Women Who Dare: Success Factors for Women Sales Agents of Solar Products in Tanzania

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines critical success factors of female micro entrepreneurship in Tanzania through a series of interviews with saleswomen of solar products who live and work in rural communities. The micro entrepreneurs I spoke with distribute clean energy products through the social enterprise Solar Sister.

Solar Sister’s mission is to envision a brighter world powered by women entrepreneurs. Solar Sister provides comprehensive business training and ongoing mentoring to their women micro entrepreneurs, promoting women’s economic empowerment and giving women the tools that enable them to develop sustainable businesses in their communities and become local agents of sustainable development.

To understand what makes a successful entrepreneur, I conducted interviews with 24 SSEs identified as top sellers in their respective districts. Through analyzing these interviews, I identified three key factors that contribute to entrepreneurial success. The first, access to resources, suggests that women who had the opportunities of an education and/or previous business experience were better prepared for microentrepreneurship. The second, community connections, demonstrated the necessity of utilizing social networks to advance entrepreneurial success. Lastly, an entrepreneurial spirit characterized by positivity, resiliency, and grit allowed these women to keep pushing forward and persevere in their business despite challenges.

PHOTOS FROM THE FIELD

Fig 1. The top performing SSEs listen to a inspirational speaker at the annual summit in Arusha

Fig 2. Listening to a recruitment meeting in Maimire Village

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the preconditions, skills, and resources that position women micro entrepreneurs to become successful community-based agents of sustainable development?

METHODS

PHOTOS FROM THE FIELD

Fig 2. Listening to a recruitment meeting in Maimire Village

Success Trait #1: Access to resources

The majority of the successful SSEs from the summit had two key pre-existing conditions: an education and previous business experience. Every woman interviewed had some level of formal education and 18 of the 24 women (75%) had previous business experience. In addition, all of the women at the summit had access to finances allowing them to afford the initial buy-in cost of 10,000 tsh to become an SSE. Half of the women interviewed had this financial capital because of their previous businesses. A third utilized loans either from a VICOBA, savings group, or personal connection.

Success Trait #2: Community networks

When explaining what key sales tactics SSEs used, many described utilizing community networks. Additionally, when asked directly about how they approach customer recruitment, 75% (18) of the women said that word of mouth through their current or previous customers was how they were connected to new customers.

Even outside of their entrepreneurial customer networks, these women were well connected in their communities. Over 90% (22) women were involved with at least one organization in addition to their affiliation with Solar Sister. In addition to being recruited through their existing networks, 19 of the 24 women had successfully recruited at least one additional SSE, spreading the opportunity of micro entrepreneurship with their community.

The women at the summit not only relied on their community for business development, but for personal support as well. Over 40% (10) of the women interviewed identified their husband as one of the people most important to their success and over a third (9) of the women named a Solar Sister employee as one of their biggest supporters.

PHOTOS FROM THE FIELD

Fig 3. Previous Occupation

Success Trait #3: An entrepreneurial spirit

Success Trait #3: An entrepreneurial spirit

Although the women at the summit were the most successful saleswomen in their respective regions, they still face significant difficulties working in rural areas including difficulties with transportation and product delivery, issues with customer payment, restrictive gender and familial expectations, communication issues, competition with other solar product suppliers, and lack of capital. Despite these challenges, the women expressed an optimistic attitude.

One key question we asked each woman was “what characteristics or circumstances have made you such a successful SSE?” From this question I identified four main themes that were most frequently self-identified by the women. The most common theme was being kind, loving, and humble towards others. The second was remaining motivated despite challenges and being hardworking. Being passionate about the work and its community impact as well as strong sales and customer service skills were the last two common themes.

PHOTOS FROM THE FIELD

Fig 4. Support Systems

Success Trait #4: A supportive community

The last success factor, “an entrepreneurial spirit,” suggests that women who exemplify passion, humility, hard work, and resiliency in the face of challenges position them to be ambitious and resourcedful distributors of clean energy and ultimately, agents of sustainable development.

PHOTOS FROM THE FIELD

Fig 5. Micro entrepreneur recruitment

PHOTOS FROM THE FIELD

Fig 6. Micro entrepreneur recruitment

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