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Empowerment Initiatives and Performance of Women-Owned Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises: Evidence from Machakos Central Ward, Machakos County, Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of empowerment programmes on the performance of women-owned SMEs in Machakos Central Ward. Specifically, the study focused on the effects of financial support, capacity building, marketing support and business networks on the performance of SMEs. The study used a quantitative cross-sectional descriptive research design and targeted a total of 70 respondents from 20 women-owned SMEs in hardware and general merchandise businesses in Machakos Central Ward. The respondents comprised 20 business owners and 50 employees in the target population. A total of 61 respondents, comprising 18 business owners and 43 employees, completed and returned the questionnaires, representing an 87.1 per cent response rate. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression. SME performance was measured using sales, profitability, market share and asset acquisition. The regression model was statistically significant ($F(4, 56) = 47.890$, $p < .001$), explaining 77.4 per cent of the variation in SME performance ($R^2 = 0.774$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.758$). Marketing support ($B = 0.240$, $\beta = 0.277$, $p = .015$) and business networks ($B = 0.673$, $\beta = 0.733$, $p < .001$) had statistically significant positive relationships with SME performance. Financial support ($B = 0.017$, $p = .834$) and capacity building ($B = -0.133$, $p = .191$) did not demonstrate statistically significant independent relationships. The strongest predictor was business networks. The study suggests that market access for women entrepreneurs, product promotion and networking opportunities for businesswomen should be a priority for the county government agencies and organisations supporting the SMEs. The practical needs of the enterprises should also be considered for financial and capacity-building interventions. The results provide empirical evidence relating empowerment initiatives to the performance of women-owned SMEs in the study area.

Key terms: Empowerment programmes, financial support, capacity building, marketing support, business networks, women-owned SMEs, business performance.

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) owned by women contribute significantly to job creation, income generation and the economic well-being of households. However, their ability to establish, grow and sustain their businesses is often constrained by financial, regulatory, skills-related, technological and infrastructural challenges (Kaberia & Muathe, 2021; Lusweti & Mwasiaji, 2021). In Kenya, limited access to adequate financing restricts the ability of many women entrepreneurs to expand their operations, while insufficient business skills and specialised training affect their capacity to manage enterprises and adopt appropriate technologies (Lusweti & Mwasiaji, 2021). These difficulties may be compounded by competing family and business responsibilities, which can limit women's participation in available business-support programmes (Asirwa, 2021). These challenges are particularly important because SMEs contribute to economic development through employment creation, income generation, innovation and poverty reduction (Kumari et al., 2019). For women entrepreneurs, improving enterprise performance therefore requires more than establishing businesses; it also requires access to resources, relevant skills, markets and supportive business relationships. Despite the implementation of empowerment programmes by the government and other institutions in Kenya, SMEs owned by women still face problems accessing the right financial and business support (Abrar Ul Haq et al., 2021). This heightens the need to explore the link between various empowerment programmes and women entrepreneurs' performance in local environments.

Empowerment programmes offer resources and capacities to women entrepreneurs to enhance their businesses. Financial support, capacity building, marketing support and business networks are a few of the initiatives involved (Jacob & Munuswamy, 2022). Financial support includes access to credit, grants and other resources needed to operate and grow businesses. On the other hand, capacity building involves giving entrepreneurs knowledge, skills, information and training to effectively manage their businesses (Abrar Ul Haq et al., 2021; Asirwa, 2021). Marketing support helps SMEs market their products, enter new markets both locally and globally and cope with competition. Business networks enable linkages with other entrepreneurs, financiers, customers, and other stakeholders and, as a result, offer opportunities for knowledge sharing, mentorship and collaboration (Asirwa, 2021).

Empirical research has shown that empowerment programmes are relevant to the performance of women-owned SMEs, but the evidence on the effect of support on performance still does not adequately show how various types of support work together. In Kenya, Obiero et al. (2018) found that diverse social networks among female-owned SMEs were associated with better business performance. Similarly, Wanjiru and Muathe (2022) linked entrepreneurial networking to profitability, productivity, market growth and the creation of new business opportunities. The results point to the possible impact of business networks on enterprise performance. Other studies, including Osiemo and Maina (2020), Mbowa et al. (2023), and Sendawula et al. (2023), have also identified financial support, training, market access and networking as relevant factors in SME growth and sustainability.

These studies collectively highlight the need for access to financial resources, business skills, markets and supportive networks. However, the evidence presented does not sufficiently establish the extent to which these four forms of empowerment contribute jointly to the performance of women-owned SMEs.This creates a gap in understanding the joint impact of financial support, capacity building, marketing support and business networks on women-owned SMEs in semi-urban areas in terms of the context and empirical data. In particular, limited evidence is available on how these four initiatives relate to enterprise performance in Machakos Central Ward, Machakos County. It is vital to look at them in the context of one study since women entrepreneurs might receive multiple types of support from multiple initiatives, and the effect of one initiative could differ from the other when considering their relationship with business performance, as a group. This study therefore examines the individual and combined relationships between financial support, capacity building, marketing support, business networks and the performance of women-owned SMEs in Machakos Central Ward.

The study tested four independent variables: financial support, capacity building, marketing support and business networks and their impact on the performance of women-owned SMEs. Financial support was evaluated based on access to cheap credit and business grants; capacity building was evaluated based on training, skills development and infrastructural support; marketing support was evaluated based on market access and product promotion; and business networks were evaluated based on professional associations and links with other entrepreneurs. Sales, profitability, market share, and acquisition of assets were used as the dependent variables. The four independent variables were chosen due to the conceptual framework of the study, which suggested that the four variables have a direct influence on the performance of women-owned SMEs.

The study was underpinned by three theoretical perspectives: Innovation Theory by Schumpeter (1934, 1942), Motivation Theory by McClelland (1965), and the Theory of Cultural Dimensions by Hofstede (1980, 2011). Innovation Theory explains how entrepreneurs use creativity, new technologies, products and business approaches to improve competitiveness and business performance. Motivation Theory emphasises the roles of achievement, power and affiliation in influencing entrepreneurial behaviour, decision-making and the desire for business success. Cultural values, shared beliefs and social norms shape entrepreneurial conduct, innovation and business growth, as explained by the Theory of Cultural Dimensions. Together, these theoretical perspectives explain how financial assistance, capacity development, marketing interventions and business networks strengthen women's entrepreneurial capabilities, enabling them to address business constraints, capitalise on available opportunities and enhance enterprise performance.

The paper is structured into the following sections. The next section presents the research methodology, including the research design, study area, sampling approach, data collection procedures and methods of data analysis. This is followed by the results and discussion section, which presents and interprets the findings on the relationships between the four empowerment initiatives and the performance of women-owned SMEs. The concluding section outlines the key conclusions drawn from the findings and the recommendations arising from the study. By examining financial support, capacity building, marketing support and business networks within a single empirical study, this paper contributes evidence on their individual and combined relationships with the performance of women-owned SMEs in Machakos Central Ward, Machakos County, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional descriptive research design and was conducted in Machakos Central Ward, Machakos County, Kenya. It targeted 20 women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in the hardware and general merchandise sectors. The 20 enterprises were drawn from the eligible businesses in the study area through simple random sampling. All 70 respondents identified within these enterprises, including 20 business owners or chief executive officers (CEOs) and 50 employees, were subsequently included in the study. Primary data were obtained through structured questionnaires comprising both open-ended and closed-ended items. Of the 70 questionnaires distributed, 61 were completed and returned, comprising 18 business owners or CEOs and 43 employees, representing an 87.1 per cent response rate. Five trained research assistants supported questionnaire distribution and collection. The data gathered were coded and analysed in SPSS version 20.

Respondents' demographic profiles and perceptions of the study variables were summarised using frequencies, percentages, mean scores and standard deviations. Pearson's correlation analysis established the magnitude and direction of the relationships between the empowerment initiatives and SME performance. Multiple regression analysis further established the extent to which each initiative, both independently and collectively, was associated with SME performance. The study adhered to ethical principles throughout the research process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A multiple linear regression model was subsequently used to determine the extent to which financial support, capacity building, marketing support and business networks predict the performance of women-owned SMEs in Machakos Central Ward. The

multiple linear regression model evaluated how well financial support, capacity building, marketing support, and business networks collectively predict business performance among women-owned SMEs.

Table 1: Regression Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	RMSE
M_0	0	0	0	0.766
M_1	0.88	0.774	0.758	0.377

Note: M_1 represents the model containing financial support, capacity building, marketing support and business networks as predictors of SME performance. Author's analysis of survey data (2026).

The multiple regression model summary is presented in Table 1. The results indicate a multiple correlation coefficient (R) of 0.880, an R^2 of 0.774 and an adjusted R^2 of 0.758. This means that financial support, capacity building, marketing support and business networks jointly explained 77.4 per cent of the variation in the performance of women-owned SMEs in Machakos Central Ward. After adjusting for the number of predictors included in the model, the explained variation was 75.8 per cent. The results suggest that the four empowerment initiatives collectively have substantial explanatory power in relation to SME performance.

Table 2: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Regression Model

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
M_1	Regression	27.232	4	6.808	47.89	<.001
	Residual	7.961	56	0.142	-	-
	Total	35.193	60	-	-	-

Source: Author's Computation from Survey Data (2026)

As presented in Table 2, the overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 56) = 47.890$, $p < .001$. This indicates that the four empowerment initiatives, considered jointly, significantly predicted the performance of women-owned SMEs. The findings indicate that, when considered jointly, the predictors account for a significant proportion of the differences in enterprise performance.

Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression Coefficients

Model	Model	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	p
M_0	(Intercept)	4.172	0.098		42.547	<.001
M_1	(Intercept)	0.799	0.282		2.829	0.006
	Financial Support	0.017	0.081	0.02	0.211	0.834
	Capacity Building	-0.133	0.101	-0.145	-1.323	0.191
	Marketing Support	0.24	0.096	0.277	2.503	0.015
	Business Networks	0.673	0.106	0.733	6.374	<.001

Note: B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardised regression coefficient. Author's computation from survey data (2026).

The regression results presented in Table 3 show that financial support had a positive but statistically non-significant relationship with SME performance (B = 0.017, SE = 0.081, β = 0.020, t = 0.211, p = .834), while capacity building had a negative but statistically non-significant relationship (B = -0.133, SE = 0.101, β = -0.145, t = -1.323, p = .191). In contrast, marketing support had a positive and statistically significant relationship with SME performance (B = 0.240, SE = 0.096, β = 0.277, t = 2.503, p = .015). Business networks also had a positive and statistically significant relationship (B = 0.673, SE = 0.106, β = 0.733, t = 6.374, p < .001), recording the strongest standardised coefficient among the four predictors. These findings indicate that, when the other predictors are held constant, marketing support and business networks are significant independent predictors of SME performance, whereas financial support and capacity building do not demonstrate statistically significant independent relationships.

Financial Support and Performance of Women-Owned SMEs

Financial support was positively associated with SME performance, but its independent relationship was not statistically significant in the regression model. This suggests that although access to affordable credit and business grants may support business operations, financial support did not independently predict enterprise performance after accounting for capacity building, marketing support and business networks.

The finding is consistent with Itonga et al. (2016), who reported that access to formal financing did not necessarily translate into improved business performance among women-owned micro and small enterprises. However, it differs from Osiemo and Maina (2020) and Alene (2020), who identified positive relationships between access to finance and business performance. These differences suggest that the relationship between financial support and enterprise performance may vary across business contexts and depending on how financial assistance is accessed and utilised. In the present study, although financial support had a positive regression coefficient, its independent relationship with SME performance was not statistically significant after controlling for capacity building, marketing support and business networks. Therefore, access to finance alone may not be sufficient to explain differences in enterprise performance when other forms of business support are considered simultaneously.

From a theoretical perspective, the finding can be interpreted through Motivation Theory by McClelland (1965), which emphasises achievement as a driver of entrepreneurial behaviour and the pursuit of business success. Access to financial resources may provide women entrepreneurs with opportunities to pursue business goals and expansion plans. However, the non-significant independent relationship observed in this study suggests that access to finance alone may not sufficiently explain differences in enterprise

performance when other empowerment initiatives are considered.

Capacity Building and Performance of Women-Owned SMEs

Capacity building had a negative but statistically non-significant independent relationship with SME performance. This indicates that the study did not establish sufficient statistical evidence that capacity building independently predicted enterprise performance after controlling for financial support, marketing support and business networks.

The findings indicate that respondents recognised the importance of training, mentoring, skills development and infrastructure in strengthening their managerial and technical capabilities. Bookkeeping, business management, technical skills and access to new technologies were identified as important areas for further capacity development. These observations are consistent with the World Economic Forum (2017), which emphasised the importance of developing human capital through training and skills development. Although respondents recognised the value of capacity-building initiatives, the regression results did not demonstrate a statistically significant independent relationship between these initiatives and SME performance. This distinction suggests that although capacity development may strengthen entrepreneurs' competencies, its contribution to measurable enterprise performance may depend on whether the acquired skills can be applied effectively alongside other forms of business support.

These findings highlight the importance of practical, continuous and market-responsive capacity-building programmes for women entrepreneurs. Training and mentoring may help strengthen managerial and technical competencies, particularly in areas such as bookkeeping, business management and technology adoption. Nevertheless, the regression analysis revealed that capacity building had no statistically significant independent effect on SME performance.

The finding can also be interpreted through Motivation Theory by McClelland (1965), which highlights the importance of achievement motivation in entrepreneurial behaviour. Capacity-building initiatives may strengthen entrepreneurs' knowledge, confidence and ability to pursue business objectives. However, the absence of a statistically significant independent relationship suggests that developing entrepreneurial skills does not necessarily translate into measurable performance differences without complementary opportunities and support.

Marketing Support and Performance of Women-Owned SMEs

Marketing support had a positive and statistically significant relationship with SME performance, indicating that it was an independent predictor of performance when financial support, capacity building and business networks were held constant. This suggests that improved market access, product promotion and related marketing assistance are associated with better performance among the women-owned SMEs studied.

The finding supports Ogire et al. (2023), who observed that access to market information positively influences business growth and market linkages. Both findings highlight the importance of connecting enterprises with relevant market information and opportunities. While Ogire et al. (2023) emphasised the contribution of market information to business growth, the present study further establishes that marketing support had a statistically significant positive relationship with SME performance after controlling for financial support, capacity building and business networks. This suggests that marketing support has an independent association with the performance of women-owned SMEs. However, the present study does not establish whether particular marketing interventions, such as digital promotion or participation in trade exhibitions, produce stronger performance outcomes than others.

The findings can be understood through Innovation Theory by Schumpeter (1934, 1942), which emphasises the role of innovation, new approaches and adaptation in improving business competitiveness. Marketing support can enable women entrepreneurs to adopt new promotional approaches, reach wider markets and respond to changing customer needs. The positive and statistically significant relationship observed in this study suggests that marketing-related initiatives are important in explaining differences in the performance of the sampled women-owned SMEs.

Business Networks and Performance of Women-Owned SMEs

Business networks had a positive and statistically significant relationship with SME performance and recorded the strongest standardised coefficient among the four empowerment initiatives. This indicates that networking was the strongest independent predictor of performance in the regression model, after accounting for financial support, capacity building and marketing support.

The finding is consistent with Obiero et al. (2018), who established that social networks were associated with better performance among women-owned SMEs in Migori County. Similarly, Wanjiru and Muathe (2022) linked entrepreneurial networking with profitability, productivity, market expansion and the creation of new business opportunities. Sendawula et al. (2023) also highlighted the contribution of entrepreneurial networks to SME performance through collaboration, exchange of ideas and business support. These studies reinforce the positive relationship between networking and enterprise performance observed in the present study. Importantly, business networks recorded the strongest standardised coefficient among the four predictors, suggesting that their independent relationship with performance was particularly pronounced in the sampled enterprises. Nevertheless, the specific networking benefits identified by respondents in the present study, including access to suppliers, shared resources, market information and collective advertising, were not tested separately in the regression model.

The networks facilitated the sharing of market information, the acquisition of new customers and suppliers, learning from other entrepreneurs, resource sharing, lower prices for goods and better negotiations. Professional organisations were also considered as beneficial forums to share market information, attend training, meet other business owners and collectively advertise products.

These findings corroborate those of Obiero et al. (2018), who reported that varied social networks of female-led SMEs in Migori County were linked to enhanced performance and were utilised for planning, troubleshooting, and strategy. They also concur with the findings of Wanjiru and Muathe (2022), which correlated entrepreneurial networking with an increase in profitability, productivity, market expansion and new business opportunities. Similarly, Sendawula et al. (2023) established that entrepreneurial networks also improved the performance of SMEs through collaboration, exchange of ideas, and business support.

The finding can be interpreted through the Theory of Cultural Dimensions by Hofstede (1980, 2011), which recognises that societal values, beliefs and norms influence business behaviour and relationships. In the context of women-owned SMEs, business networks provide opportunities for affiliation, relationship-building, cooperation and information exchange. This interpretation is also consistent with McClelland's Motivation Theory (1965), particularly the need for affiliation, which may encourage entrepreneurs to establish and maintain supportive business relationships. The strong positive relationship identified in this study highlights the importance of networking in the performance of the sampled enterprises.

Overall, the findings suggest that business networks provide women entrepreneurs with opportunities to access business information, resources, mentorship and new market connections. These opportunities may help strengthen enterprise performance by improving access to knowledge, customers and business partnerships.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the four empowerment initiatives have different independent relationships with the performance of women-owned SMEs in Machakos Central Ward. The statistically significant positive relationship between marketing support and SME performance is consistent with Ogire et al. (2023), while the stronger relationship observed for business networks is supported by Obiero et al. (2018), Wanjiru and Muathe (2022), and Sendawula et al. (2023). In contrast, financial support did not demonstrate a statistically significant independent relationship with performance, a finding that is consistent with Itonga et al. (2016) but differs from the positive relationships reported by Osiemo and Maina (2020) and Alene (2020). Similarly, although respondents recognised the importance of capacity development, it did not emerge as a statistically significant independent

predictor in the regression model. Taken together, these findings suggest that the relationship between empowerment initiatives and enterprise performance is not uniform. In the context of the sampled SMEs, marketing support and business networks showed stronger independent statistical relationships with performance than financial support and capacity building. This highlights the importance of considering both the type of intervention and the business context when designing empowerment programmes for women entrepreneurs.

The findings may also be interpreted in light of the three theoretical perspectives underpinning the study. Innovation Theory helps explain the relationship between marketing support and enterprise competitiveness through improved promotional approaches and market adaptation. Motivation Theory explains how financial resources and capacity-building programmes can assist with entrepreneurial behaviour that leads to achievement; however, these had no independent significant relationship to performance in this study. The Theory of Cultural Dimensions provides a way of thinking about the significance of business relations, affiliation and cooperation in networking activities. Together, these perspectives provide a theoretical basis for understanding how different empowerment initiatives relate to the performance of women-owned SMEs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The research assessed how financial assistance, capacity development, marketing support and business networking relate to the performance of women-owned SMEs in Machakos Central Ward, Machakos County. The results show that the empowerment efforts are not all associated independently with enterprise performance. The regression analysis accounted for 77.4 per cent of the variation in SME performance and was statistically significant overall. However, when all four initiatives were examined concurrently, only marketing support and business networks demonstrated significant positive associations with performance. Business networks had the highest standardised coefficient, followed by marketing support. In contrast, financial support and capacity building did not demonstrate statistically significant independent relationships with SME performance.

These findings suggest that improving access to markets, strengthening product promotion and facilitating business relationships are particularly important considerations in supporting the performance of the women-owned SMEs examined. Despite the absence of statistically significant effects in the regression model, financial assistance and capacity development may still contribute to SME performance and should therefore remain part of enterprise support interventions. Rather, their contribution to enterprise performance may depend on how they interact with other forms of support and the business circumstances in which they are provided. Overall, the findings highlight the need for empowerment programmes that respond to the different needs of women entrepreneurs, with particular attention to marketing opportunities and business networking.

Recommendations: Given the results, the following recommendations are suggested, with the interventions found to have statistically significant relationships with SME performance given priority. First, the Machakos County Government department responsible for trade and enterprise development, women entrepreneurs' associations and business-support organisations should prioritise strengthening business networks among women-owned SMEs. They should facilitate the formation and development of business associations, networking forums and mentorship platforms where women entrepreneurs can exchange market information, establish partnerships, identify potential customers and suppliers, and share business experiences. It is also important to support existing business associations in planning joint marketing operations and collaborative projects that provide opportunities for their members.

Second, the Machakos County Government, business-support organisations and relevant trade development agencies should strengthen marketing support for women-owned SMEs. This should also involve sharing market information, supporting women entrepreneurs at local and regional trade exhibitions, providing hands-on digital marketing advice and creating opportunities for women entrepreneurs to connect with a larger customer base. These interventions should help improve product visibility, market access and customer connections.

Third, financial institutions, microfinance organisations, savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs) and relevant government agencies should improve access to affordable and flexible financial services for women entrepreneurs. Specific focus should be placed on the manageability of the borrowing cost, the manageability of the collateral and the availability of loans and credit programmes. Financial assistance should be based on the practical requirements and the ability to pay of women entrepreneurs of SMEs.

Finally, government agencies, business development organisations and relevant training institutions should provide practical and continuous capacity-building programmes for women entrepreneurs. Bookkeeping, financial management, business planning, technical skills and the use of digital technologies should all be covered in training. Training should be complemented by mentorship and follow-up support to ensure that the skills acquired are used in the business.

The implementation of these recommendations requires collaboration among county government departments, financial institutions, business-support organisations, training institutions and women entrepreneurs' associations. This coordination can help ensure that networking and marketing opportunities are on top of the agenda and financial and capacity-building interventions offer complementary support for women's SMEs to sustain their performance.

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