurs could adopt financial planning and budgeting strategies to promote the sustainability of their businesses.

- **Encouraging innovation and growth**

Women entrepreneurs should be encouraged to take calculated risks and to innovate in their businesses. In addition, they would benefit from being mentored and coached in developing strategies for growth and expansion.

- **Addressing infrastructure challenges**

The SME infrastructure in Masvingo, such as transportation and communication networks that support SME growth, needs to be developed. There should also be strategies to enhance the overall business environment, including access to markets and resources.

- **Supporting women entrepreneurs in rural areas**

The provision of targeted support to women entrepreneurs in rural areas may be lacking since rural areas are relatively neglected (Mugano, 2024). These entrepreneurs' unique challenges in respect of accessing markets and resources need to be addressed. There is therefore a need to develop initiatives for promoting entrepreneurship in rural areas, with the aim of fostering economic growth and development.

- **Enhancing collaboration and networking**

There is a need for women entrepreneurs to collaborate and network with one another and to share best practices and resources. They need partnerships with other women entrepreneurs and other stakeholders, including government agencies and financial institutions.

- **Monitoring and evaluation**

There should be regular monitoring and evaluation of the impact of initiatives for empowering women entrepreneurs in Masvingo. The data gathered through such monitoring and evaluation should be used to identify areas that require additional support and to adjust strategies accordingly.

- **Challenges confronting younger entrepreneurs**

Young entrepreneurs may experience higher failure rates than their older counterparts due to factors such as limited financial capital, a lack of access to market opportunities, and insufficient support infrastructure.

There is need for support mechanisms tailored to the particular needs of young entrepreneurs.

- **Challenges confronting older entrepreneurs**

Most SME owners, who are in their prime working years, face challenges concerning high competition, inadequate equipment, and poor business location, which can impact their performance. Thus, a mix of diverse generations would support the SME sector.

- **Targeted support strategies**

The educational profile of SME owners can inform targeted support and investment strategies for the SME sector. Policymakers and investors can focus on providing training and resources that cater to the educational backgrounds of entrepreneurs in the region.

- **Access to higher education**

The low number of individuals who hold master's or higher degrees suggests that access to higher education programs in the Masvingo area needs to be increased. In addition, access to higher education should be supported.

- **Primary and secondary education**

The presence of individuals with no education or limited education points to issues concerning educational access and retention at the school level. Improving educational infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development could help address these challenges.

- **Workforce development**

The limited availability of highly skilled and educated professionals in the Masvingo region could impact economic and social development. Vocational training programs and apprenticeships could help bridge the skills gap.

- **Entrepreneurial education**

The provision of entrepreneurial education and training to SME practitioners in Masvingo could enhance their business management skills and competitiveness. Workshops, seminars, and online courses focused on entrepreneurship, marketing, and financial management may accelerate the development and success of SMEs in the province.

- **Adaptation to digital platforms**

SMEs can employ digital platforms to strengthen and maintain their business operations. This approach can help SMEs stay in business despite operating at a low scale.

5.6 Recommendations

The following recommendations were derived:

- **Enhancing access to education and training:** Provide women entrepreneurs in Masvingo with proper education and training opportunities to improve their business management skills, financial discipline, and risk management abilities.
- **Improving access to capital:** Introduce initiatives to increase access to loans and credit for women entrepreneurs to address the significant gap in financial support.
- **Addressing human capital management:** Invest in the training and development of SMEs especially young entrepreneurs and women entrepreneurs to adapt to changing market conditions.
- **Enhancing market access:** Provide training on marketing and sales strategies and develop infrastructure to facilitate the transportation of goods and to reduce costs.
- **Promoting financial discipline:** Offer financial literacy programs to help women entrepreneurs manage their finances effectively and adopt financial planning and budgeting strategies.
- **Encouraging innovation and growth:** Mentor and coach women entrepreneurs in developing strategies for growth and expansion and encourage them to take calculated risks and to innovate.
- **Offering training and mentorship:** Provide training and mentorship programs for younger entrepreneurs to help them develop the necessary skills to manage and grow their businesses effectively.
- **Ensuring access to support infrastructure:** Ensure that support infrastructure and networks are accessible for all entrepreneurs, regardless of their age, to help level the playing field and to promote the growth and stability of SMEs.
- **Providing financial support:** Offer financial support programs that cater to the specific needs of younger entrepreneurs to help them overcome financial constraints and access market opportunities.
- *Enhancing market opportunities:* Create programs that provide access to market opportunities for all entrepreneurs, regardless of their age, to help promote growth and stability in the SME sector.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Results summary

The empowerment of Women, Illiterate and Inexperienced (WII) entrepreneurs in Masvingo, requires a multifaceted approach to address the unique challenges they face. Enhancing access to education, capital, human capital management, and market access, along with improving infrastructure, can significantly strengthen the entrepreneurial landscape. These strategies are essential for fostering economic growth and the sustainability of SMEs.

6.2 Limitations

This study focused exclusively on SMEs in Masvingo Province, limiting the generalisability of the findings to other regions. The research also relied on self-reported data, which may introduce biases. Future research could broaden its scope geographically and consider a longitudinal approach to capture the evolving nature of challenges faced by entrepreneurs over time.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

This research highlights the need for more in-depth studies on gendered entrepreneurial challenges and the specific barriers faced by less educated and inexperienced entrepreneurs. Future research should explore the long-term impact of targeted training and financing initiatives, as well as how infrastructural development can influence SME growth in rural and underdeveloped regions. Moreover, investigating the role of collaboration and networking in fostering entrepreneurial resilience among WII entrepreneurs offers a promising avenue for further inquiry.

6.4 Practical Implications

Based on the research findings, the following practical steps are recommended for practitioners:

- Enhance access to education and training: Implement targeted programs on financial literacy, risk management, and human capital management.
- Improve access to capital: Develop financing schemes tailored to the needs of women, illiterate, and inexperienced entrepreneurs.
- Support market access: Offer training on marketing strategies and invest in infrastructure to lower transportation costs.
- Foster financial discipline: Establish financial literacy programs that promote budgeting and planning.
- Encourage innovation and growth: Provide mentorship and coaching to guide entrepreneurs in taking calculated risks and expanding their businesses.
- Strengthen rural entrepreneurship: Develop specific initiatives to support WII entrepreneurs in rural areas.

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