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Navigating Expectations and Tensions: A Transformative Marketing Perspective on Women Entrepreneurs and DEI in South Asian Contexts.

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By

Hasanthi Gamage

Supervisors:

Dr. Sarah Dodds

Prof. Nitha Palakshappa

Abstract

This study examines how South Asian women entrepreneurs understand and interpret diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within their entrepreneurial and marketing practices, and how they navigate tension associated with applying these principles in everyday business contexts. It focuses on Sri Lanka as a relevant South Asian setting, shaped by strong socio-cultural norms, gendered expectations, and resource-constrained entrepreneurial environments, alongside a growing but uneven ecosystem of women-led small and medium enterprises. These conditions provide a suitable context for examining DEI as a lived and situated practice rather than a formal organisational construct.

A qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected through 13 semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs across diverse sectors in Sri Lanka. The interviews aimed to capture lived entrepreneurial experiences and were analysed using thematic analysis. Transformative marketing is used as a supporting theoretical lens to interpret how entrepreneurial practices evolve in response to changing market conditions and institutional expectations.

The findings indicate that DEI is not understood as a formal framework, but as a context-dependent set of meanings shaped by social norms, resource constraints, and institutional realities. Diversity is interpreted as difference, equity as fairness and access, and inclusion as being community oriented. The findings further show that women entrepreneurs navigate differing expectations from customers and communities which shapes how DEI is understood and enacted within their entrepreneurial and marketing practices.

This study contributes to the intersection of DEI, women's entrepreneurship, and transformative marketing by illustrating how DEI is interpreted and enacted within resource-constrained entrepreneurial settings. It extends understanding of transformative marketing by demonstrating its relevance in interpreting lived, small-scale entrepreneurial realities in emerging economies.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

Women entrepreneurs play an increasingly important role in economic and social development through innovation, employment creation, and community engagement. However, entrepreneurial opportunities and experiences remain uneven, shaped by social expectations, cultural norms, access to resources, and institutional conditions, particularly in developing and emerging economies.

At the same time, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has gained growing attention in business and marketing research, particularly in relation to access to opportunity and participation within economic and social systems. Much of this work is grounded in large organisational and corporate settings, with less attention given to how DEI is understood and experienced within entrepreneurial contexts that are resource-constrained and culturally embedded.

This study examines how women entrepreneurs interpret DEI in their everyday business activities and how these interpretations shape their responses to opportunities, challenges, and marketplace interactions. It focuses on the tensions women navigate in balancing business sustainability, caregiving responsibilities, market uncertainty, resource limitations, and structural constraints. These tensions are central to how DEI is understood and enacted in practice.

DEI serves as the primary analytical lens, while Transformative Marketing provides a supporting framework for understanding how entrepreneurial and marketing practices respond to changing social conditions and stakeholder needs. The study is grounded in the view that DEI is not only a formal organisational concept but also a lived and negotiated experience shaped by social, cultural, and economic realities.

1.2 Background

Marketing scholarship has increasingly recognised the need to address broader societal challenges alongside traditional business objectives. This shift has encouraged greater attention to issues such

as stakeholder well-being, social responsibility, sustainability, and inclusion (Ruyter et al., 2021; Ozanne et al., 2024). Within this evolving landscape, Transformative Marketing has emerged as an important perspective for understanding how marketing responds to social and environmental change (Kumar, 2018; Varadarajan, 2018).

Transformative marketing, as introduced by Kumar (2018), describes the evolving nature of marketing systems in response to changes in markets, technology, consumer behaviour, and institutional environments. It emphasizes value creation through responsiveness and adaptation, where firms adjust their strategies to remain relevant while addressing broader stakeholder needs. While early discussions of transformative marketing focused on value creation and competitiveness (Previte & Robertson, 2019), later scholarship extends this view by highlighting resilience, collaboration, agility, stakeholder well-being, and ethical responsibility in uncertain and rapidly changing contexts, creating stronger connections between marketing activities and broader social concerns (Pedersen et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2022; Lim, 2023).

Within this context, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has gained increasing relevance. DEI provides a framework for understanding how individuals and groups experience inclusion, fairness, recognition, and access to opportunities within social and economic systems (Kipnis et al., 2021; Armstrong, 2024). Rather than focusing solely on organisational policies or representation, DEI draws attention to the ways structural conditions influence everyday experiences and participation (Licsandru & Cui, 2018; Trkulja et al., 2024). Recent marketing scholarship has also highlighted the growing importance of diversity and inclusion in marketplace well-being and socially responsible marketing practices (Eisend et al., 2022; Kipnis et al., 2021).

For women entrepreneurs, particularly within South Asian contexts, these issues are especially important. Gendered expectations, family responsibilities, social norms, and unequal access to resources often shape entrepreneurial experiences (Bullough et al., 2021; Franzke et al., 2022; Peiris et al., 2023). Women entrepreneurs frequently navigate barriers related to access to finance, business networks, legitimacy, and social expectations while balancing family and business responsibilities (Marlow & Patton, 2005; Dewitt et al., 2022; Nimeshi G. & Rodrigo, 2024). Understanding how women interpret and navigate DEI therefore offers valuable insight into how inclusion and fairness are experienced within entrepreneurial practice. This study addresses these

issues by examining the experiences of Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs and exploring how DEI is understood and enacted within their business and marketing activities.

1.3 Research Gap, Emerging Questions, and Research Objectives

The existing literature on South Asian women entrepreneurs predominantly highlights the challenges and constraints they encounter in starting and managing businesses, often overlooking the connections to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) within marketing practices (Franzke et al., 2022; Peiris et al., 2023; Nimeshi G. & Rodrigo, 2024). As a result, understanding of how women in this region interpret and navigate diversity, equity and inclusion remains limited. Furthermore, much of the entrepreneurship literature, particularly on DEI in relation to women's entrepreneurship, is grounded in Western contexts (Bullough et al., 2021), limiting understanding of how gender, inclusion, and entrepreneurship are experienced within non-Western settings such as South Asia (Franzke et al., 2022; Corrêa et al., 2021).

This gap is particularly significant because DEI is increasingly recognized as a central framework within marketing scholarship for promoting inclusion, representation, equitable access, and marketplace well-being (Kipnis et al., 2021; Trkulja et al., 2024). However, how these principles are lived, interpreted, and operationalised in resource-constrained and culturally embedded environments remains underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by examining Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs and their interpretations of DEI within their entrepreneurial and marketing practices. It focuses on how these women perceive diversity, equity, and inclusion in their everyday business lives and how such understandings intersect with broader ideas of transformative marketing. Rather than treating DEI as a formal organisational framework, the study explores it as a lived, contextual, and negotiated experience.

Research Questions

1. *How do South Asian women entrepreneurs understand and interpret DEI in their business practices?*
2. *How do South Asian women entrepreneurs navigate tensions around DEI in their business practice?*

1.4 Overview of Methodology

A qualitative approach is adopted since it enables the researcher to capture contextual variables and lived experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Miles et al., 2014; Tisdell et al., 2025). This is aligned with the study's aim of understanding how Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs experience diversity, equity, and inclusion within their entrepreneurial practices.

The study is designed to explore how DEI is understood, interpreted, and negotiated in real entrepreneurial environments in Sri Lanka. This focus reflects the use of semi-structured interviews with 13 women entrepreneurs from diverse sectors, allowing participants to express their experiences in their own terms.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted both online and in person, ensuring accessibility, comfort, and confidentiality for participants, with recordings transcribed and anonymised for analysis. This aligns with the broader methodological emphasis on capturing detailed narratives while maintaining ethical research standards.

The analysis follows a thematic approach using transcribed interview data, allowing patterns of meaning related to DEI to be identified across participants. This supports an interpretive understanding of how DEI is experienced through everyday business decisions, interactions, and constraints. Rather than treating DEI as a predefined or institutional framework, this methodological approach enables an exploration of how it is lived and negotiated within specific socio-cultural and entrepreneurial contexts.

1.5 Importance and Contributions

This study contributes to a more grounded understanding of DEI in entrepreneurship by focusing on South Asian women entrepreneurs. It addresses gaps in existing literature that often apply

Western-centred interpretations of DEI without fully capturing local socio-cultural realities. Specifically, the study shows that DEI is not experienced as a fixed or formal framework, but as a lived and negotiated process shaped by ongoing tensions in women's entrepreneurial lives. These tensions arise from the interaction between cultural expectations, family responsibilities, resource constraints, and marketplace demands.

The findings further demonstrate that women entrepreneurs navigate these tensions through everyday practices that balance survival, relational obligations, and business needs. In doing so, the study extends existing discussions on transformative marketing and women's entrepreneurship by showing how informal and contextually grounded practices emerge through these tensions within a developing economy context.

1.6 Structure of Thesis

Chapter 1 introduces the study by outlining the research background, research problem, objectives, research questions, and significance of the research. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), transformative marketing, women's entrepreneurship, and the South Asian context. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology, including the research approach, data collection methods, participant selection, and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 reports the findings of the study through the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview data. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the existing literature and theoretical framework, highlighting the study's contributions and implications. Chapter 6 concludes the study by summarising the key findings, outlining the contributions, discussing limitations, and providing recommendations for future research. The reference list and appendices are provided at the end of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature relevant to this study through four interconnected areas that reveal a central tension between global DEI frameworks and the lived realities of entrepreneurship in South Asian contexts. It first examines Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in marketing and society, focusing on how DEI its and representation are defined and understood in contemporary research. It then introduces transformative marketing as the theoretical lens for this study, as it explains how marketing systems respond to social change while balancing firm goals with broader stakeholder well-being (Kumar, 2018; Varadarajan, 2018; Lim, 2023).

The chapter then moves to entrepreneurship literature, particularly gender and resource constraints, to show how structural conditions shape entrepreneurial participation and outcomes. It concludes with South Asian women's entrepreneurship, where DEI appears not only as a framework but as a lived experience shaped by cultural norms, institutional limits, and informal support systems. Across these sections, the literature highlights a tension between formal DEI models and entrepreneurial contexts where DEI is negotiated through practice and relationships. This structure moves from broad theory to specific context and supports the development of the research questions and analytical framework.

2.1 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Marketing and Society

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become central to contemporary discussions on markets, branding, and consumer well-being. At its core, DEI seeks to ensure that individuals and groups are recognized, represented, and fairly treated within social and economic systems. In marketing contexts, this extends beyond representation to include how consumers experience fairness, visibility, and respect in brand communication and service delivery (Eisend et al., 2022; Kipnis et al., 2021; Licsandru & Cui, 2018).

Although diversity, equity, and inclusion are frequently discussed as a single concept, they represent distinct yet interconnected dimensions of social and marketplace participation. Diversity

refers to the presence of differences among individuals and groups, including differences related to gender, ethnicity, age, culture, religion, and socioeconomic background (Eisend et al., 2022). Equity focuses on fairness in access to opportunities, resources, and outcomes, recognising that individuals may face different barriers and therefore require different forms of support to participate on equal terms (Trkulja et al., 2024). Inclusion extends beyond representation and fairness to consider whether individuals feel valued, respected, and able to participate meaningfully within social and organisational settings (Licsandru & Cui, 2018). These distinctions are important because organisations may achieve diversity without necessarily creating equitable or inclusive environments. For example, a business may increase representation among employees or customers while still maintaining structures that limit participation or decision-making power for certain groups. Similarly, inclusion without equity may fail to address underlying barriers that prevent meaningful engagement. Contemporary marketing scholarship increasingly emphasises the need to view DEI as a multidimensional framework rather than a checklist of isolated initiatives (Wang & Shao, 2023).

Within marketing, DEI has become closely connected to the concept of marketplace well-being (Arsel et al., 2022). This perspective positions markets as socially constructed systems rather than neutral exchange spaces. Markets shape access to resources, influence identity formation, and affect how individuals experience belonging, recognition, and exclusion (Poole et al., 2020). As a result, marketers play an important role in shaping perceptions of DEI through branding, communication, and customer engagement practices (Arsel et al., 2022; Campbell et al., 2025). Advertising and brand communication are particularly significant in this regard, as they contribute to how consumers interpret social groups, construct meaning, and evaluate brand legitimacy (Arsel et al., 2022; Campbell et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025). Recent research shows that diversity representation in advertising can influence perceived variety, consumer engagement, and brand outcomes, particularly when representation is perceived as authentic and contextually appropriate (Campbell et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2025). From this perspective, DEI is not simply an organisational responsibility but a mechanism through which firms participate in shaping more inclusive market systems and reinforcing stakeholder relationships.

This growing emphasis reflects a broader shift in marketing scholarship, where consumers increasingly evaluate brands not only on functional value but also on ethical alignment, social responsibility, and perceived authenticity (Kipnis et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2025). DEI practices therefore carry reputational consequences, as they influence brand trust, legitimacy, and long-term relational equity. Firms that actively engage with diversity in meaningful ways are more likely to be perceived as socially responsive, while those that neglect or oversimplify inclusion risk weakening consumer trust and relational commitment (Eisend et al., 2022).

However, DEI in marketing is not without complexity. While inclusive advertising can strengthen engagement and broaden brand appeal, it can also generate resistance when perceived as inauthentic or commercially opportunistic (Eisend et al., 2022). Studies indicate that poorly executed diversity messaging may lead to backlash or disengagement, particularly when consumers interpret inclusion as symbolic rather than substantive (Mazzoli et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2025). In some cases, exposure to diversity cues can even produce negative brand evaluations when consumers perceive misalignment between messaging and brand behaviour (Uduehi et al., 2025). These findings highlight that DEI communication is not inherently beneficial, but context-dependent and shaped by consumer interpretation.

At the same time, there is growing evidence that consumers increasingly expect brands to reflect DEI values in visible and consistent ways and may actively penalise firms that fail to do so (Linda Tuncay Zayer et al., 2023b). This creates a dual pressure for firms, where DEI is both an expectation and a risk. On one hand, it offers opportunities to strengthen brand equity through inclusion-oriented engagement. On the other hand, it exposes firms to heightened scrutiny regarding authenticity, consistency, and intent.

These developments position DEI as more than a representational or communicative concern within marketing. Instead, they highlight how they are actively produced through dynamic interactions between firms, consumers, and broader market systems. The tensions identified in DEI practice, particularly between authenticity and commercial intent, also point to the need for a framework that can explain how marketing systems respond to changing social expectations while still operating under conditions of uncertainty and constraint. Transformative marketing provides such a lens, as it focuses on how marketing practices evolve in response to environmental change, stakeholder demands, and shifting conceptions of value. It therefore offers a useful theoretical

foundation for understanding how DEI is not only communicated but also enacted and negotiated within contemporary marketing systems.

2.2 Transformative Marketing as a Theoretical Foundation for DEI

Transformative marketing provides a useful lens for understanding how DEI operates within modern marketing systems, as both are concerned with adapting marketing practices to address shifting social conditions, stakeholder needs, and the pursuit of equitable outcomes. (Kipnis et al., 2021). Originally introduced by Kumar (2018), transformative marketing emphasises the adaptation of marketing activities in response to rapid environmental change, including technological disruption, resource constraints, and shifting consumer expectations. Early formulations of transformative marketing placed strong emphasis on competition and value superiority. While this remains relevant, it has been critiqued for potentially overlooking collaboration and shared value creation. In response, later work has refined the concept to emphasise agility, responsiveness in dynamic environments (Lim et al., 2022; Lim, 2023).

Lim et al. (2022) and Lim (2023) extend this view by shifting attention from firm-centred adaptation to more relational and context-sensitive marketing practice. Responsiveness is framed not only as reacting to change, but also as engaging with evolving stakeholder expectations under conditions of uncertainty and constraint (Lim, 2023; Pedersen et al., 2020). This places greater emphasis on crisis contexts and structural shifts, where value is co-created with stakeholders rather than delivered solely by firms. Building on this, transformative marketing is increasingly positioned as oriented toward stakeholder well-being rather than narrow firm performance outcomes, reflecting a broader concern with social impact, fairness, and long-term value creation within marketing systems (Lim, 2023; Arsel et al., 2022).

The development of transformative marketing reflects broader shifts in marketing thought. Traditional approaches have largely prioritised firm performance, market share, and competitive advantage as primary indicators of success (Campbell et al., 2023). In contrast, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that firms operate within interconnected social systems and therefore carry responsibilities that extend beyond economic outcomes (Varadarajan, 2018; Vrontis et al., 2025). This shift has placed greater emphasis on societal well-being, sustainability,

and stakeholder interests as legitimate objectives of marketing activity (Neumann, 2020; Ruyter et al., 2021). Transformative marketing therefore challenges the assumption that marketing is primarily concerned with firm-level value creation. Instead, it recognises that marketing activities shape broader social outcomes through consumer experiences, resource distribution, and marketplace participation (Ruyter et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). This is especially relevant in contexts marked by uncertainty, resource scarcity, and institutional change, where business decisions carry wider social consequences (Pedersen et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2024).

The relevance of transformative marketing has become more visible following periods of disruption, including economic crises, technological change, and evolving consumer expectations. These conditions highlight the need for organisations to remain both flexible and socially responsive while sustaining stakeholder trust (Pedersen et al., 2020). In such environments, firms are expected not only to adapt operationally but also to demonstrate responsibility toward community needs. For entrepreneurs working in resource-constrained settings, these dynamics are particularly significant. Small businesses often depend on close relationships with customers, local communities, and informal networks (Agarwal, 1994, Ahmad et al., 2020; Manzi-Puertas et al., 2025). As a result, success is frequently shaped by trust, reciprocity, and social legitimacy rather than financial resources alone (Gimenez-Fernandez et al., 2020). This positions transformative marketing as a useful framework for understanding how entrepreneurial actors generate value while responding to wider social conditions.

Transformative Consumer Research (TCR), introduced by Mick et al. (2012), focuses on generating knowledge that enhances individual and collective well-being by empowering consumers and addressing issues of vulnerability, inequality, and marginalisation in markets (Mick et al., 2012). In a related development, Transformative Service Research (TSR) extends this concern to service systems, examining how services can be designed and delivered to improve well-being and reduce structural disparities through inclusivity, equity, and value co-creation across stakeholders (Previte & Robertson, 2019; Anderson & Ostrom, 2015). However, transformative marketing is adopted in this study because it more directly explains how marketing practices adjust to changing social conditions and stakeholder expectations. This makes it better suited for examining DEI as a lived and entrepreneurial practice, rather than primarily as a

consumer- or service-focused phenomenon. Within this framing, DEI is positioned as both a functional and ethical requirement embedded in marketing practice.

Importantly, transformative marketing also emphasises authenticity in how inclusion is communicated and experienced (Nunes et al., 2021). Consumers increasingly expect consistency between brand messaging and organisational behaviour, and inconsistencies can weaken credibility. This shifts attention away from inclusion as communication alone toward inclusion as practice embedded in everyday decision-making (Armstrong, 2024). This is particularly relevant in entrepreneurial contexts. Unlike large organisations, small and medium enterprises operate through direct and continuous interaction with customers, communities, and local networks, meaning that DEI is enacted through daily practices rather than formal policy structures (Ahmad et al., 2020; Gimenez-Fernandez et al., 2020).

This framing of transformative marketing as an applied, practice-oriented lens for DEI also provides a bridge to entrepreneurship, where marketing activity is closely tied to day-to-day business decisions and stakeholder relationships. In entrepreneurial settings, particularly within small and resource-constrained firms, market engagement is shaped less by formal strategy and more by ongoing adaptation to social conditions, trust-based exchanges, and local institutional realities. As a result, the concerns highlighted above around authenticity, responsiveness, and embedded practice become especially visible in entrepreneurial contexts. The next section therefore turns to entrepreneurship and economic development to examine how these broader structural and relational dynamics shape women's entrepreneurial experiences.

2.3 Entrepreneurship and Economic Development

Entrepreneurship has long been recognised as a key driver of economic development. It contributes to growth through innovation, job creation, productivity improvements, and market diversification (Solé, 2013; Gimenez-Fernandez et al., 2020). Classical economic theory, particularly Schumpeter's work, positions entrepreneurs as central actors in economic transformation through innovation and creative destruction (Śledzik, 2013).

More recent literature reinforces this view, showing that entrepreneurship plays a significant role in both developed and developing economies, although its impact varies depending on institutional

conditions and levels of market maturity (Navarro et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2025). In addition to economic output, entrepreneurship also contributes to social and environmental well-being, particularly when embedded within inclusive policy frameworks (Neumann, 2020).

A growing body of research also highlights that entrepreneurship is not gender neutral in practice. Structural inequalities, cultural expectations, and institutional barriers influence who participates in entrepreneurial activity and how success is distributed across populations (Bullough et al., 2021).

2.3.1 Gender and Entrepreneurship

Gender is understood as a socially constructed system of roles, expectations, and behaviours assigned to men and women (Liñán et al., 2020). Despite policy commitments to gender equality, significant disparities remain in entrepreneurial participation and outcomes (Corrêa et al., 2021).

Women continue to be underrepresented in business ownership globally, even though their contributions to economic and social development are widely recognised (Bullough et al., 2021). Research suggests that while entrepreneurial motivation and capability exist across genders, access to resources, networks, and institutional support is unevenly distributed (Morris et al., 2020). At the same time, newer studies show signs of convergence in entrepreneurial behaviour, with women increasingly leveraging digital tools, social media, and online platforms to bypass traditional constraints (Mari et al., 2024). These shifts indicate that entrepreneurship is evolving in ways that may gradually reduce, but not eliminate, structural inequality.

2.3.2 Women's Entrepreneurship and Resource Constraints

Women entrepreneurs often operate within environments characterized by financial limitations, restricted access to professional networks, and persistent social expectations related to family and caregiving responsibilities (Dewitt et al., 2022; Avnimelech & Rechter, 2023). These constraints shape not only business outcomes but also the processes through which entrepreneurial opportunities are identified, evaluated, and pursued. Existing literature suggests that women frequently encounter barriers in accessing capital, mentorship, and institutional support, limiting their ability to scale ventures and compete on equal terms with male entrepreneurs (Corrêa et al.,

2021; Kaur & Trifan, 2025). In many contexts, entrepreneurial activities must also be negotiated alongside domestic and caregiving responsibilities, creating tensions between business aspirations and socially prescribed gender roles (Bullough et al., 2021). Such challenges are particularly evident in developing and emerging economies, where institutional support mechanisms are often less accessible and gender inequalities remain deeply embedded within social and economic structures (Corrêa et al., 2022).

Despite these barriers, women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to innovation, employment generation, and community development across a wide range of sectors (Crane, 2021; Raman et al., 2022). Entrepreneurship can provide women with opportunities for economic independence, increased decision-making power, and greater participation in public and professional life (Kabeer, 1999). Studies further suggest that women entrepreneurs frequently demonstrate resilience and adaptability by mobilizing available resources, leveraging family and community networks, and developing innovative responses to resource constraints (Mari et al., 2024; Muhammad Ashraf Fauzi et al., 2023). In many cases, entrepreneurship offers flexibility that enables women to balance income-generating activities with family responsibilities while simultaneously contributing to local economic development and social well-being (Laguía et al., 2022; Corrêa et al., 2022). As a result, women's entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized not only as an economic activity but also as an important pathway for empowerment, social inclusion, and sustainable development (Leal Filho et al., 2022; Adhikari, 2025).

However, the literature also emphasises that women's entrepreneurial experiences are not uniform. Outcomes vary significantly depending on context, sector, and institutional support systems (Mari et al., 2024). This reinforces the importance of examining entrepreneurship through a contextual and intersectional lens. This emphasis on contextual and intersectional analysis points directly to the importance of examining women's entrepreneurship within specific regional settings. The broader patterns identified in the literature such as, financial constraints, restricted networks, uneven institutional support, and gendered social expectations, take distinctive forms when situated within particular cultural and structural environments. South Asia represents one such context, where the intersection of family systems, social norms, and resource constraints shapes women's entrepreneurial experiences in ways that general accounts of women's entrepreneurship

do not fully capture, and where the relationship between DEI and entrepreneurial practice remains underexplored (Bullough et al., 2021; Mari et al., 2024; Peiris, 2024).

2.4 South Asian Women Entrepreneurship and DEI Contexts

South Asia presents a distinctive environment for studying women's entrepreneurship and DEI. Cultural norms, family systems, and institutional structures strongly shape women's participation in economic activity (Swierczek & Quang, 2004). In many cases, entrepreneurship is not only an economic activity but also a socially embedded practice influenced by family expectations and community obligations. As a result, entrepreneurial decisions by South Asian women are rarely shaped by market logic alone, but are closely linked to household roles and wider social responsibilities (Bullough et al., 2021). Within this context, women often navigate constraints related to credit access, mobility, and gendered expectations that prioritise domestic responsibilities over economic participation (Pal & Gupta, 2022). These conditions affect not only the scale of ventures but also the types of businesses women are able to establish and sustain, particularly outside urban or well-resourced settings. However, South Asian settings also provide alternative forms of support through family and community networks, which partially compensate for limited access to formal institutions and enable business continuity (Kaur & Trifan, 2025; Corrêa et al., 2021).

The entrepreneurial experiences of women in South Asia are further shaped by intersecting identities and social positions. Research highlights that factors such as education, ethnicity, and geography significantly influence access to resources and entrepreneurial outcomes (Peiris, 2024). This reinforces the need for an intersectional lens, as women's entrepreneurial pathways vary significantly across socio-economic contexts (Muhammad Ashraf Fauzi et al., 2023; Mari et al., 2024).

In Sri Lanka, this dynamic is particularly visible in SME sectors where women contribute meaningfully to local economic development while operating within structural limitations (Peiris et al., 2023). Studies show that access to finance and institutional support remains uneven, particularly for small-scale enterprises outside formal financial systems (Jayawardane, 2016; Arandara & Gunasekera, 2020). While financial inclusion initiatives have improved access in some areas, gaps remain in credit availability, market reach, and institutional visibility for women-

led ventures. These constraints are reflected in persistent challenges related to scaling, legitimacy, and market recognition among Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs (Nimeshi G. & Rodrigo, 2024; Peiris et al., 2023). At the same time, entrepreneurship continues to expand through informal mechanisms such as microfinance participation and network-based business development, which provide partial pathways around structural barriers (Bernard et al., 2016; Panda, 2018).

Within this landscape, DEI is experienced less as a formal organisational framework and more as a lived negotiation of access, recognition, and legitimacy within everyday entrepreneurial practice (Kipnis et al., 2021; Licsandru & Cui, 2018; Bullough et al., 2021). Although policy initiatives across South Asia frequently promote gender equality and entrepreneurial development, their implementation is often inconsistent, resulting in a persistent gap between formal policy commitments and everyday lived realities (Kabeer, 1999; Agarwal, 1994).

Evidence from South Asian contexts suggests that SMEs frequently function through hybrid arrangements in which formal institutions and informal networks coexist (Swierczek & Quang, 2004; Bhandari & Titzmann, 2017). Reflecting the socially embedded nature of entrepreneurship, marketing practices often extend beyond commercial objectives to build trust, reinforce legitimacy, and sustain long-term community relationships (Sahu & Panda, 2024; Solé, 2013). Digital platforms and informal communication channels have expanded the visibility of women-led enterprises (Franzke et al., 2022), yet uneven access to technology and financial resources continues to limit their ability to scale beyond local markets (Bist et al., 2022). These dynamics align with broader entrepreneurial marketing perspectives that emphasise adaptability, resource constraints, and relational exchange as central to firm survival in uncertain environments (Navarro et al., 2022; Sulaiman et al., 2024).

This interpretation is consistent with transformative marketing, which shifts attention away from firm-centred performance towards context-sensitive value creation and stakeholder engagement (Kumar, 2018; Lim, 2023). Consequently, marketing becomes a relational practice centred on trust and legitimacy, although the implementation of transformative marketing ideals remains uneven in resource-constrained environments with limited DEI structures (Ruyter et al., 2021; Varadarajan, 2018). Therefore, understanding women's entrepreneurship in South Asia requires

approaches that account for how agency, meaning, and legitimacy are constructed within structurally constrained but socially active environments (Mari et al., 2024; Peiris, 2024).

Despite these constraints, South Asian women demonstrate significant adaptive capacity in their entrepreneurial practices. Many rely on effectuation and bricolage logics, mobilising available resources creatively and building ventures through incremental growth and relational networks (Manzi-Puertas et al., 2025; Wood & Fisher, 2022). These practices reflect forms of informal strategy-making that are responsive to uncertainty and resource scarcity rather than formal planning models. Such practices also resonate with transformative marketing principles, particularly its emphasis on collaboration, responsiveness to environmental conditions, and shared value creation (Kumar, 2018; Lim et al., 2022). Although many women entrepreneurs do not explicitly engage with formal DEI frameworks, their activities often reflect DEI logics embedded in everyday business practice (Ahmad et al., 2020; Sahu & Panda, 2024; Corrêa et al., 2021; Bullough et al., 2021).

Overall, while the literature offers substantial insight into entrepreneurship, DEI, and transformative marketing, these streams remain largely fragmented in relation to South Asian women entrepreneurs. This is particularly evident in Sri Lanka, where women play a significant yet under-recognised role in SME development within structurally constrained environments (Jayawardane, 2016; Peiris et al., 2023).

While this chapter outlined how women's entrepreneurship in South Asia is shaped by structural constraints, adaptive practices, and situated understandings of DEI within marketing and business activity, there is a need to examine how these dynamics operate in a specific empirical setting. The next chapter sets out the research design, methodological choices, and analytical procedures used to study women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka, with particular attention to how entrepreneurship is experienced as a socially embedded and context-dependent practice.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study is grounded in an interpretive research paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through the meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences of individuals rather than existing as an objective or fixed reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). From this perspective, knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participants, and understanding emerges through interpretation rather than measurement or prediction (Schwandt, 1994). The interpretive paradigm is therefore appropriate for examining how South Asian women entrepreneurs understand and engage with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within their everyday entrepreneurial and marketing practices.

Consistent with this paradigm, a qualitative research design is adopted. Qualitative inquiry is concerned with understanding how people make sense of their lived experiences and the social world in which they operate, with emphasis placed on meaning, context, and process rather than frequency or causality (Miles et al., 2014; Tisdell et al., 2025). It is particularly suited to exploratory research questions where rich, descriptive data are required to understand how individuals interpret and navigate their environments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) further describe qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the researcher within the world under study, requiring reflexivity and sensitivity to context throughout the research process. In line with this, the present study prioritises depth of understanding over breadth, allowing participants' voices and interpretations to inform the analysis of entrepreneurial experience. This approach enables a nuanced exploration of how meaning, agency, and legitimacy are constructed within structurally constrained but socially embedded entrepreneurial settings.

3.2 Research Context

Sri Lanka provides an ideal South Asian context to examine these questions (see 1.3). According to Arandara and Gunasekera (2020), Sri Lankan women seem to contribute heavily to economic growth, but they are at a disadvantage according to social indicators, which is understudied. Women constitute a significant share of micro and small business owners, while a smaller but growing number of women have also established medium and large-scale enterprises, particularly in urban and export-oriented industries such as apparel, tourism, ICT, and education services (Nimeshi G. & Rodrigo M., 2024). These women often have higher levels of education, access to networks, and international market exposure compared to micro-level entrepreneurs, yet they continue to face gendered barriers in financing, leadership recognition, and business scaling. However, they remain underrepresented among medium and large enterprises and continue to face systemic constraints, including limited access to credit, restricted mobility, and cultural expectations that reinforce traditional gender roles (Jayawardane, 2016).

Sri Lanka has experienced significant advancements in entrepreneurship, particularly within the micro and small enterprise (MSE) sector, over the past two decades (Wijewardena & Rammal, 2025; Jayawardane, 2016). A substantial proportion of this segment consists of women, who predominantly operate home-based or small-scale enterprises across various industries, including services, textiles, handicrafts, agriculture, and, increasingly, the digital sector (Shashithanganee et al., 2018; Jayawardane, 2016). Despite these advancements, women remain grossly underrepresented in medium to large enterprises, highlighting the ongoing disparity in entrepreneurial advancement and scale between genders (Bernard et al., 2016). This disparity can be attributed to several structural factors, including inadequate access to resources, mobility constraints, discriminatory property rights, and pervasive gendered social norms that prioritize domestic duties over entrepreneurial aspirations (Peiris et al., 2023).

The entrepreneurial ecosystem in Sri Lanka is characterized by regional heterogeneity and multi-ethnic dimensions. Women from Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim communities encounter distinct opportunities and challenges contingent upon their geographic location, community networks, and access to institutional resources (Jayawardane, 2016). For instance, women entrepreneurs in the conflict-affected North and East regions who are predominantly Tamil and Muslim often rely

significantly on community-level support networks, informal financing mechanisms, and social enterprise frameworks to sustain their business endeavors (Ratnayake et al., 2024). Conversely, urban Sinhalese women, particularly in cities such as Colombo and Kandy, may have better access to microfinance institutions, digital platforms, and market opportunities; however, they frequently face societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles (Peiris et al., 2023).

Moreover, Sri Lanka's increasing engagement in digital entrepreneurship and integration into international value chains has imposed new demands for socially responsible and inclusive business practices (Chanaka Wijewardena & Rammal, 2025). The next generation of women entrepreneurs, particularly those involved in e-commerce, education, and creative industries, are becoming increasingly attuned to global DEI narratives and transformative marketing principles that emphasize authenticity, transparency, and stakeholder well-being (Onalaja & Otokiti, 2022).

3.3 Sampling Strategy

A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Initial participants were identified through professional networks, including women entrepreneur associations such as the Women's Chamber of Industry and Commerce of Sri Lanka and entrepreneurship development programmes linked to national institutions. These connections were partly developed during my prior work as a research assistant in Sri Lanka, which facilitated access to relevant gatekeepers and contact persons within these organisations. Due to the nature of the context, email communication was not an effective channel, as many potential participants did not regularly use email. Instead, initial contact was primarily made via telephone through available contacts. In some cases, where direct contact details were unavailable or outdated, intermediaries such as family members were used to pass on study information and request permission to establish contact.

First, contacts were made with 12 women entrepreneurs. However, receiving further details about the study and the requirement for online interviews, several declined to participate, mainly due to limited digital access, lack of familiarity with online platforms, or concerns about privacy and data use. Ultimately, five participants were successfully recruited through direct contact.

After the initial recruitment phase, snowball sampling was used to expand the participant pool. Each participant was asked to recommend other women entrepreneurs who met the study criteria.

In the second stage, first recruited participants led to the recruitment of another four participants. From this group, snowball referrals generated a further four participants in the third stage. This sequential referral process resulted in a total sample of 13 women entrepreneurs. Eleven interviews were conducted online and two participants were interviewed in person when they were visiting New Zealand for a short period. In one of these cases, an initial participant introduced another eligible entrepreneur during her visit, which enabled an additional face-to-face interview to be arranged.

Snowball sampling was considered appropriate in this context due to the informal nature of women-led entrepreneurial activity in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka many small and medium businesses are not systematically recorded in formal databases. In such settings, access through institutional lists alone is often limited, and trust-based referrals become essential for reaching eligible participants. Snowball sampling is particularly useful when studying hard-to-reach populations and when formal sampling frames are incomplete or unavailable (Obilor, 2023). It also helps establish credibility and participant trust, as referrals are often mediated through existing social and professional relationships (Noy, 2008).

An effort was made to maximise variation in the sample. Participants were drawn from different industries, business sizes, and geographic regions to ensure diversity of experience. This approach strengthened the study by enabling comparison across different entrepreneurial contexts rather than focusing on a single sector or demographic group.

In total, 13 women entrepreneurs participated in the study, please see table 1 for an overview of each participant.

Table 1: Summary of the participants

Participant	Type of business	Key features of the business	Background of the owner
P1	Retail shop owner (combined)	Home-attached retail shop with a separate bookshop area, photocopying, scanning and mobile services. About five employees. Operates long hours (6 a.m.to10 p.m.).	Took over the family business started by her father. From a business family. Learned management after taking over.
P2	Boutique hotel owner	Small boutique hotel supplying accommodation mainly for tourists. Focus on personalised service and local hospitality.	Started the business independently. No strong family business background mentioned. Motivated by personal ambition and opportunity in tourism.
P3	Grocery shop owner	Small neighbourhood grocery and FMCG shop. Two male workers and one female staff member for accounts.	Started with a personal bank loan and strong family support. Husband and brother actively support operations.
P4	Online flower shop owner	Fully online flower selling business. Supplies sourced from several flower farms. Marketing mainly through Facebook and Instagram. Started with very low capital.	Previously worked in agriculture, dairy and flower farms. Started in 2024. Motivation was to use her own skills and fund future studies and migration plans.
P5	Airbnb / small motel business	Beach-side home converted into a small accommodation facility. Eight employees. Strong reliance on online platforms and three-wheeler driver networks.	Former garment factory worker. Lost job during COVID. Used EPF (Employees' Provident Fund) savings to start. No business background.
P6	Home-based snack producer	Produces snacks from home mainly on order basis. Supplies for events and small retailers. Flexible and seasonal production.	Started to support family income. Family responsibilities strongly influence work schedule.
P7	Home-based floor mat and table mat business owner	Produces handmade mats at home. Works mainly on bulk and festival orders. Small-scale operation.	Started as an income-generating activity for family support. No formal business background.

P8	Traditional jewelry maker (fourth generation)	Hand-crafted traditional jewelry business. Heritage and cultural designs. Multi-generation brand identity.	Comes from a fourth-generation jewellery-making family. Strong family transmission of skills and reputation.
P9	Childcare center owner	Own preschool with hired teachers and helpers. Focus on early childhood education and care.	Education professional who later became an entrepreneur. Motivated by social contribution and stable income.
P10	Small-scale manufacturer (Soap and craft)	Home-based soap, scented candles, greeting cards and souvenirs. Seasonal and bulk-order driven. Two employees (one male, one female).	Started after finishing school. Restarted after COVID disruption. Motivation mainly to support family financially.
P11	Tea factory and estate owner	Family-owned tea factory and estates. Supplies to dealers, retailers and boutique hotels. Uses branding, awards and international dealer networks.	Comes from a long-standing tea-estate family. Took ownership last year and restructured the business.
P12	Textile and garment shop owner	Two outlets (Kandy and Kurunegala). Produces and sells sarees, frocks, jackets and custom garments. Employs around 10 - 12 staff per outlet.	Former tailor and workshop owner. Developed a hand disability and depression. Restarted business in 2022 with strong family support. No family business background.
P13	Small-scale poultry farm supervisor (university-attached farm)	Poultry unit within a university farm. Manages daily operations, labour coordination and supplier handling. Mainly operational rather than commercial marketing.	Agriculture graduate. One year in the supervisory role. Works in a long-established (about 30-year-old) institutional farm environment.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility while maintaining focus on key research themes. An interview guide (Appendix 4) was developed based on the literature on DEI, transformative marketing, and women's entrepreneurship.

Interviews were conducted both online and in person. Two in-person interviews were conducted in Auckland with Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs who were visiting New Zealand for a short

period. The remaining 11 interviews were conducted through online platforms, enabling access to participants based in Sri Lanka. Online interviewing became widely adopted during and after the COVID-19 period as researchers adapted to fieldwork constraints, and it is now recognised as a viable approach for generating qualitative insights when carefully designed and ethically managed. It offers practical advantages in terms of accessibility, flexibility, and reduced logistical burden for both researchers and participants (Dodds & Hess, 2020).

Each interview lasted approximately 35-45 minutes. With informed consent (Appendix 2), all interviews were audio-recorded. Notes were taken during and immediately after each interview to capture contextual observations, tone, and non-verbal cues. This helped strengthen the depth of interpretation during analysis. All recordings were transcribed verbatim. Where interviews were conducted in Sinhala, they were translated into English for consistency. Care was taken to preserve meaning during translation, following established cross-cultural qualitative translation practices (Clark et al., 2017). All transcripts were anonymised to protect participant identity.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis followed an iterative and abductive process that moved between empirical observations, emerging patterns, and existing theoretical concepts relating to entrepreneurship, DEI, and transformative marketing (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Abductive reasoning involves moving back and forth between data and theory in order to develop the most plausible explanations for observed patterns, rather than relying only on either data-driven induction or theory-testing deduction (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). This approach was appropriate because DEI in entrepreneurship is a complex and context-dependent phenomenon that could not be fully captured through predefined categories alone, requiring continuous refinement of concepts as analysis progressed.

A structured coding framework was developed through several stages of analysis. At the initial stage, repeated reading of interview transcripts was undertaken to become familiar with participants' narratives and to identify meaningful units of text related to entrepreneurial experience, constraints, and interpretations of DEI. Open coding was then conducted line-by-line,

with codes staying close to participants' own language. For example, statements such as "I didn't have much money to start with" and "family support is not always stable" were initially coded as *Financial constraints* and *family support*, ensuring minimal interpretation at this stage.

Consistent with approaches that emphasize transparency and rigor in qualitative research (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), analysis then moved from descriptive coding towards abstraction. Table 2 (Appendix 1) presents these first-order codes, which captured direct empirical meanings such as "financial constraint," "balancing family and business," and "knowledge of DEI terms."

In the second stage, shown in Table 3 (Appendix 1), first-order codes were compared constantly across interviews to identify similarities and differences. Codes such as "financial constraint," "limited capital," and "cash flow challenges" were grouped under broader conceptual categories such as *financial and operational pressures*. At this stage, the analysis moved from "what is being said" to "what patterns are emerging across cases."

Table 4 (Appendix 1) presents the third-order coding stage, where second-order categories were further synthesised into analytical clusters. For instance, negotiating *social roles*, *gender-based constraints*, *socio-cultural barriers*, *work family tension* were integrated into the broader theme of *gendered and socio-cultural constraints*. This stage focused on identifying relationships between categories and developing more abstract explanations of how structural and social conditions shape entrepreneurial practice.

Table 5 presents the final interpretive themes, with the clustered categories revisited in relation to the research questions and theoretical framing. This involved abductive movement back to the literature on entrepreneurship, DEI, and transformative marketing to refine interpretations and ensure theoretical coherence. For example, categories related to "work-family tension" and "balancing family and business" were revisited alongside the gender and entrepreneurship literature, leading to the interpretation that these were not simply personal scheduling challenges but reflected structurally embedded role expectations that shape how entrepreneurial agency is practiced within household and community systems.

Table 5: Final Thematic Structure (Interpretive Themes Developed from Third-Order Categories)

Final interpretive themes	Third-order categories
Theme 1: Navigating Tension in Entrepreneurial Practice	Entrepreneurial agency and adaptive survival; Structural and operational challenges
Theme 2: Gender and Social Barriers	Gendered and socio-cultural constraints
Theme 3: Understanding DEI	Understanding and interpretation of DEI Future orientation and growth
Theme 4: Everyday DEI Practice	Everyday DEI practices
Theme 5: DEI in Marketing Practices	Marketing and visibility practices Entrepreneurial pathways and personal background

Finally, Table 6 (See Appendix 1) presents codes and theme generation (Analytical Roadmap). This is designed as a single “map-style” table showing how the data moved from raw codes through to final themes. I addressed intercoder reliability by completing the majority of the coding independently to demonstrate my capacity for autonomous analysis at the master’s level. To ensure consistency and rigor, my supervisors reviewed and discussed my coding decisions during supervision meetings, providing feedback and helping to validate interpretations while maintaining my independence in the research process.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee prior to data collection. The study involved minimal risk, however, ethical issues were identified in relation to participant recruitment, data collection, and cross-cultural interpretation of qualitative data. These were addressed in line with standard research ethics principles.

A key ethical consideration was identified in related to informed consent and voluntary participation. Given that participants were recruited through professional networks through

snowballing, there was a risk that individuals might feel implicit pressure to participate. This was mitigated by clearly communicating that participation was entirely voluntary, that non-participation would have no consequences, and that participants could withdraw at any stage prior to analysis without explanation. In addition, an information sheet (Appendix 3) outlining the purpose of the study, research procedures, and data usage was provided to all participants prior to the interviews. A consent form (Appendix 2) was also supplied and signed before the commencement of each interview. This ensured that participants were fully informed about the nature of the study and agreed to participate on that basis. The provision of these documents helped reinforce informed decision-making and strengthened the transparency of the research process.

Another important issue was confidentiality in small and interconnected entrepreneurial communities. Even without using real names, participants could potentially be identifiable due to their business roles, industries, or geographic locations. To address this, all identifying information was removed or generalised during transcription, and pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. Care was taken in reporting findings to avoid indirect identification through contextual details.

A further ethical issue concerned the discussion of potentially sensitive experiences, including gender-related barriers, financial constraints, and family responsibilities. Although the study did not focus on personal lives, such topics could still evoke discomfort or emotional reflection. This was managed by adopting a participant-led interview approach, where individuals could skip questions or stop the interview at any point. Interviews were conducted in a respectful and non-judgemental manner, ensuring participants maintained control over what they chose to disclose.

A cross-cultural ethical consideration related to language and translation accuracy. Some interviews were conducted in Sinhala and later translated into English for analysis. This introduced the risk of meaning loss or interpretation bias. To mitigate this, transcripts were carefully translated with attention to cultural meaning, and contextual interpretations were retained where direct linguistic equivalence was not possible.

Finally, data security and storage were treated as a key ethical requirement. All audio recordings, transcripts, and consent forms were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the

researcher. Recordings were deleted after transcription verification, in line with university data management requirements.

Overall, the study ensured that ethical principles of autonomy and confidentiality were upheld throughout the research process, while also being sensitive to the cultural and social context in which participants operate.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of interviews conducted with Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs operating across different business sectors. The analysis identified five main themes that capture how participants experience, interpret, and manage their business practices in everyday contexts. A summary of the participants' demographic and business characteristics is provided in Table 1 in Chapter 3. This table presents key information including the type of business, key features of the business as well as the background of the owner. The five themes are: (1) Navigating Tension in Entrepreneurial Practice, (2) Gender and Social Barriers, (3) Understanding Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), (4) Everyday DEI Practices, and (5) Interpreting DEI in Marketing Practices. Each theme is supported by subthemes, detailed observations, and direct quotations from participants. The five themes reported below were developed through thematic analysis of the interview data following the coding and theme refinement process outlined in the methodology chapter (see Table 2 in Appendix 1).

The first theme looks broadly at the key tensions that women experience in their business practice, including financial, operational, and everyday challenges. The second theme then considers the gender and social barriers that shape these experiences, showing how women navigate expectations within family, community, and business settings. The third theme moves towards how participants understand and interpret diversity, equity, and inclusion, drawing on their own experiences and perspectives rather than formal knowledge. The fourth theme then explores how these ideas are reflected in everyday business practices, particularly through informal and relationship-based approaches to managing people and work. Finally, the fifth theme extends this understanding to marketing, showing how women interpret and apply diversity and inclusion in their customer engagement, while also navigating the tensions that arise in trying to reach and represent diverse groups.

The findings are presented to show how patterns emerged across participants. This approach captures both shared experiences and individual differences, while demonstrating how women actively respond to the conditions in which they operate.

Theme 1: Navigating Tension in Entrepreneurial Practice

This theme captures how women entrepreneurs experience and manage ongoing tension in their business practices. Across the interviews, participants described uncertainty, responsibility, and changing conditions that shaped their entrepreneurial journeys. These tensions appeared at different stages, beginning from entry into business and continuing through learning and daily operations. At the same time, participants actively responded to these conditions, showing how they navigated and managed these tensions in practice

Within this theme, four sub-themes are identified: business entry, learning through experience, business adjustments, and personal resilience. These sub-themes show how tensions emerge, develop, and are continuously managed through the actions and decisions of the participants.

1.1 Business Entry

The tension within entrepreneurial practice becomes visible from the point at which women enter into business. Participants described different pathways into entrepreneurship, showing that entry is shaped by both necessity and personal motivation. What connects these experiences is not a single reason for entry, but the presence of a situation that required action.

For some participants, entry into business followed a sudden disruption. A boutique hotel owner described how losing her job during the COVID period created uncertainty about her future and forced her to reconsider her dependence on employment. Rather than remaining in that position, she moved towards self-employment as a way to regain control over her situation:

“After I lost my job during the COVID period, I realised that I could not depend on employment anymore, so I decided to start something on my own to support my family.” (P2)

A similar sense of adjustment can be seen in the experience of a home based mat maker, although her situation was shaped by family responsibilities rather than job loss. In her case, the need to care for her parents limited her ability to continue formal employment, which led her to identify business as a practical alternative that could fit within her circumstances:

“I had to give up my job because my parents became ill, and I needed to stay at home to take care of them, so starting a small business from home became the only practical option.” (P7)

While both participants reflect different life situations, they show a common pattern where entrepreneurship emerges as a response to changing personal conditions. This sense of

responsibility continues in the case of a soap and craft business owner who linked her decision directly to the need to contribute financially to her household. Her emphasis was not only on income generation but also on independence:

“My main motivation for starting the business was to support my family and to have my own income instead of depending on others.” (P10)

In contrast, for some participants, entry into entrepreneurship was also connected to rebuilding and moving forward after a difficult period. A garment business owner described how starting her business became part of a personal recovery process, allowing her to regain confidence and re-establish a sense of purpose:

“After my illness I felt that I had lost many opportunities, so starting this business helped me rebuild my life and regain confidence.” (P12)

Alongside these experiences, there were also participants who entered entrepreneurship through prior exposure and interest. A grocery shop owner explained that her decision was influenced by both family needs and her own familiarity with business activities:

“My family needed another source of income, and since I already had some experience with small trading activities, I decided to open my own shop.” (P3)

These participants show that business entry is shaped by a tension between external circumstances and personal intention. Some women were drawn into entrepreneurship by necessity, while others moved towards it through experience and interest. However, in all cases, participants made active decisions to establish their businesses. It shows that entrepreneurship begins within conditions that require women to respond, adapt, and take initiative.

1.2 Learning Through Experience

Following entry into business, participants described the process of learning how to manage their operations. At this stage, a different form of tension becomes visible, particularly between limited formal training and the practical demands of running a business.

A retail shop owner reflected on how her understanding of business developed through everyday interactions rather than formal education. Over time, she became familiar with customer behaviour and supplier relationships through direct experience:

“Running the shop every day helped me understand how customers behave and how to deal with suppliers, and that practical experience taught me more than any training programme.” (P1)

This process of gradual learning is also evident in the case of an online flower shop owner who described how she relied on observation and experimentation to improve her business practices. Instead of structured training, her knowledge developed step by step through trying different approaches:

“I did not receive formal business training, but by observing other businesses and trying different things in my own shop, I gradually learned how to manage it better.” (P4)

Building on this, a homemade snack producer highlighted how learning was closely linked to making mistakes and adjusting over time. She shows that knowledge was not immediate but developed through repeated engagement with everyday challenges:

“When you run a business every day you learn from your own mistakes and experiences, and that teaches you how to manage problems and make better decisions.” (P6)

Across these participants, learning emerges as an ongoing process rather than a fixed stage. The tension here lies in the need to make decisions without having formal training or complete knowledge. Participants responded to this by relying on experience, observation, and reflection, gradually building their confidence and capability.

This subtheme connects closely with business entry. Once participants entered entrepreneurship, they were required to quickly develop the skills needed to sustain their businesses. Their ability to do so shows how they actively navigated this tension, turning uncertainty into practical knowledge through everyday experience.

1.3 Business Adjustments

As participants gained experience in managing their businesses, another form of tension became increasingly visible. While learning allowed them to build confidence, it did not remove uncertainty from their business environments. Instead, participants described the need to

continuously adjust their operations in response to changing conditions. This highlights a tension between instability in the external environment and the need to maintain consistency within the business.

A retail shop owner, who earlier described learning through daily practice, went on to explain how this learning is applied in real time. She noted that customer preferences are not fixed, and this requires ongoing changes in pricing and product offerings:

“Sometimes we have to change our prices or introduce new products depending on what customers are buying at that time.” (P1)

This sense of fluctuation is further reflected in the experience of a boutique hotel owner, whose business is directly affected by seasonal demand. She described how periods of high activity are followed by quieter months, requiring her to actively adjust services and promotions to maintain the business:

“During the tourist season, the motel is very busy, but during other months it is quiet, so we adjust our services and promotions according to the season.” (P2)

In a different context, a homemade snack producer highlighted how demand affects production decisions. Her case shows that even small scale operations require careful adjustment to avoid loss:

“When the demand for snacks increases I produce more, but when demand is low I reduce production so that I do not waste ingredients.” (P6)

While these examples relate to market conditions, other participants pointed to operational challenges within the workplace. A home based mat maker who earlier entered business due to family responsibilities, described how labour availability can disrupt her plans. In such situations, she is required to reorganise her schedules to meet commitments:

“Sometimes male workers do not come to work, and when that happens I have to adjust the delivery schedules because I cannot send orders to shops on time.” (P7)

Similarly, a small scale manufacturer drew attention to the dynamic nature of costs of raw materials, which directly affects pricing decisions and overall sustainability:

“The prices of raw materials go up and down frequently, so I have to adjust my product prices in order to keep the business running.” (P10)

Across these participants, business adjustment emerges as a continuous process. The tension lies in the fact that participants operate in environments that they cannot fully control. However, instead of remaining constrained by these conditions, they actively respond through ongoing decision-making.

1.4 Personal Resilience

While adjustments help participants manage external and operational challenges, the findings also show that sustaining a business requires continued personal commitment. At this stage, the tension becomes more internal, reflecting the emotional and personal demands of entrepreneurship alongside economic responsibility.

A grocery shop owner, who initially entered business due to both family need and prior experience, described how this sense of responsibility continues even when the business becomes difficult. She highlights the importance of persistence in maintaining the business over time:

“Even when the business becomes difficult, I continue because I feel responsible for supporting my family.” (P3)

This sense of obligation is mentioned by a homemade snack producer, who linked her persistence directly to her role as a provider. Despite the challenges she faces, her decision to continue is shaped by the dependence of her children on her income:

“There are many challenges in running a business, but I continue because my children depend on this income.” (P6)

The emotional dimension of this experience becomes more visible in the case of the home based mat maker, who acknowledged moments of doubt and the difficulty of continuing under pressure. However, she also described how she consciously reminds herself of her purpose in order to move forward:

“There were many times when I felt like giving up, but I reminded myself why I started the business and that helped me continue.” (P7)

A childcare centre owner further illustrates how this tension operates in more complex business settings. Managing multiple centres involves significant responsibility and ongoing challenges, yet her commitment is sustained by a belief in the value of the service she provides:

“Managing several childcare centres brings a lot of tension, but I stay committed because I believe the service we provide is important.” (P9)

These participants show that resilience is not simply an individual trait but a response shaped by responsibility, purpose, and commitment. The tension here lies between emotional strain and the need to continue sustaining the business. Participants do not deny the difficulties they face, but they remain engaged despite them.

Overall, these findings show that tension is not limited to a single stage of the entrepreneurial journey but runs throughout how participants enter, manage, and sustain their businesses. From the point of entry to the ongoing demands of running a business, women continually respond to changing conditions while maintaining responsibility for their work and families. In this way, navigating tension becomes a central part of everyday entrepreneurial practice rather than a separate or occasional challenge.

Theme 2: Gender and Social Barriers

This theme shows that the tensions faced by women entrepreneurs are not limited to financial or operational issues, but are deeply connected to social expectations about gender. Across the interviews, participants described how their roles as business owners are shaped, and at times constrained, by expectations within the family, the marketplace, and wider society.

What is important here is that these tensions are not isolated incidents. They are repeated patterns that influence how women make decisions, organise their time, and establish authority. The theme is developed through four sub-themes: family roles, male-dominated networks, gender expectations, and emotional tension. Together, they show how women continuously negotiate their position as both business owners and socially expected caregivers.

2.1 Family Roles

The tension between business responsibilities and family expectations appears early in participants' business journey and continues throughout their entrepreneurial journeys. Even when women take on leadership roles, domestic responsibilities remain closely attached to them.

A retail shop owner described how this tension is built into her daily routine. She explained that the time when her business requires the most attention directly overlaps with what is expected of her at home:

“Evenings are the busiest time in the shop, but that is also when my family expects me to be at home, so it becomes difficult to manage both sides properly.” (P1)

Her experience shows that the issue is not simply about being busy, but about being expected in two places at the same time. This creates a constant need to divide attention, often without reducing responsibility in either role.

A homemade snack producer extended this point by describing how caregiving responsibilities add another layer to this tension. She noted that both roles demand full commitment, leaving little room for flexibility:

“Running the business while taking care of my children is challenging because both responsibilities require my full attention, and I cannot ignore either one.” (P6)

This highlights how the tension is not temporary but continuous, as both business and family require ongoing involvement. The situation becomes more complex in larger operations. A childcare centre owner reflected on how her dedication to the business is sometimes questioned within her own family:

“My family sometimes feels that I spend too much time managing the centres instead of focusing on personal life, even though the business also supports the family.” (P9)

Her case shows that even when the business contributes to the household, her role in it is not always fully recognized. Similarly, a poultry farm owner explained that traditional expectations remain unchanged despite her leadership position:

“Even though I manage the farm and make most of the decisions, people still expect me to handle most of the household responsibilities as well.” (P13)

Across these cases, a consistent pattern can be seen. Women are expected to succeed in business while continuing to fulfil traditional domestic roles. Their agency lies in how they organise, adjust, and continue to manage both, even when expectations remain unequal.

2.2 Gendered Entrepreneurial Environments

Beyond the household, tension becomes visible in the way women interact with suppliers and business networks. These spaces are often shaped by long standing male dominance, which affects how women are perceived and treated.

A grocery shop owner described how her authority is sometimes indirectly questioned during negotiations. She noted that suppliers often assume that decision making should involve a man:

“Most suppliers I deal with are men, and sometimes they expect to negotiate with a male representative instead of me, even though I am the one managing the business.” (P3)

This reflects a deeper assumption about who holds authority in business settings. An online flower shop owner described how this dynamic affected her when she first started. Building connections was not only about business knowledge, but also about being accepted in a space where women were less common:

“At the beginning it was difficult to build connections with suppliers because most of them were men who were used to dealing with male business owners, so it took time for them to take me seriously.” (P4)

Her experience shows that credibility is something that had to be established over time, rather than assumed. The poultry farm owner described a similar situation, where even formal interactions reflect gendered expectations:

“Sometimes suppliers expect to talk to a male officer or the head of the unit because they assume that men are responsible for these roles, even when I am in charge.” (P13)

Across these cases, women are not excluded from networks, but their authority within them is often questioned. Their response is not withdrawal, but continued participation and negotiation, showing persistence as a key way of managing this tension. Wider social beliefs about what men and women should do also shape everyday business interactions. These expectations influence customer preferences, division of labour, and perceptions of leadership.

A childcare centre owner explained how gender expectations can influence hiring and customer trust:

“Parents usually prefer female teachers in early childhood education because they feel women are more suitable for working with young children, so that also affects how we recruit staff.” (P9)

In this case, gender expectations align with the business, but they still reinforce fixed ideas about roles. In contrast, a tea estate business owner described how similar assumptions can reduce her visibility as a business leader:

“Very often when people visit the business they ask about my husband first before asking about my role, even though I am the one managing everything.” (P11)

This shows how authority is often associated with men, regardless of the actual structure of the business. The poultry farm owner pointed to another form of role division based on physical assumptions:

“Men usually take responsibility for the heavier work in the farm because those tasks require more physical strength, and that is how work is usually organised.” (P13)

These examples show that gender expectations shape both opportunity and limitation. However, participants do not simply accept these roles. They often adjust their approach, continue their decisions, and gradually influence how others see them. This reflects a careful balance between working within expectations and slowly reshaping them.

2.3 Emotional Tension

The combined effect of these social expectations creates a strong emotional dimension to entrepreneurship. Managing business operations alongside family roles and social expectations leads to ongoing mental strain.

The retail shop owner described this clearly:

“Trying to manage the shop and family responsibilities at the same time can become stressful, especially when both need attentions at the same time.” (P1)

Her experience reflects the continuous nature of this tension. A home based mat maker highlighted how this pressure increases when the business depends entirely on one person:

“Running the business alone brings a lot of pressure because I have to manage production, deliveries and customer orders, and there is no one else to share that responsibility.” (P7)

This shows how operational demands add to existing social expectations. For the childcare centre owner, the scale of responsibility adds further complexity:

“There is always tension because managing several centres means I have to deal with staff, parents and administration, and everything depends on my decisions.” (P9)

Similarly, the poultry farm owner described how these pressures build over time:

“That pressure affects me mentally, especially during busy periods when many responsibilities come together and everything has to be managed at once.” (P13)

These women show that emotional tension is not separate from business practice. It is part of how women experience and sustain their entrepreneurial roles.

This theme shows that gender and social expectations shape how women experience entrepreneurship in ways that go beyond business operations. The tensions identified here influence how women see their roles, how they interact with others, and how they maintain authority in their businesses.

Building on this, the next theme explores how women themselves make sense of ideas such as diversity, fairness, and inclusion, and how these meanings are formed within their everyday business practice.

Theme 3: Understanding DEI

This theme explores how women entrepreneurs interpret diversity, equity, and inclusion within their everyday business experiences. Although most participants were unfamiliar with formal DEI terminology, they demonstrated practical understandings of these concepts through their interactions with customers, employees, suppliers, and communities. Rather than drawing on organisational frameworks or formal policies, participants understood DEI through lived experiences and everyday business practices. Three subthemes emerged: diversity as difference, equity as fairness, and inclusion as community orientation.

3.1 Diversity as Difference

Participants generally understood diversity as the presence of people from different backgrounds, cultures, religions, and experiences. While few used formal definitions, diversity was recognised through everyday interactions with customers, workers, and community members.

An online flower shop owner explained:

"In my business I meet customers from different cultures and backgrounds, so diversity to me means interacting with many kinds of people and understanding their needs." (P4)

Similarly, a snack producer described diversity as a normal part of business life:

"Working with people from different communities and religions is part of everyday business, so you learn how to deal with different people." (P6)

A childcare centre owner linked diversity to both employees and clients:

"Diversity means working with different kinds of people, including staff and parents from different communities, and making sure everyone feels comfortable." (P9)

A tea factory and estate owner expressed a similar view:

"For me diversity means accepting people from different cultures and backgrounds and respecting their differences when they come to the business." (P11)

These accounts show that participants viewed diversity primarily as difference among people. Diversity was understood through direct social interaction rather than through formal representation or organisational policies.

3.2 Equity as Fairness

Participants consistently associated equity with fairness. Rather than discussing structural inequalities or formal equity initiatives, they described equity as treating people fairly and providing equal opportunities.

A grocery shop owner explained:

"I believe equity means treating everyone fairly when they come to my shop, without giving special treatment based on who they are." (P3)

A traditional jewellery maker shared a similar interpretation:

"For me equity simply means being fair to everyone, whether they are workers or customers, because that is important for the business." (P8)

For some participants, fairness extended beyond treatment to opportunities. A tea factory and estate owner noted:

"Equity means giving people fair opportunities regardless of where they come from, so everyone has a chance to work and succeed." (P11)

Likewise, a poultry farm owner linked equity to workplace management:

"Equity means providing similar opportunities and treating workers fairly, so that everyone feels respected in the workplace." (P13)

These responses demonstrate that participants interpreted equity primarily through interpersonal fairness. Their understanding focused on equal treatment and access to opportunities within everyday business relationships.

3.3 Inclusion as Community Orientation

Participants often described inclusion as creating environments where people feel welcomed, respected, and able to participate. Rather than viewing inclusion through formal organisational programmes, they understood it as fostering positive relationships within their businesses and communities.

A childcare centre owner explained:

"We work with families from different backgrounds, and I try to make sure everyone feels comfortable and respected when they come here." (P9)

A boutique hotel owner similarly emphasised acceptance:

"I try to treat everyone the same and make them feel welcome because that is important for the business." (P2)

An Airbnb business owner connected inclusion to employee relationships:

"I want workers to feel that they can speak openly and be comfortable here because that creates a better environment for everyone." (P5)

A small-scale manufacturer described inclusion through support and participation:

"When people feel respected and included, they are more willing to contribute and work together." (P10)

These accounts suggest that inclusion was understood as belonging, acceptance, and participation. Participants frequently linked inclusion to maintaining harmonious relationships with customers, workers, and community members. As such, inclusion was experienced less as a formal organisational objective and more as a relational practice embedded within everyday business activities.

Building on this, the next theme examines how these interpretations are reflected in actual business practices, particularly how DEI is applied, adapted, or sometimes overlooked in routine decision making.

Theme 4: Everyday DEI Practice

This theme explores how participants translated their understandings of diversity, equity, and inclusion into everyday business practices. Although participants rarely implemented formal DEI policies, their accounts suggest that DEI principles were often embedded within routine business decisions. Rather than emerging through structured programmes, these practices appeared through hiring decisions, interpersonal support, and efforts to create welcoming environments. The theme comprises three subthemes: hiring decisions, informal support, and community inclusion.

4.1 Hiring Decisions

Participants frequently described recruitment practices that prioritised trust, capability, and personal circumstances over formal qualifications. While most did not explicitly frame these decisions as diversity or inclusion initiatives, their accounts suggest efforts to provide opportunities to individuals who might otherwise face barriers to employment.

An Airbnb business owner explained:

"When I recruit workers, I mostly look at whether they are willing to learn and work hard rather than their qualifications." (P5)

Similarly, a tea factory and estate owner noted:

"Sometimes I give opportunities to women who have difficulty finding work because everyone deserves a chance to earn an income." (P11)

A childcare center owner also emphasized suitability and commitment:

"We focus more on whether someone can work well with children rather than where they come from." (P9)

These accounts suggest that employment decisions were often guided by practical fairness and opportunity rather than formal recruitment criteria. Participants appeared to prioritise inclusion through access to employment opportunities.

4.2 Informal Support

Participants also demonstrated inclusion through various forms of informal support directed towards employees, customers, and community members. These practices often extended beyond business transactions and reflected personal commitments to helping others.

A snack producer explained:

"If one of my workers has a family problem, I try to be flexible because everyone faces difficulties sometimes." (P6)

Similarly, a motel owner stated:

"When customers are facing difficulties, I try to help where possible rather than thinking only about profit." (P2)

A small-scale manufacturer described supporting employees during personal challenges:

"Sometimes workers need financial help or flexibility, and I try to support them if I can." (P10)

These examples suggest that inclusion was often expressed through empathy, flexibility, and relational support. Participants frequently viewed business relationships as extending beyond purely economic exchanges.

4.3 Community Inclusion

Participants also described how their businesses include people from different communities and backgrounds. These practices are not usually part of formal diversity strategies, but emerge through everyday interactions and local connections.

A home based mat maker described her team composition in simple terms:

“In my small team there are both men and women working together, and we try to manage the work in a way that suits everyone.” (P7)

This shows that gender diversity is present in practice, even without being formally planned. A jewellery manufacturer provided a more direct example of inclusion by employing people with disabilities:

“I employ people with disabilities because the work can be done while sitting and they can perform the tasks comfortably without much difficulty.”(P8)

Her decision reflects a practical and thoughtful approach to inclusion, where work is adapted to fit workers’ abilities. The childcare centre owner highlighted diversity within her workforce and client base:

“My staff include people from Muslim, Tamil and Sinhalese communities, and we work together without any major issues.” (P9)

This shows how cultural and religious diversity is part of everyday business life, particularly in community based services. Similarly, the garment producer described diversity across age and background:

“My employees come from different age groups and backgrounds, and I try to treat them equally so that everyone feels comfortable working here.” (P12)

Her response reflects an emphasis on fairness and equal treatment within a diverse team.

Across these participants, inclusion is not driven by formal policies but by everyday decisions and relationships. The value of this theme lies in showing that DEI practices can exist in subtle and informal ways, shaped by context, resources, and personal values.

This theme shows that women entrepreneurs actively practice forms of diversity, equity, and inclusion, even when these are not formally defined or structured. Their approaches are practical, relational, and closely tied to their own experiences and business realities.

The next theme builds on this by examining how these practices extend into areas such as marketing and future planning, particularly how women interpret and apply DEI in promoting and developing their businesses.

Theme 5: DEI in Marketing Practices

This theme examines how participants reflected diversity, equity, and inclusion within their marketing activities. Although participants rarely adopted formal DEI marketing strategies, their accounts demonstrate attempts to engage diverse customers, represent their businesses authentically, and maintain accessible communication channels. Marketing practices were generally shaped by resource limitations and practical considerations rather than formal inclusion frameworks. Three subthemes emerged: inclusive branding and representation, informal DEI marketing, and digital and low-cost marketing approaches.

5.1 Inclusive Branding and Representation

Participants frequently emphasised presenting their businesses in ways that would appeal to a broad range of customers. Rather than using formal diversity campaigns, they focused on creating welcoming business identities.

A tea factory and estate owner explained:

"I want anyone who comes to my business to feel comfortable and respected regardless of their background." (P11)

Similarly, a childcare centre owner noted:

"We try to make sure that all families feel welcome because our services are for everyone." (P9)

A boutique hotel owner also highlighted inclusiveness in customer interactions:

"We treat all guests equally because making people feel welcome is important for the business." (P2)

These accounts suggest that representation was primarily communicated through interpersonal interactions and business culture rather than through formal branding initiatives.

5.2 Informal DEI Marketing

Participants often promoted values associated with fairness, trust, and respect through everyday marketing practices, even when they did not explicitly identify these actions as DEI-related.

An online flower shop owner explained:

"Most of my customers come through recommendations because people know that I treat customers fairly." (P4)

A small-scale manufacturer similarly stated:

"Building trust is the most important form of marketing because customers remember how they are treated." (P10)

A retail shop owner noted:

"I try to provide the same service to everyone because that helps build a good reputation." (P1)

These responses suggest that inclusive values were communicated indirectly through customer experiences and word-of-mouth promotion rather than through formal marketing campaigns.

5.3 Digital and Low-Cost Marketing

Participants largely relied on affordable marketing approaches due to financial constraints and limited access to specialised marketing expertise. Social media, customer referrals, and personal networks were commonly used promotional tools.

A snack producer explained:

"Most of my marketing happens through Facebook because it is affordable and easy to use." (P6)

Similarly, an Airbnb business owner stated:

"We mostly depend on social media and recommendations because we cannot afford expensive advertising." (P5)

A grocery shop owner noted:

"I do not have a formal marketing plan. I mainly use WhatsApp and existing customers to promote the business." (P3)

A traditional jewellery maker shared a similar experience:

"Marketing is mostly done when I have time because there is no separate budget for advertising." (P8)

These accounts suggest that marketing activities were shaped primarily by resource constraints. Consequently, DEI-related values appeared informally through customer relationships and communication practices rather than through planned marketing strategies or formal inclusion campaigns.

4.2 Conclusion

The findings show that women's entrepreneurial experiences are shaped by a set of interconnected tensions that run across different aspects of their business practices. These tensions begin at the point of entry into entrepreneurship and continue through everyday operations, social interactions, and decision making processes. Across the five themes, a clear pattern emerges. Women actively navigate financial uncertainty, social expectations, and practical challenges while also making sense of diversity, equity, and inclusion through their own experiences. Although formal knowledge of DEI is limited, participants demonstrate practical and relational understandings of fairness, inclusion, and difference in how they manage their businesses, interact with others, and engage with customers.

At the same time, the findings show variation across participants. Some women consciously reflect DEI in their practices, particularly in areas such as marketing and representation, while others engage with these ideas more informally or indirectly. This variation highlights that DEI is not applied in a uniform way, but is shaped by context, resources, and individual perspectives.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This study explored how South Asian women entrepreneurs understand Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) within their business practices and how they navigate tensions surrounding DEI in their entrepreneurial journeys. The findings reveal that women entrepreneurs in the South Asian context do not engage with DEI in the same formalized manner commonly reflected in Western marketing literature. Instead, DEI emerges as a lived, contextual, and negotiated experience shaped by cultural expectations, economic constraints, gendered realities, and survival-oriented business practices.

The transformative marketing in this context operates differently from the idealized assumptions often presented in existing literature. Rather than viewing DEI as a strategic branding tool or a framework, participants interpreted diversity, equity, and inclusion through everyday practices such as differentiation, community support, customer relationships, family obligations, community-oriented labour, and adaptive entrepreneurship. This finding extends transformative marketing literature by showing that transformative practices can exist informally, even when entrepreneurs do not explicitly adopt DEI language or institutional frameworks.

A linear relationship between the themes identified in the study. Structural and cultural tensions shape women's understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which then influence the ways they negotiate marketplace expectations and marketing practices. Finally, these negotiations affect how transformative marketing is enacted in practice. This process suggests that transformative marketing in South Asian entrepreneurial settings is not driven primarily by corporate-level strategic intentions, but by adaptive responses to social realities. Therefore, this chapter revisits the literature reviewed and compares it with the findings of this study. In doing so, it identifies how the study confirms, challenges, and extends existing literature on transformative marketing, women's entrepreneurship, and DEI within the South Asian context.

5.2 Transformative Marketing Reinterpreted

The findings suggest that transformative marketing operates differently within the experiences of South Asian women entrepreneurs than existing literature often assumes. Transformative marketing is commonly conceptualised as a deliberate strategic process through which organisations create value for multiple stakeholders while responding to societal challenges (Kumar, 2018; Lim, 2023). Implicit within this view is the assumption that firms possess the resources, institutional support, and strategic capacity needed to pursue transformative objectives. The experiences of participants challenge this assumption. Rather than engaging with formal DEI agendas or transformative marketing frameworks, participants described transformation through everyday entrepreneurial practices such as building trust with customers, maintaining ethical relationships, supporting local communities, and creating opportunities for others. These actions were rarely framed as explicit social initiatives. Instead, they emerged as practical responses to resource limitations, family responsibilities, cultural expectations, and marketplace realities.

This finding suggests that transformative outcomes may emerge through adaptation rather than intention. While existing literature often presents transformation as a planned organisational objective (Kumar, 2018; Lim, 2023), participants demonstrated how transformative practices can develop incrementally through routine business decisions. Transformation therefore appeared less as a formal strategy and more as an outcome of ongoing negotiations between entrepreneurial aspirations and contextual constraints. The findings also support Tadjewski et al.'s (2014) argument that transformative marketing should be understood within broader social systems rather than purely managerial contexts. Participants consistently linked business success to family support, community relationships, social legitimacy, and interpersonal trust. This indicates that transformative outcomes are co-produced through interactions between entrepreneurs and their social environments rather than generated solely through organizational decisions.

Importantly, the study reveals that transformative marketing may exist in informal and locally embedded forms. Unlike dominant models that emphasis structured sustainability or inclusion initiatives, participants practiced transformation through small-scale acts of ethical conduct, community support, and relational value creation. Consequently, transformative marketing is

better understood as a contextual and relational process that emerges through adaptive entrepreneurial practices, particularly within resource-constrained environments.

5.3 DEI as Lived, Contextual Practice

The findings suggest that diversity, equity, and inclusion are experienced as lived social realities rather than formal organisational frameworks. While DEI literature often presents diversity, equity, and inclusion as strategic organisational commitments reflected through policies, representation, and inclusive marketing initiatives (Kipnis et al., 2021), participants understood these concepts through their everyday experiences as women entrepreneurs navigating social, cultural, and economic constraints.

This interpretation extends existing DEI literature by demonstrating that DEI may carry different meanings outside corporate and Western institutional settings (Mazzoli et al., 2024). Rather than viewing inclusion as organisational representation or diversity as a measurable business objective, participants associated DEI with recognition, fairness, respect, belonging, and access to opportunities. In this sense, DEI was interpreted less as a managerial framework and more as a reflection of how individuals experience their position within society and the marketplace. This supports Armstrong's (2024) argument that inclusion is deeply relational and shaped by individual experiences rather than solely organisational practices. The findings also reinforce critiques of universal DEI models. Licsandru and Cui (2018) argue that dominant understandings of social inclusion do not always capture the realities of non-Western contexts. The experiences of participants support this view by illustrating how DEI is filtered through local priorities, including financial sustainability, family obligations, and entrepreneurial survival. Consequently, formal DEI frameworks were often secondary to more immediate concerns linked to everyday business realities.

Importantly, this finding challenges assumptions that DEI is universally understood and applied across contexts. Instead, the meaning and relevance of DEI appear to be shaped by the social environments in which entrepreneurs operate. Understanding DEI as a lived and contextual practice therefore shifts attention away from standardised organisational models and towards the ways individuals negotiate fairness, belonging, and opportunity within their specific cultural and entrepreneurial settings.

5.4 Navigating DEI Under Constraint

A key insight emerging from the findings is that women entrepreneurs navigate DEI within conditions of constraint. Existing literature often presents inclusive business practices as desirable and increasingly expected within contemporary markets (Kipnis et al., 2021; Trkulja et al., 2024). However, participants operated within environments characterised by limited resources, social expectations, and gendered challenges. Importantly, the findings reveal what may be described as dual-layered DEI tensions. Women entrepreneurs simultaneously navigate their own struggles for diversity recognition, equitable treatment, and social inclusion while also facing increasing expectations to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion through their businesses. Existing literature typically examines these dimensions separately. Studies on women entrepreneurs often focus on barriers and inequality, while DEI literature focuses on organisational responsibility. The findings demonstrate that these realities intersect and are embedded in everyday entrepreneurial practice.

Rather than rejecting DEI principles, participants frequently balanced competing priorities. Financial sustainability often required immediate attention, leaving limited capacity for formal diversity initiatives. Family responsibilities, cultural expectations, and restricted access to opportunities further influenced business decision-making. Consequently, participants adopted practical and selective approaches to inclusion rather than comprehensive DEI strategies. These constraints align with broader evidence of structural barriers affecting women entrepreneurs, including limited access to finance, weak networks, gender inequality, and cultural restrictions (Franzke et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020; Avnimelech & Rechter, 2023). The findings extend this literature by showing how such structural barriers not only restrict entrepreneurship generally but also shape how DEI is enacted in practice.

For many participants, achieving recognition and legitimacy as entrepreneurs remained an ongoing challenge. Prior research has highlighted similar structural constraints, including credibility barriers, mobility limitations, and restricted access to opportunities (Franzke et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2020; Avnimelech & Rechter, 2023). At the same time, broader marketplace expectations increasingly encouraged businesses to demonstrate inclusivity and social responsibility. This created tensions between personal experiences of exclusion and expectations to become agents of

inclusion. The findings therefore suggest that DEI is not simply something women entrepreneurs implement. It is also something they continually negotiate within their own lives and business environments. This supports prior work on adaptive entrepreneurship and effectuation, which shows that entrepreneurs operating under constraints rely on flexible decision-making and resource improvisation (Panda, 2018). In this study, however, adaptation extended beyond economic adjustment to include emotional and cultural negotiation. Women entrepreneurs balanced business aspirations with expectations surrounding marriage, caregiving, motherhood, and family commitments. These dynamics shaped their visibility in public business spaces and their willingness to engage in marketing activities.

Overall, the findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that entrepreneurial marketing among South Asian women is shaped not only by market conditions but also by ongoing social negotiations around DEI.

5.5 Informal Transformative Marketing Practices

Another important insight is that transformative marketing practices frequently emerged informally. Existing literature often associates transformative marketing with intentional strategies designed to enhance stakeholder well-being (Kumar, 2018; Lim, 2023). Participants, however, rarely described formal transformative objectives. Instead, transformative outcomes emerged through relationship-building, ethical treatment of customers, community engagement, and support for local stakeholders. These practices reflected values of trust, care, and mutual support rather than structured social responsibility programmes.

This finding aligns with previous entrepreneurship literature suggesting that women frequently rely on relational approaches to business development (Ahmed et al., 2020; Corrêa et al., 2021). However, the findings extend this literature by demonstrating how these relational practices can generate transformative outcomes even without formal DEI frameworks. Participants often prioritised customer welfare, community relationships, and ethical interactions because these behaviours supported both social and business objectives. As a result, transformative marketing

emerged organically through entrepreneurial practice rather than through explicit strategic intentions.

These findings challenge assumptions that transformative marketing requires formal organisational systems. Instead, they suggest that transformative outcomes may emerge through everyday entrepreneurial activities that prioritise human relationships and stakeholder well-being.

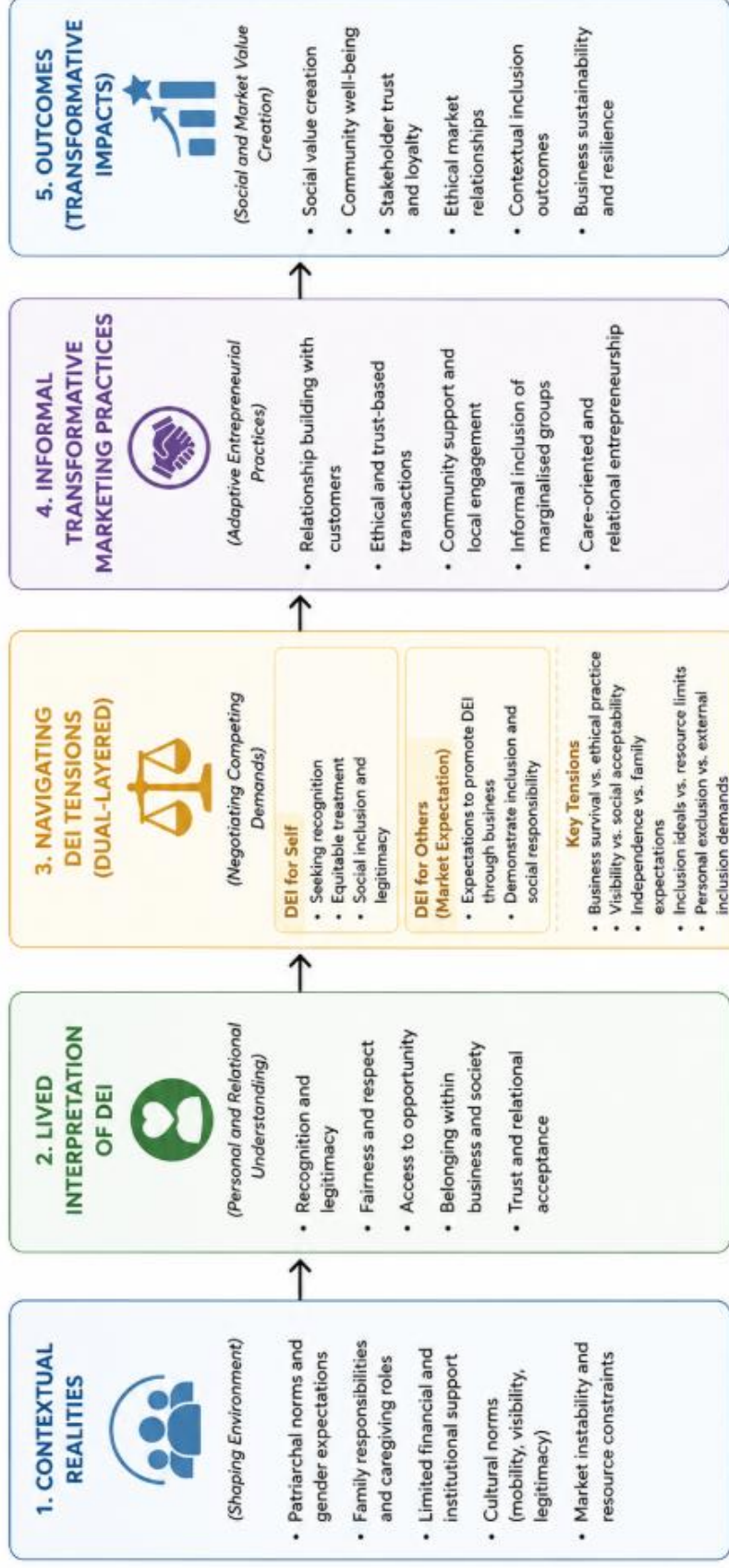
5.6 A Contextual Framework for Transformative Marketing

Based on the findings, this study proposes a contextual framework (see Figure 1) for understanding transformative marketing among South Asian women entrepreneurs. Structural and cultural realities, including patriarchy, family expectations, resource limitations, and social norms, shape how women understand diversity, equity, and inclusion. These understandings then influence how women navigate marketplace tensions and entrepreneurial decisions. Through these ongoing negotiations, informal transformative marketing practices emerge, producing outcomes that support both business sustainability and stakeholder well-being.

Unlike dominant transformative marketing models that emphasise formal organisational strategies, this framework highlights transformation as a contextual and adaptive process shaped by lived realities.

Conceptual Framework

Transformative Marketing through DEI among South Asian Women Entrepreneurs



Transformative marketing among South Asian women entrepreneurs is a contextual and adaptive process, where DEI is lived, negotiated, and enacted through informal practices to create value for both business and society.

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework

5.7 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes four contributions to existing literature.

First, it reframes DEI as a lived and relational practice. Previous research has examined DEI primarily through marketplace inclusion, representation, and organisational efforts to create equitable environments (Licsandru & Cui, 2018; Kipnis et al., 2021; Arsel et al., 2021; Armstrong, 2024). The findings show that women entrepreneurs understand DEI through everyday experiences of recognition, fairness, opportunity, and belonging. In doing so, the study highlights DEI as a lived and relational practice that is negotiated through daily entrepreneurial interactions rather than solely through formal structures and policies.

Second, the study extends transformative marketing literature by demonstrating that transformative marketing can emerge through informal entrepreneurial practices rather than solely through deliberate organisational strategies. Existing work conceptualises transformative marketing as a process through which firms respond to changing stakeholder expectations, societal challenges, and environmental conditions to create broader forms of value (Kumar, 2018; Lim, 2023). The findings suggest that such transformation may also occur through everyday entrepreneurial activities, including relationship building, community engagement, and adaptive responses to resource constraints. This extends transformative marketing theory by showing that transformative outcomes can emerge in the absence of formal strategies or institutional frameworks, particularly within small business and resource-constrained contexts.

Third, the study challenges Western-centric assumptions within DEI literature by showing that diversity, equity, and inclusion are not experienced through formal organisational systems alone in entrepreneurial contexts. Much of the existing literature assumes access to institutional support, resources, and structured inclusion mechanisms (Bullough et al., 2021; Corrêa et al., 2021). The findings instead show that in resource-constrained environments, DEI is shaped by structural inequalities, gendered expectations, and uneven access to opportunity. Existing literature on gender and resources in South Asia highlights how women's participation is shaped by broader systems of power and constraint (Agarwal, 1994; Kabeer, 1999). In Sri Lanka in particular, women entrepreneurs navigate intersecting constraints that shape how DEI is experienced in practice (Peiris, 2024).

Finally, the study introduces the concept of dual-layered DEI tensions, where women entrepreneurs both experience and are expected to enact DEI reflecting overlapping pressures of gendered expectations and institutional DEI responsibility (Bullough et al., 2021; Kipnis et al., 2021; Armstrong, 2024). This extends literature on gender role expectations in entrepreneurship (Liñán et al., 2020; Bullough et al., 2021) by showing that these expectations also shape how responsibility for DEI is assigned and enacted in business practice. In addition, it advances research on gender and constraint in South Asian entrepreneurship (Agarwal, 1994; Bhandari & Titzmann, 2017; Fillion, 2022) by showing how structural inequalities generate simultaneous expectations for women entrepreneurs to navigate and enact DEI within their entrepreneurial practice.

5.8 Managerial Implications

The findings have several implications for practitioners and policymakers.

Support programmes should recognise that women entrepreneurs often understand DEI through lived experience rather than formal definitions. For many, it is shaped by access to opportunity, treatment within networks, and recognition in business relationships. Programmes should therefore be context-sensitive and grounded in local entrepreneurial realities. This can be delivered through mentor-led sessions, peer learning, and community-based workshops within women's business associations and local enterprise centres. Business support organisations should recognise that transformative marketing often develops through informal, everyday entrepreneurial practice. Relationship-building, trust, and community engagement already play a central role in how women run and sustain their businesses. Support initiatives should build on these practices rather than replace them with formalised models alone.

Policymakers should address structural barriers that limit women's access to finance, networks, and entrepreneurial opportunities. These constraints continue to shape both business outcomes and inclusion in practice. Strengthening access to credit, improving linkage to formal networks, and expanding targeted enterprise support would help create more equitable conditions for growth.

In these contexts, entrepreneurship is strongly relational. Informal networks, family ties, and community connections remain central to business survival and growth. Strengthening and legitimising these networks within formal support systems can improve long-term entrepreneurial outcomes.

At the firm level, DEI should be understood as part of everyday business decision-making rather than a separate policy concern. Decisions around hiring, supplier relationships, and customer engagement directly shape how fairness and inclusion are experienced in practice. Making these practices more deliberate can strengthen trust and long-term market relationships.

5.9 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The research focused on a relatively small sample of women entrepreneurs within Sri Lanka. Consequently, the findings may not be representative of all women entrepreneurs across South Asia. While this allowed for in-depth insight into lived experiences, it limits the extent to which findings can be generalised to other South Asian contexts.

Further research could also explore differences across sectors and business sizes. DEI may be experienced differently in medium scaled registered businesses compared to home-based businesses, as well as in early-stage ventures versus more established firms. Also, future research could explore how digital platforms and social media shape the way women entrepreneurs communicate and enact DEI within their businesses. This may be particularly relevant as online channels become increasingly important for customer engagement and business growth.

The study relied on women entrepreneurs' accounts of their experiences and business practices. Future research could broaden the scope of inquiry by incorporating the perspectives of customers, suppliers, and employees. Such research may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how DEI is interpreted and enacted within everyday entrepreneurial settings.

Although participants frequently referred to family support and responsibilities, these issues were not examined in detail within the scope of this study. Future research could explore how family relationships shape DEI-related experiences among women entrepreneurs, particularly within

South Asian contexts where family networks often play a central role in entrepreneurial decision-making.

The study focused exclusively on women entrepreneurs. Future research could include male entrepreneurs to examine whether interpretations of DEI and experiences of transformative marketing differ across gendered entrepreneurial contexts. Such comparisons may provide a deeper understanding of which experiences are shaped by gender and which are common to entrepreneurship more broadly.

5.10 Conclusion

This chapter interpreted the findings through the lenses of transformative marketing, DEI, and women's entrepreneurship. The discussion demonstrated that women entrepreneurs understand DEI primarily through lived experiences of recognition, fairness, opportunity, and belonging rather than formal organisational frameworks. Their entrepreneurial practices reveal how transformative outcomes can emerge through adaptation, relationship-building, and community engagement despite significant structural constraints.

The findings contribute to transformative marketing scholarship by demonstrating that transformation is often contextual, negotiated, and embedded within everyday entrepreneurial realities. They further highlight the importance of recognising how women entrepreneurs simultaneously navigate personal and professional DEI challenges. Ultimately, the study emphasises the need for more contextually grounded understandings of transformative marketing and DEI within developing economies.

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Appendix 1

Table 2: First order coding

First-order codes
Creative solutions
Business survival
Idea generation
New business ideas
Managing operations
Day-to-day management
Informal management style
Survival strategies
Business continuity
Sustaining business
Incremental survival adjustments
Resource utilisation
Resource improvisation
Effectuation approach
Support from other businesses
Peer business support
Value addition
Product improvement
Service improvement
Negotiating expectations
Family expectations
Societal expectations
Domestic responsibility pressure
Challenge of being a woman
Gendered entrepreneurial experience
Men vs women comparison
Gender role differences
Cultural barriers
Societal barriers
Mobility restrictions
Visibility constraints
Balancing family
Balancing business
Work–family tension
Time management pressure
Financial constraints
Limited capital
Economic pressure
Market instability

Workforce issues
Hiring challenges
Employee turnover
Reliability of workers
Customer base dependency
Limited market reach
DEI awareness
DEI terminology knowledge
Diversity awareness
Equity awareness
Inclusion awareness
Global applicability of DEI
Local applicability of DEI
Personal interpretation of DEI
Contextual understanding of DEI
DEI relevance questioning
DEI not needed
DEI not priority
Informal DEI practice
Unstructured inclusion
DEI as barrier
External pressure of DEI
Hiring by gender
Hiring by age
Hiring by experience
Operational inclusion
Workplace inclusion
Fairness tension
Equity tension
Business start
Business evolution
Business growth
Family background
Family support
Entrepreneurial motivation
Motivation triggers
Work experience
Leadership experience
Customer engagement
Customer targeting
Social media marketing
Network marketing
Leaflet marketing
DEI in marketing
Inclusive messaging

Symbolic inclusion
Business expansion
Growth intention
Future planning
Inclusive future strategies
Accessibility planning
Long-term vision
Sustainability orientation

Table 3: Second-Order Coding (Initial Collapsing of Codes)

Second-Order Category	Collapsed First-Order Codes
Adaptive business strategies	Creative solutions; survival tactics; adaptive responses; problem-solving approaches
Adaptive business strategies	Idea generation; improvisation in business; flexible decision-making
Survival-oriented action	Business continuity; sustaining operations; maintaining income streams
Survival-oriented action	Managing uncertainty; coping with market instability
Resource mobilisation and effectuation	Resource use; bricolage; improvisation with limited capital
Resource mobilisation and effectuation	External support; informal help from networks; collaboration with other businesses
Gendered socio-cultural constraints	Gender expectations; being a woman entrepreneur; male comparison narratives
Gendered socio-cultural constraints	Cultural restrictions; social norms; community expectations
Gendered socio-cultural constraints	Gender bias in business credibility; role stereotyping
Work–family tension	Balancing family and business; caregiving responsibilities; household pressure
Work–family tension	Time constraints; role conflict between home and enterprise
Financial and operational pressures	Financial constraints; limited capital; cash flow challenges
Financial and operational pressures	Economic instability; cost pressures; pricing difficulties
Workforce management issues	Recruitment challenges; employee turnover; reliability issues
Workforce management issues	Managing small teams; informal staffing practices
Market dependency	Customer base reliance; unstable demand; limited market reach
Market dependency	Localised markets; dependence on repeat customers
DEI understanding and awareness	Knowledge of DEI terms; awareness of inclusion concepts
DEI understanding and awareness	Confusion or partial understanding of DEI
Local interpretation of DEI	Personal meaning-making of DEI; contextual interpretation
Local interpretation of DEI	Adapting global DEI ideas to local business realities
Contextual relevance of DEI	DEI relevance questioned; suitability for small businesses
Contextual relevance of DEI	DEI seen as abstract or externally driven concept
Conceptual understanding of DEI	Understanding diversity; equity awareness; inclusion awareness
Perceived scope of DEI	DEI seen as large-scale corporate concept

Informal DEI practice	Unstructured inclusion; intuitive fairness practices
Informal DEI practice	Non-formal application of DEI principles
Low perceived relevance of DEI	DEI not prioritised; operational urgency over inclusion
Low perceived relevance of DEI	DEI considered secondary or optional
DEI seen as constraint	DEI as operational burden; compliance pressure perception
Inclusive/selective hiring practices	Hiring decisions; gender/age/experience preferences
Inclusive/selective hiring practices	Workforce selection criteria; informal recruitment
Operational inclusion	Inclusion in day-to-day operations; task allocation fairness
Operational inclusion	Internal workplace participation practices
Fairness and equity tensions	Perceived unfairness; equity dilemmas in hiring or pay
Fairness and equity tensions	Balancing merit vs social expectations
Entrepreneurial pathways and backgrounds	Business formation; startup journey; growth evolution
Entrepreneurial pathways and backgrounds	Family influence; background shaping entrepreneurship
Entrepreneurial pathways and backgrounds	Prior work experience; leadership experience
Entrepreneurial motivation	Motivation for starting business; push/pull factors
Entrepreneurial motivation	Economic necessity; personal ambition
Marketing and visibility practices	Customer engagement; communication strategies
Marketing and visibility practices	Social media use; offline marketing tools
Marketing and visibility practices	Networking; branding and outreach
DEI representation in promotion	DEI messaging in branding; inclusive marketing signals
DEI representation in promotion	Symbolic representation of inclusion in advertising
Future orientation and growth	Expansion goals; scaling intentions
Future orientation and growth	Business sustainability planning; long-term vision
Future DEI aspirations	Inclusive service development; accessibility intentions
Future DEI aspirations	Planned DEI integration in future strategies
Forward-looking orientation	Strategic planning; innovation intentions

Table 4: Third-Order Coding (Thematic Clusters / Further Collapsing)

Third-order categories	Second-order categories grouped
Entrepreneurial agency and adaptive survival	Adaptive business strategies; Survival-oriented action; Resource mobilisation and effectuation
Gendered and socio-cultural constraints	Negotiating social roles; Gender-based constraints; Socio-cultural barriers; Work–family tension
Structural and operational challenges	Financial pressures; Workforce management; Market dependency
Understanding and interpretation of DEI	Awareness of DEI; Local interpretation; Low relevance; Informal practice; DEI as constraint
Everyday DEI practices	Inclusive/selective hiring; Operational inclusion; Equity tensions
Entrepreneurial pathways and personal background	Entrepreneurial pathways; Family influence; Motivation; Prior experience
Marketing and visibility practices	Marketing channels; DEI representation; Symbolic DEI visibility
Future orientation and growth	Future orientation; Future DEI aspirations

Table 5: Final Thematic Structure (Interpretive Themes Developed from Third-Order Categories)

Final interpretive themes	Third-order categories
Theme 1: Navigating Tension in Entrepreneurial Practice	Entrepreneurial agency and adaptive survival; Structural and operational challenges
Theme 2: Gender and Social Barriers	Gendered and socio-cultural constraints
Theme 3: Understanding DEI	Understanding and interpretation of DEI Future orientation and growth
Theme 4: Everyday DEI Practice	Everyday DEI practices
Theme 5: DEI in Marketing Practices	Marketing and visibility practices Entrepreneurial pathways and personal background

Table 6: Codes and Theme Generation (Analytical Roadmap)

First level	Second level	Final Collapsed code	Theme
Creative solutions for business survival	Adaptive business strategies	Opportunity-driven and necessity-driven entry into entrepreneurship	Theme 1. Navigating Tension in Entrepreneurial Practice
Idea		Creative survival and business adaptation strategies	
Managing naturally		Effectuation and use of available resources	
Survival	Survival-oriented action	Learning through experience and prior work exposure	
Sustained business		Personal motivation and resilience	Theme 2. Gender and Social Barriers
Resource utilization and effectuation	Resource mobilisation and effectuation		
Support from other businesses			
Value addition			
Negotiating societal and family expectations	Negotiating social roles	Negotiating family expectations and care responsibilities	Theme 3. Understanding DEI
Challenge being a woman	Gender-based constraints	Gendered barriers and social norms in entrepreneurship	
Men VS Women	Gendered comparison and positioning	Male-dominated networks and supplier relationships	
Cultural and societal barriers	Socio-cultural barriers	Institutional and structural arrangements shaping work (contracts, intermediaries, hierarchy)	
Balancing family and business	Work-family tension	Gendered and social pressure associated with being a woman entrepreneur	Theme 4. Everyday DEI Practices
Financial constraints	Financial pressures		
Economy	Financial and economic pressures		
Workforce	Workforce management		
Workforce issues (turnover, reliability)			Theme 5. DEI in Marketing Practices
Customer base	Market dependency	Awareness and familiarity with DEI language	
Knowledge of DEI terms	Awareness of DEI concepts	Interpretation of diversity, equity and inclusion in everyday business terms	
Interpretation in personal business context	Local interpretation of DEI	Perception of DEI as global or large-business discourse	
Global vs. local applicability	Contextual relevance of DEI	Relevance of DEI to small and survival-oriented businesses	Theme 6. DEI in Marketing Practices
Diversity	Conceptual understanding of DEI	Viewing DEI as not needed or not a priority	
Equity			
Inclusion			
Suited for large scale businesses	Perceived scope of DEI	Hiring and workforce decisions shaped by gender, age and experience	Theme 7. DEI in Marketing Practices
Practicing anyways	Informal DEI practice	Informal inclusion in daily work practices	
Not needed	Low perceived relevance of DEI	Equity challenges in pay, workload and opportunity allocation	
Not the priority		Workforce reliability and turnover issues	
DEI as a barrier	DEI seen as constraint	Inclusion of specific groups (local community, people with disabilities, known workers)	Theme 8. DEI in Marketing Practices
Hiring practices (gender, age, experience)	Inclusive / selective hiring practices	Customer targeting and engagement strategies	
Inclusion in operations	Operational inclusion	Use of low-cost and informal marketing channels	
Equity challenges	Fairness and equity tensions	Limited or symbolic use of DEI in marketing communication	
Business start and evolution	Business formation and growth	Growth and expansion aspirations	Theme 9. DEI in Marketing Practices
Family background and support	Family influence and support	Future interest in socially responsible or inclusive initiatives	
Motivation	Entrepreneurial motivation		
Motivation and triggers			
Previous work experience	Prior experience and skills		Theme 10. DEI in Marketing Practices
Previous leadership roles			
Entrepreneurial Journey	Entrepreneurial pathway		
Customer engagement and targeting	Market communication practices		
Strategies (social media, leaflets, networks)	Marketing channels and tools		Theme 11. DEI in Marketing Practices
Incorporation of DEI in marketing	DEI representation in promotion		
DEI	Symbolic DEI visibility		
Expansion goals	Business growth intentions		
DEI-oriented future initiatives (accessible services, Future DEI aspirations			Theme 12. DEI in Marketing Practices
Vision and Future Plans	Forward-looking orientation		

Table 7: Theme Frequency Summary Table

Theme	Subthemes	Total Participants Referencing Theme	Participants
Navigating Tension in Entrepreneurial Practice	Business entry, learning through experience, business adjustments, resilience	9	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P9, P10, P12
Gender and Social Barriers	Family roles, male dominated networks, gender expectations, emotional pressure	8	P1, P3, P4, P6, P7, P9, P11, P13
Understanding DEI	Limited awareness, diversity as difference, equity as fairness	10	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P11, P13
Everyday DEI Practices	Hiring decisions, informal support, community inclusion	9	P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P12
Interpreting DEI in Marketing Practices	Inclusive branding, informal inclusive marketing, digital marketing, absence of marketing	10	P1, P2, P3, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12

Table 8: Participant & Theme Matrix with Participant Profiles

Participant	Business Type	Navigating Entrepreneurial Tension	Gender and Social Barriers	Understanding DEI	Everyday DEI Practices	DEI in Marketing Practices
P1	Retail shop owner (combined)	✓	✓		✓	✓
P2	Boutique hotel owner	✓		✓	✓	✓
P3	Grocery shop owner	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
P4	Online flower shop owner	✓	✓	✓		
P5	Airbnb / small motel business			✓	✓	✓
P6	Home-based snack producer	✓	✓	✓	✓	
P7	Home-based floor mat and table mat business owner	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
P8	Traditional jewellery maker (fourth generation)				✓	✓
P9	Childcare center owner	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
P10	Small-scale manufacturer (Soap and craft)	✓		✓		✓
P11	Tea factory and estate owner		✓	✓		✓
P12	Textile and garment shop owner	✓			✓	✓
P13	Small-scale poultry farm supervisor		✓	✓		

Appendix 2: Participants Consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read and understood the information sheet for this study.

I have had the details of the research explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study within two weeks after my interview without giving a reason.

I understand that all information I provide will be kept confidential and used only for academic purposes.

Please tick as appropriate:

- ☐ I agree to the interview being audio recorded.
- ☐ I do not agree to the interview being audio recorded.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full Name (printed): _____

Appendix 3: Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET

Who am I?

My name is Hasanthi Gamage, and I am a Master of Business Studies (Marketing) student at the Massey Business School, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. This research forms part of my master's thesis under the supervision of Dr. Sarah Dodds and Prof. Nitha Palakshappa from the Massey Business School, Massey University.

Together, we share an interest in sustainability, transformative marketing, and socially responsible entrepreneurship. This study contributes to understanding how women entrepreneurs in South Asia interpret and navigate ideas of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) within their business practices.

Overview of the research project

This study explores how Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs understand and experience DEI within their business and marketing activities. It seeks to learn how they interpret such ideas and how they manage the challenges and expectations of applying DEI principles in their own business contexts.

The project involves conducting semi-structured interviews with 15–20 Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs from industries such as education, tourism, ICT, handicrafts, and digital services. The goal is to understand how these women balance personal, cultural, and institutional challenges while engaging with global ideas of inclusion and equity.

The research is qualitative in nature and aims to offer insights that could support more inclusive and sustainable forms of entrepreneurship in South Asia.

Participant commitment and involvement

Your participation will involve a Zoom interview lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The conversation will be open and informal, allowing you to share your experiences, reflections, and views on DEI and entrepreneurship. You may choose to speak in English or Sinhala, depending on your comfort level.

With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. If you prefer not to be recorded, notes will be taken instead. You may also ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the session.

You will receive an electronic Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form before the interview. Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw within two weeks after the interview without giving a reason. If you choose to withdraw, your data will not be included in the analysis.

Research ethics and participants' rights

This project has been peer-reviewed and approved under Massey University's Human Ethics guidelines. All possible measures have been taken to protect your privacy and rights as a participant.

You have the right to:

- decline to answer any question
- withdraw from the study within two weeks after the interview
- ask questions about the research at any stage
- review your interview transcript and request changes
- receive a summary of the final research findings upon completion

All data will remain strictly confidential. Your name and any identifying information about your business will be replaced with pseudonyms in transcripts and publications. Any translated materials (from Sinhala to English) will be handled by a professional translator under a confidentiality agreement. Data will be stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher and will be destroyed after the required retention period in accordance with Massey University policy.

There are no incentives or payments for participating in this research.

Who to contact about the research

If you have any questions about the study, please contact:

Researcher:

Hasanthi Gamage

Master of Business Studies (Marketing)

Massey Business School

Email: Hasanthi.HewaAlawathaGamage.1@uni.massey.ac.nz, hasanthigamage@gmail.com

Dr. Sarah Dodds

Massey University, Albany

Email: s.dodds@massey.ac.nz

Professor Nitha Palakshappa
Massey University, Albany
Email: n.palakshappa@massey.ac.nz

Thank you very much for considering participation in this study. Your insights will make an important contribution to understanding women's entrepreneurship and inclusive business practices in South Asia.

Appendix 4: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Introductory blurb

Thank you for taking part in this study.

Have you had a chance to read the information sheet about the project and your role in it? (Briefly go through their rights, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.)

Are you comfortable with the interview being recorded?

Do you have any questions before we start?

Brief background to share: This research looks at how Sri Lankan women entrepreneurs make sense of ideas such as diversity, equity, and inclusion in their business lives. It explores how they manage everyday challenges, expectations, and responsibilities while trying to grow their businesses.

Interview process

We'll start with general questions about your story and business journey, then move toward your views and experiences related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Please feel free to skip any question or stop at any time.

Main Question	Probing Questions
<i>General Business Background – first, I'm interested in understanding a bit about your business</i>	
1) Tell me a bit about your journey as an entrepreneur. How did you start your business and what motivated you to do so?	* What challenges did you face early on? * How did your background or family influence your path? * What keeps you motivated to continue?
2) How would you describe your business today?	* What does success mean to you? * Who are your main customers? * What values guide your work or decisions?
<i>Understanding of DEI – I'm interested in understanding what diversity, equity and inclusions (commonly referred to as DEI) means to you and your business practice, so the next questions will relate to this.</i>	

3) In your own words, what does diversity, equity and inclusions (DEI) mean to you?	* If we take each term, could you tell me what each one means to you? * How does cultural and social expectations in Sri Lanka influence what DEI means to you?
4) Could you now describe what DEI means in your business context?	* How do you incorporate DEI into your business practices? * How easy or difficult is it to incorporate DEI into your business practices? What are the barriers? * How do cultural or social expectations in Sri Lanka influence how you incorporate DEI into your business?
<i>Uncovering potential tensions around DEI – I'm now interested in exploring how you deal with potential issues and tensions around DEI personally and in your business</i>	
5) What are your experiences as a women entrepreneur in Sri Lanka?	* How have you experienced expectations or barriers in business? * How do you handle or respond to such experiences? * What kinds of support or understanding make a difference for women in business?
6) As a woman running a business in Sri Lanka, what expectations do you feel from your family, community, or society?	* How do these expectations affect the way you work? * How do you deal with those pressures?
6) How do you balance your personal responsibilities and business demands?	* What kinds of pressures or tensions do you face? * How do you manage stress or find strength? * How do your family or community support your business journey?

7) How do you manage tensions in your business related to DEI?	
8) Have you ever faced situations where global ideas such as “diversity” or “equity” or “inclusion” clash with local business realities or cultural norms?	* How did you handle those situations? * What compromises or adjustments did you make? * How do you see these tensions shaping your work as a woman entrepreneur?
Marketing and Marketing Communications – <i>lastly, I am interested in what aspects of DEI you use in your marketing, if any.</i>	
9) What kinds of marketing or communication approaches do you use to represent your business?	* How do you present your values or beliefs in your brand?
10) What aspects of DEI do you include in your marketing communications?	* How do these ideas influence how you promote your business?
11) Looking ahead, what is your vision for your business and for women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka?	* What changes would you like to see in how women are supported? * What advice would you give to other women starting a business?
12) Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not discussed?	

Closing note

Thank you for sharing your story and reflections. Your experiences will help us understand how women in Sri Lanka think about and navigate diversity, equity and inclusion in both their personal and business lives.