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## A multi-dimensional study on women-centered tourism businesses in peripheral destinations of north central Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

The tourism industry has been proven to provide women with more opportunities than all other sectors of the world economy. Women centered businesses in tourism are gradually becoming an important aspect owing to the fact that of the contribution made by them on women empowerment, improving the status of quality of life and family and community well-being. Accordingly, women and women centered business sector play an important role in the contemporary tourism industry. The main objective of this study was to analyze different dimensions of women centered tourism businesses in peripheral destinations of Sri Lanka in relation with the nature, scale, ownerships and types of businesses, motivational factors, issues and appropriate measures. Data from a sample of 85 women who engaged in tourism related businesses of four peripheral destinations was collected through a mix method which include both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. The results of this study provide a multifaceted insight about the women centered tourism businesses. As per the findings, it was clearly discernible that businesses owned by women in tourism of the study area are at a vital importance. Those are fallen into 09 categories which come under different ownerships. The results also identified that business surveyed belong to a diverse variety such as medium, small, informal and cottage industries. Out of which medium scale business sector is the most prominent business category followed by informal, small scale and cottage industries. Motivational factors impact on women to start a business was found to be as another important finding. Accordingly, aspiration to generate more income, desire to own a self-business, ambition for the self-empowerment and commitment on family businesses are the main motives for a large majority of business women. Cultural perceptions, limited entrepreneurial knowledge, low level of education, lack of businesses awareness and experience in customer service, language incompetency, stiff competition extended from the male dominated business environment, limited financial access and capital and issues in business ownership are the common constraints revealed through the survey.

**Keywords:** women centered, tourism business, motivational factors, peripheral destinations

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### Introduction

The link between women and tourism is a prominent theme in academic literature. During the last few decades, there is a noticeable increase in gender based studies in tourism research. It has become a popular theme among researchers and world's leading international institutions. This is due the fact that women play an important role in the tourism industry and their contribution is significant as similar as men. As published by the World Travel and Tourism Council (2019) <sup>[13]</sup>, tourism industry has almost twice as many female employers than other sectors and it provides women with more opportunities for workforce participation, leadership, entrepreneurship and empowerment. WTTC (2019) has further analyzed that the countries experienced a strong growth in travel and tourism GDP over the years have also witnessed a significant improvement in the share of women's employment. Further, the tourism industry has been proven to provide women with more opportunities for empowerment compared to other industries, giving the sector increased responsibility for the advancement of women. According to the United Nations Global Report on Women and Tourism 2010, published by the United Nations World Tourism Organization and UN Women, tourism industry provides more opportunities for women's participation in the workforce, their entrepreneurship and leadership than all other sectors of the world economy (UNWTO, 2010). In a critical examination about the women in tourism, it is significant to consider other aspects such as businesses run and owned by them which are both formal and informal and other roles perform by them such as leaders, innovators and their contribution to tourism workforce.

Studies on women centered businesses in tourism focused different themes. Some of the important aspects related to this theme have been studied in detail by Zapalska and Brozik (2014) <sup>[15]</sup>. Their research findings reveal that development of tourism related entrepreneurship by women have been a major step to increase female participation in the process of economic development, providing employment opportunities, improving economic independence and social, educational and health status which ultimately contribute on their living standards. They have further justified their arguments supporting the opinions evinced by Birley (1989); Cromie and Hays (1988) and Scott (1986). Based on the judgments of these scholars, Zapalska and Brozik (2014) <sup>[15]</sup>

concluded that different approaches can be applied to study female entrepreneurships and businesses in tourism industry. At the same time, the authors were able to identify a series of special features impact to start women owned tourism businesses. Among them, the skills and knowledge, talents and abilities in managing a business and a compelling desire to do something positive are most noticeable.

Women centered businesses are gradually becoming an important aspect in tourism industry owing to the fact that of the contribution made by them on women empowerment, improving the status of quality of life and family and community well-being. Cave and Kilic (2010)<sup>[4]</sup> referred Aronsson (2000) to elaborated different aspects of the businesses owned by women in the tourism industry of the developing countries. As they have found, a broader increase in the participation of women in tourism industry could be noticed. The most common type of opportunities that tourism provides for women of the developing countries are self-employment in small and medium-sized income generating activities. As cited by Deen et al. (2016)<sup>[5]</sup> in their research, McElwee and Al-Riyami (2003) revealed that a majority of women found to own businesses were concentrated within the service industry. As they have further analyzed, women prefer this particular field since it renders them capable of providing a sound basis within the context of the tourism and accommodation sector and leading to the need to support them who wish to become or who already are business owners.

The research titled “Women Entrepreneurship and its Scope in Tourism Sector in Telangana”, conducted by Bharathi (2019)<sup>[3]</sup> provides a detail insight on different aspects about women in tourism businesses. This author has explained in this research that women entrepreneurs generate employment opportunities and offer solutions to many managerial and business problems through forward planning and decision making. These ideas were further supported by Bharathi (2019)<sup>[3]</sup> through the perceptions of Tshabalala and Ezeuduji (2016)<sup>[11]</sup> and Samiei and Akhoondzadeh (2013). Bharathi (2019)<sup>[3]</sup> also cites the work of Zapalska and Brozik (2014)<sup>[15]</sup> and Chipfuva et al. (2012) and specified that women entrepreneurship promotes social and economic wellbeing of families through women empowerment and initiating self-development and financial independence. In the same research, Bharathi (2019)<sup>[3]</sup> review the ideas evinced by Upadhyay (2017), Luliana at al. (2016) and Draft Tourism Policy (1997) to conclude the opinion that tourism development as an important mechanism for sustainable human development which includes poverty mitigation, employment generation, women progress and other underprivileged groups. It is also a route that women gain larger control over income, knowledge, technology, skill and training, decision-making process and augment the self-image of women to make them active contestants in the process of adaptation and the development of capabilities to claim themselves.

Elaborating the motivational aspects of women centered tourism businesses, Tshabalala and Ezeuduji (2016)<sup>[11]</sup> cited Koutsou et al. (2003) and suggest that women embarked on cooperative projects to increase their family income, gain independence, raise their power of control, self-esteem and social status. Tshabalala and Ezeuduji (2016)<sup>[11]</sup> reveal another important aspect based on the research findings of Bras and Dahles (1998). According to this view, small tourism businesses in Bali islands generate enough room for women to exploit upcoming niches in the tourism market.

Several studies have been conducted in relation to the different constraints faced by women who engaged in tourism related businesses. Accordingly, various scholars have made their attempts to study the issues and challenges caused on hampering the business success of women in tourism. Deen et al. (2016)<sup>[5]</sup> have mainly focused on the challenges that women face when they are small business owners in the accommodation sector. In their literature review, they have highlighted the research findings of Chinomona and Maziriri (2015) and stated that limited financial access is a major hindrance for them to start their own business.

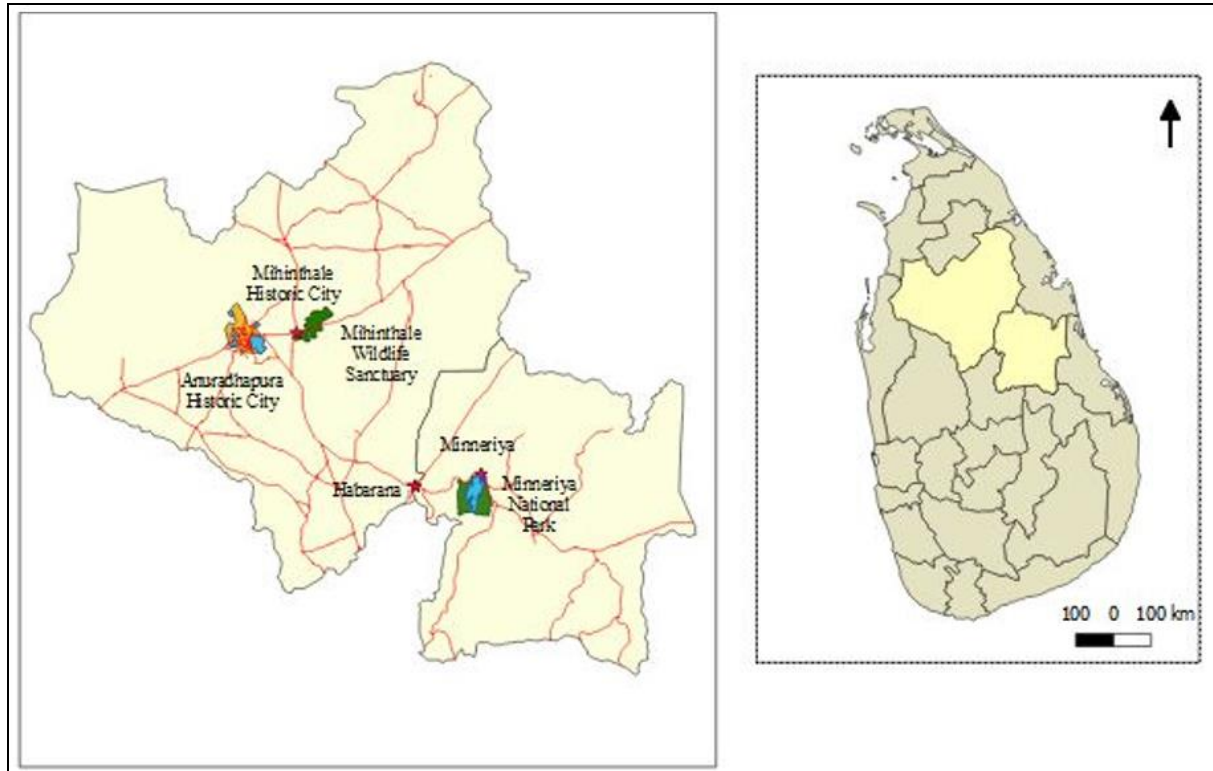
With reference to the research conducted by Vossenber (2013); Hewapathirana (2011) and Madurawala et al. (2016) an important aspect related to the constraints faced by women in tourism has been highlighted by Handaragama and Kusakabe (2021)<sup>[6]</sup>. As they have mentioned women entrepreneurs face several gender-based disadvantages compared with men. Bharathi (2019)<sup>[3]</sup> has identified a series of challenges faced by women who engaged in tourism businesses viz. lack of awareness, pessimistic entrepreneurial mindset, pressure from male dominated society, stiff competition, scarcity of material and financial resources, limited mobility, family ties and lack of education and awareness. Further, Tshabalala and Ezeuduji (2016)<sup>[11]</sup> have identified some other challenges faced by South African women in tourism related businesses such as lack of financial capital, business capability, problem of size and scope, racial issues, traditional perceptions and business location.

According to the above discussion, it is clearly evident that women and women centered business sector play an important role in the contemporary tourism industry and there is a wealth of research that highlight many interesting facets related. If so, it is clearly evident that there is a dearth of studies focus on the Sri Lanka context. Accordingly, there is a timely need to undertake a study to investigate the multidimensional aspects of women centered tourism businesses with a Sri Lankan perspective.

The main objective of this research was to analyze different dimensions of women centered tourism businesses in the peripheral destinations of the North Central Province of Sri Lanka. Along with the main objective, a few specific objectives were designed to identify the existing nature, scale and types of women centered tourism businesses, investigate the nature of the business ownerships, examine the motivational factors which impact on women to start a businesses, analyze related issues faced by them and recommend appropriate measures to mitigate the identified issues.

### Methodology

With the aim of reinforcing the validity and reliability of this research, a mix method which include both qualitative and quantitative research techniques was employed. The research design of this study was there for comprised few stages such as the selection of research sites, selection of the sample, data collection and analysis. The information related to the women who operate tourism related businesses of the peripheral destinations of the North Central Province were obtained through a preliminary survey. In addition, institutional reports such as business registration lists of related local authorities were referred to finalize the number of business women and types. Based on the results of the preliminary survey and the summery of the business related information, the study area was selected (Figure 01). Accordingly, it includes two historic cities (Anuradhapura and Mihinthale), one touristic service city (Habarana) and a neighboring destination to a national park (Minneriya).



**Source:** Developed by author from various sources

**Fig 1:** The study area

As another outcome of the preliminary survey, a total of 170 business women who run different businesses in above research sites could be identified. They were stratified into four categories based on the destination. Out of the total, 85 (50 percent) women was selected as the sample and it was based on the stratified random sampling technique. Consequently, the total sample was proportionately distributed among the research sites as Anuradhapura (30 respondents or 35 percent), Mihinthale (15 respondents or 18 percent), Habarana (25 respondents or 29 percent) and Minneriya (15 respondents or 18 percent). All the sampled respondents were surveyed in their business premises to collect necessary information through the questionnaire survey. Applying the purposive sampling method and based on the responses given at the questionnaire survey, 05 respondents were selected to conduct interviews. In addition, a number of research techniques such as observations were employed to collect qualitative data. The methodology applied to collect secondary data included the literature survey and review. Available literature concerning the different concepts of women centered entrepreneurial activities and businesses along with research findings of a number of scholars in different countries was critically analyzed to write the theoretical background of the study.

Data analytical phase of this study too was a combined process in which both qualitative and quantitative analytical methods were employed. A major part of the data collected through the questionnaire survey was tabulated and converted into percentages and collated in the form of tables, graphs and figures to make the data analyses and the presentation meaningful. Simple statistical methods such as central tendency (mean, medium and mode) were employed as quantitative analytical tools. Ranking and summarizing the information, making list of important facts and using visual displays in the form of images have been employed in relation with qualitative analysis.

### Results and Discussion

In recent years gender analyses has become a central part in the tourism industry in general and tourism literature in particular. Women centered businesses in the tourism industry in many countries play an important role in

terms of providing employment and income opportunities, delivering goods and services, household development, women empowerment, improving financial strength, enhancement of livelihood standards, mentoring the next generation of female leaders and fostering women's pride and respect. This background has been justified by different scholars including Haugh and Talwar (2016) [7]; Scott et al. (2012) [10]; Ardrey et al. (2006) [2] and Jamali, (2009) [8]. As they have revealed, women centered businesses are found as an opportunity for economic empowerment, improving the status of women and family and community well-being.

The study area selected for this research holds a trove of cultural and natural treasures for different tourism activities. Tourism in the region mainly focuses on spectacular world heritage-listed archaeological sites, other cultural attractions and activities, nature walks, wildlife reserves and tours of folk villages. Due to this great potential, it attracts a large number of tourists both domestic and international annually. Therefore, a huge demand has been generated for different services. Consequently, a variety of large, medium, small and informal businesses have been established to cater the demand generated. Even though, this business sector is largely male-dominated, a majority of these establishments are owned and operated by women. According to the preliminary survey and the field works, it could be noticed that many of the businesses owned by women are fallen into medium, small, cottage and informal categories. The distribution of women centered businesses of the Study area is depicted in Table 01.

**Table 1:** Distribution of women centered businesses in the study area

Business	Anuradhapura		Mihinthale		Habarana		Minneriya		Total
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	
Homestay accommodations	02	06.7	02	13.3	03	12	02	13.3	09
Guest houses	02	06.7	02	13.3	04	16	02	13.3	10
Take away businesses	03	10.0	02	13.3	03	12	03	20.0	11
Wayside stalls	05	16.7	03	20.0	05	20	03	20.0	16
Communications	03	10.0	*	*	02	08	01	06.8	06
Retail shops	04	13.3	02	13.3	02	08	02	13.0	10
Cloth shops	03	10.0	01	06.8	03	12	01	06.8	08
Stalls of votive items	06	20.0	03	20.0	*	*	*	*	09
Handy craft shops	02	07.0	*	*	03	12	01	06.8	06
Total	30	100.0	15	100.0	25	100	15	100.0	85

**Source:** Filed Survey, 2020-2021.

\* - Women owned businesses are not available

As shown in Table 01, the total number of female business owners selected for the in-depth study is 85. The businesses owned by them could be categorized into 09 categories. With perusal of the distribution of different businesses, several important conclusions can be drawn. As per the total number of businesses of each category, the number of wayside business stalls (16) is higher than all others. Take away businesses (11), guest houses and retail shops (respectively by 10) are the other noticeable categories. Communications and handy craft shops represent the least numbers as 06 by each category. Few noticeable aspects are discernible when the site level data related the distribution of the business establishments are concerned. Stalls of votive items (06) and wayside stalls (05) are the most noticeable businesses in the Anuradhapura historic city. Total percentage value of these categories is 36.7%. The significance of the Anuradhapura historic city as a domestic pilgrimage route has greatly impact on this higher value.

Coming to the nature of tourism related businesses owned by women in Mihinthale, 03 (20.0%) out of total surveyed (15) are stalls of votive items and other majorities represent similar values as 02 for each category. Being located at a close proximity to the main touristic attractions of Anuradhapura historic city, Mihinthale reported a lesser number of tourism related businesses. It is on one hand a seasonal attraction. On the other hand, tourist who visit Mihinthale accustom to use Anurdhapura town to purchase their necessities.

It is worth of noting here that Habarana plays an important role in the tourism industry of the region and the country as well. Being a touristic service city and a local transit, it comprises a large number of tourism related infrastructures and businesses. Wayside stalls (05), guest houses (04), homestay accommodations (03) and take away businesses (03) are the most noticeable businesses owned by the women of this city and it represent a 60% of the total women centered businesses surveyed. Similarly, the distribution of women centered tourism businesses in Minneriya too depicts an equal picture. One of the most important aspects of these two research cites is that there is no single business which sell votive items since they are entirely consist of wildlife and nature based tourism activities.

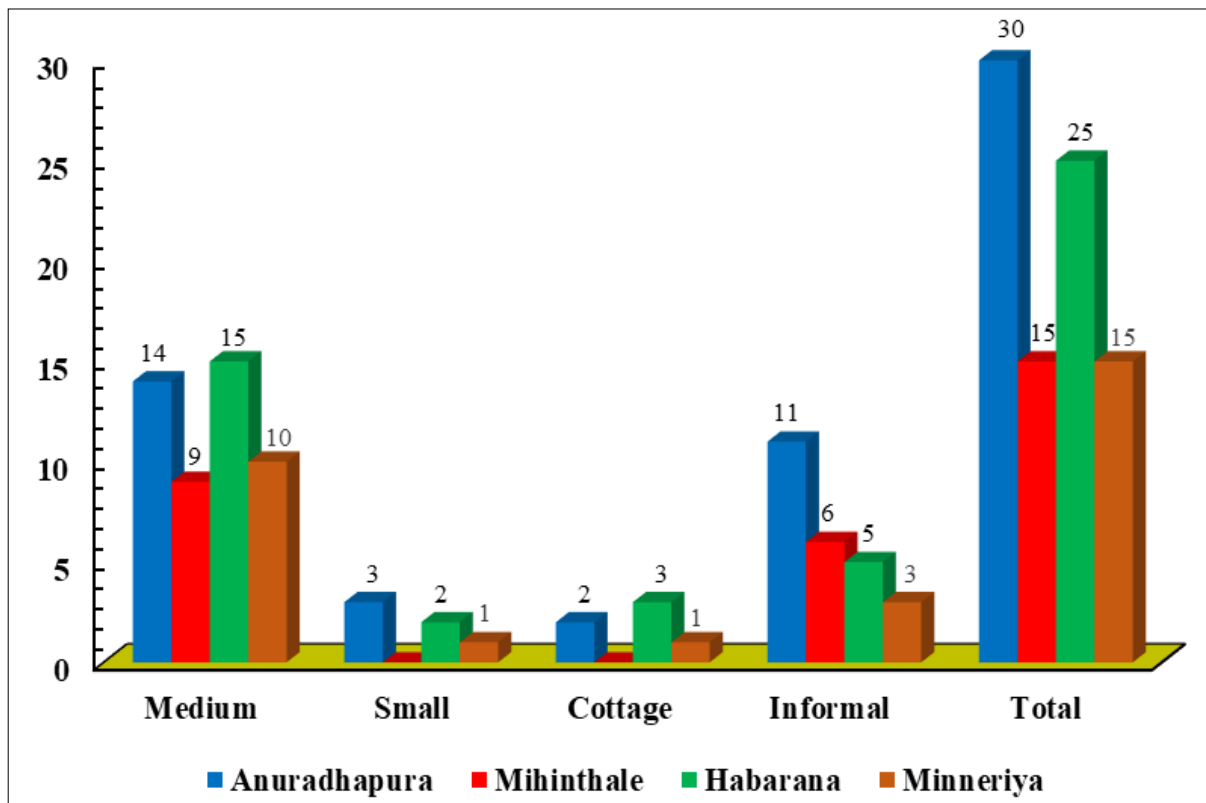
The women of the study area are engaged in different types of businesses which can be categorized according to the scale as medium, small, cottage industries and informal businesses. The medium scale businesses include homestay accommodations, guest houses, take away businesses, retail shops and cloth shops. Communications and internet cafes have been categorized into small scale businesses. The cottage industry include the handy craft shops which produce and sell different items such as wood carvings, rat and reed items, leather and silk items. Stalls of votive items and way side boutiques represent the informal business sector (Figure 02).



Source: Field Survey, 2020-2021.

Fig 2: Women-centered tourism related businesses in the study area

The filed survey further revealed that there are 48 women who own medium scale businesses and it is 56.4% out of the total surveyed. The informal sector represents 29.4% (25) and small scale and cottage industries represent each by 07.0% (06) respectively. A similar aspect can be noticed when the site level distribution of businesses are concerned (Figure 03). Figure 03, illustrates another noticeable factor; that is small or cottage industries have not been located in Mihinthale.



Source: Filed Survey, 2020-2021.

Fig 3: Nature of the businesses owned by women

Tourism businesses not only vary in size and scale but also in their ownership too. As identified by various scholars, ownership of the business is an important aspect of women centered businesses since it is greatly impact on business success and profits. Citing the research findings of Birley (1989) and Cromie and Hays (1988) respectively, Zapalska and Brozik (2014) [15] stated that various approaches can used to study female entrepreneurship and factors that drive women into business and make their business successful. Ownership is one of the important factors which impact on this success. With perusal of this argument, the ownership of the businesses surveyed can be categorized as shown in Table 02.

As shown in Table 02, it is clearly discernible that the businesses included into the sample represent different categories of ownerships which can be categorized into 06 categories. Accordingly, the number of business women who own a business located in a self-owned plot of land is 21. A total of 18 have started a business in a rented building while 15 business premises have been located on rented lands. Wayside businesses are

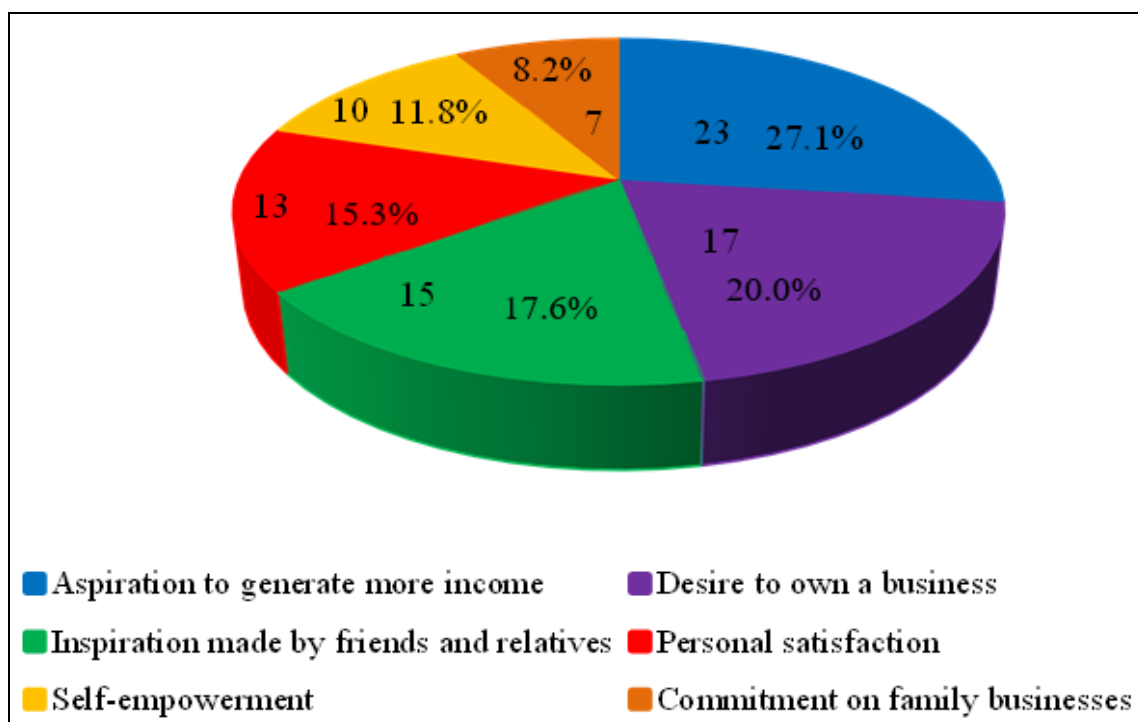
considered as a lucrative aspect of the tourism industry of the study area. It is on one hand a type of tourist attraction. On the other hand, those fulfill different needs of tourists when they visit places in and around of tourist attractions. As shown in Table 02, the total number of wayside businesses is 16. With the aim of promoting tourism related businesses and women welfare, the local authorities have made some initiations to grant business premises located closely adjacent to tourist attractions. Accordingly, 09 women have started their businesses at some premises those that are owned by the local authorities.

**Table 2:** Nature of the ownership of present business owned by the women in the study area

Nature of the Ownership	Number	Percentage
Business in a land of self-owned	21	24.7
Business in a rented land	15	17.6
Business in a rented building	18	21.2
Business in an unauthorized land	06	07.1
Wayside business	16	18.8
Business premises owned by a local authority	09	10.6
Total	85	100.0

**Source:** Filed Survey, 2020-2021.

Studying the motivational factors impact on women to start a present business is another important objective of this research. Many researchers have studied the different aspects of this theme which include multifaceted motivational factors. Based on the research findings of Shane et al. (1991), Ahmad et al. (2016) <sup>[1]</sup> have listed four factors of businesswomen motivation such as recognition, independence, learning and roles. In the same research, they have further cited the works of Birley and Westhead (1994) and identified seven motivational factors. Osman et al. (2009) <sup>[9]</sup> have analyzed 20 motivational factors of women homestay owners of Malaysia while dividing them as full and push factors. Further, Yashoda et al. (2020) <sup>[14]</sup> have conducted a research on homestay entrepreneurs of Sri Lanka including female business owners. Concluding their literature review, they have categorized the motivational factors as extrinsic motives and intrinsic motives. The first category includes economic and financial incentives and social pressure while the second category includes experiences, personal satisfaction, passion and personal growth. As per the findings of the field survey, a similar background could be noticed related to the motivational factors impact on the women of the study area. Such motivational factors are depicted in Figure 04.



**Source:** Filed Survey, 2020-2021.

**Fig 4:** Motivational factors impact on women to start the present business

As depicted in Figure 04, it is clearly evident that the women who run tourism related businesses have been motivated by different motives. Aspiration to generate more income is the uppermost motivational factor for 23 (27.1%) women followed by the desire to own a business for the motive for 17 (20.0%). A total of 15 (17.6%) business women have been inspired by their friends and relatives while 13 (15.3%) have stated their present

business based on personal satisfaction. Ambition for the self-empowerment and commitment on family businesses are the other two reasons by which 10 (11.8%) and 07 (08.2%) women have been motivated respectively.

Even though women-centered businesses are gradually becoming a fashionable component in Sri Lankan tourism industry, there is a range of constraints which hinder the potentials therein. The deep rooted societal and cultural perceptions of the Sri Lankan society on women who engaged in tourism related businesses or occupations is the major challenge faced by them. Such misperceptions negatively impact on women who have already started a business or wish to enter into the field of tourism businesses. Among the other problematic issues faced by the women who engaged in the study area are; limited entrepreneurial knowledge, low level of education, lack of businesses awareness and customer service, language incompetency, stiff competition extended from the male dominated business environment, limited financial access and capital, scarcity of material for cottage industries, limited institutional support and issues of business ownership or the business premises. Above contextual background can be elaborated through few case studies conducted with few female business owners as follows.

*“Running even a small business is a big challenge for a woman in a field like tourism. There are many reasons generate different issues. One of the main problems we face in the field of business is the language incompetency. Due to this issue, it is difficult to communicate with foreigners. Even though tour guides help us, they are also looking for a commission anyway. We run these businesses with a lot of issues. There are other issues such as capital, raw material transportation problems etc.....” (Respondent Number – 01).*

*“Running a successful tourism business in a male dominated business environment is a big challenge for a woman. On the other hand women who engage in a business in the field of tourism is not well received even by the society. It is due to a cultural norm and the fact that of the business in tourism are mostly run by the men. At the same time, there is another norm in the Sri Lankan society that dealing with foreigners is not suitable for women.....” (Respondent Number – 02).*

Above quotations can be considered as clear elucidations related to the constraints faced by female business community of the study area.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

As per the overall descriptive results of this study, it is clearly discernible that women-centered tourism businesses in the North Central Sri Lanka play a vital role in providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for women and contribute on their empowerment, household development and on many other positive aspects. There is a wide range of businesses owned by women that can be categorized into few categories such as medium, small, cottage and informal sectors. Accordingly, the medium scale business sector represents 56.4% while the informal sector accounts for 29.4%. The small scale and cottage industries represent each by 07.0% respectively. A similar aspect could be noticed when the site level data related to the scale of the businesses are analyzed. As a final revealing, it can be stated that the wayside and take away businesses, guest houses and retails shops are the most noticeable categories in the women-centered business sector of each research site. Due to the fact that of being a popular domestic cultural route, Anuradhapura historic city depicts few outstanding characteristic. As cited by various scholars, the ownership of a business is a key driving force which impact on the business success. It is also a significant factor which direct a business person for a more success commercial background. According to the field survey, 06 types of business ownerships could be identified. With reference of the findings related to this aspect, 21 business women have established their business in a self-owned plot of land while 15 business premises have been located in rented lands. As a promotional strategy, the local authorities have made attempts to provide some small plot of lands for those who interested to start a business and a total of 09 women have been benefited accordingly. When compared to other sectors, the wayside businesses are the most prominent segment that accounts for a total of 16 women.

Studying the motivational factors is another important aspect of this research. As per the findings, motivational factors are a driving force which affects the stimulations of the business environment. Accordingly, a series of motivational factors could be identified. Aspiration to generate more income is the uppermost motivational factor along with other motives such as the desire to own a business, inspiration made by the friends and relatives, personal satisfaction, ambition for the self-empowerment and commitment on family businesses. Accordingly, it can be concluded that different motivational factors have been impact on women to start their own business.

Another important aspect focused in this research is the issues and constraints faced by business women. As reviled by the filed survey, they have faced many challenges due to economic reasons, social and cultural misperceptions in the society. Other major reasons associated with the constraints faced by these business women are the knowledge related issues in relation with languages and business experiences, financial, capital and ownership issues and less institutional support. These issues generate a problematic environment which ultimately caused on the lessening the diverse opportunities therein.

As a conclusive step, it is also important to focus on a few suggestions that can be introduced to overcome the issues and create a better business atmosphere. Among the most practical solutions flowing are noteworthy. Different awareness programmes on new business knowledge, customer oriented service systems and methods of capital and financial management would be conducive for the women who operate different businesses. At the same time, it is of at utmost importance of introducing and implementing new training programmes to enhance

their language skills which cause on widen up of the businesses towards the international tourism industry. Eradication of the misperceptions which has been routed in the male dominated business culture and the society too is timely and significant to empower these business women. It will be another positive step forward if the government agencies, local authorities and other related organizations can extend their assistance to overcome the other issues such as limited financial access and scarcity of capital. In conclusion, as the comprehensive strategically ultimatum, it is just and fair to bring the aforementioned measures into action, to implement with positive participation - state and private sector, the results will be ushering a new era of prosperity for the posterity of the women engaged in tourism businesses.

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