

Chapter 1

Introduction

ABSTRACT

This book begins with a fundamental question: Can women entrepreneurs serve as transformative agents in the fight against poverty? Drawing from immersive fieldwork across Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, it examines how women navigate entrepreneurship in contexts of scarcity, social constraint, and resilience. Far from being passive beneficiaries of aid, these women operate informal businesses as acts of necessity, resistance, and self-determination. The book critiques gender-neutral policy frameworks and simplistic empowerment narratives, instead advocating for intersectional, culturally grounded, and community-driven models of support. It highlights how even small-scale enterprises can yield significant social and economic impacts—transforming households, communities, and gender norms. More than a study, this book is a call to action for researchers, policymakers, and development practitioners to center women’s lived realities and to co-create inclusive systems that recognize them not as marginal actors but as essential leaders of change.

INTRODUCTION

The origins of this book lie in a deceptively simple yet profoundly urgent question: Can women entrepreneurs be a transformative force in the fight against poverty? This question emerged not from a theoretical vacuum but from the lived landscapes of the Global South, where millions of women wake each day to navigate a delicate balance between surviv-

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al and self-determination. Across communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, I encountered women whose daily acts of labor and leadership challenged prevailing narratives about economic passivity and social marginalization. Their entrepreneurial journeys were not framed by business schools or incubator programs. They were shaped by necessity—by the need to feed their families, preserve their dignity, and forge paths of agency in systems often indifferent to their potential.

What began as an inquiry into women's roles in poverty alleviation soon transformed into a deeper, more nuanced exploration of how entrepreneurship operates in contexts of scarcity, constraint, and creativity. Through interviews with market vendors, seamstresses, food sellers, digital freelancers, and informal traders, a pattern began to emerge, not of linear success or simplistic empowerment, but of tenacity, innovation, and hard-earned autonomy. These women were not waiting to be empowered; they were claiming space within local economies, often with limited support but boundless resolve.

This book is the product of several years of immersive fieldwork, reflective analysis, and countless conversations in homes, markets, workshops, and virtual forums. It is grounded in the belief that economic participation, especially by women, is not a peripheral matter. It is central to achieving inclusive and sustainable development. Yet, for too long, women's entrepreneurship has been relegated to the margins, celebrated in principle but overlooked in practice. This work seeks to change that by bringing women's stories, strategies, and structural realities into full view.

As I listened to these women speak about their motivations, barriers, and aspirations, a new clarity emerged. Yes, women entrepreneurs can transform their communities, but only when we recognize the systems that hinder or enable them. Only when we challenge policies that assume neutrality but embed gender bias. Only when we move beyond the micro-loan as a silver bullet, and instead invest in comprehensive, contextual, and community-driven models of support.

Throughout this book, you will read stories that reveal entrepreneurship not as a glamorous pathway to wealth, but as a deeply embedded practice of resilience. Women's economic activity, often in the informal sector, is not merely a means of income generation. It is a form of resistance. It

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