

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.

RESEARCH QUESTION

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

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 Mamire Village

METHODS

Literature Review

- Understand the context and critical success factors of women micro entrepreneurs in the developing world

Interviews

- 20 question google form administered to 24 of the top performing Solar Sister Entrepreneurs (SSEs) at the annual SSE summit. Each interview was conducted through the use of a translator.

Interview Analysis

- Coding interview responses, pulling out common themes and categories and tracking the frequency of similar responses to identify major trends in the data

FINDINGS

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.

Previous Occupation

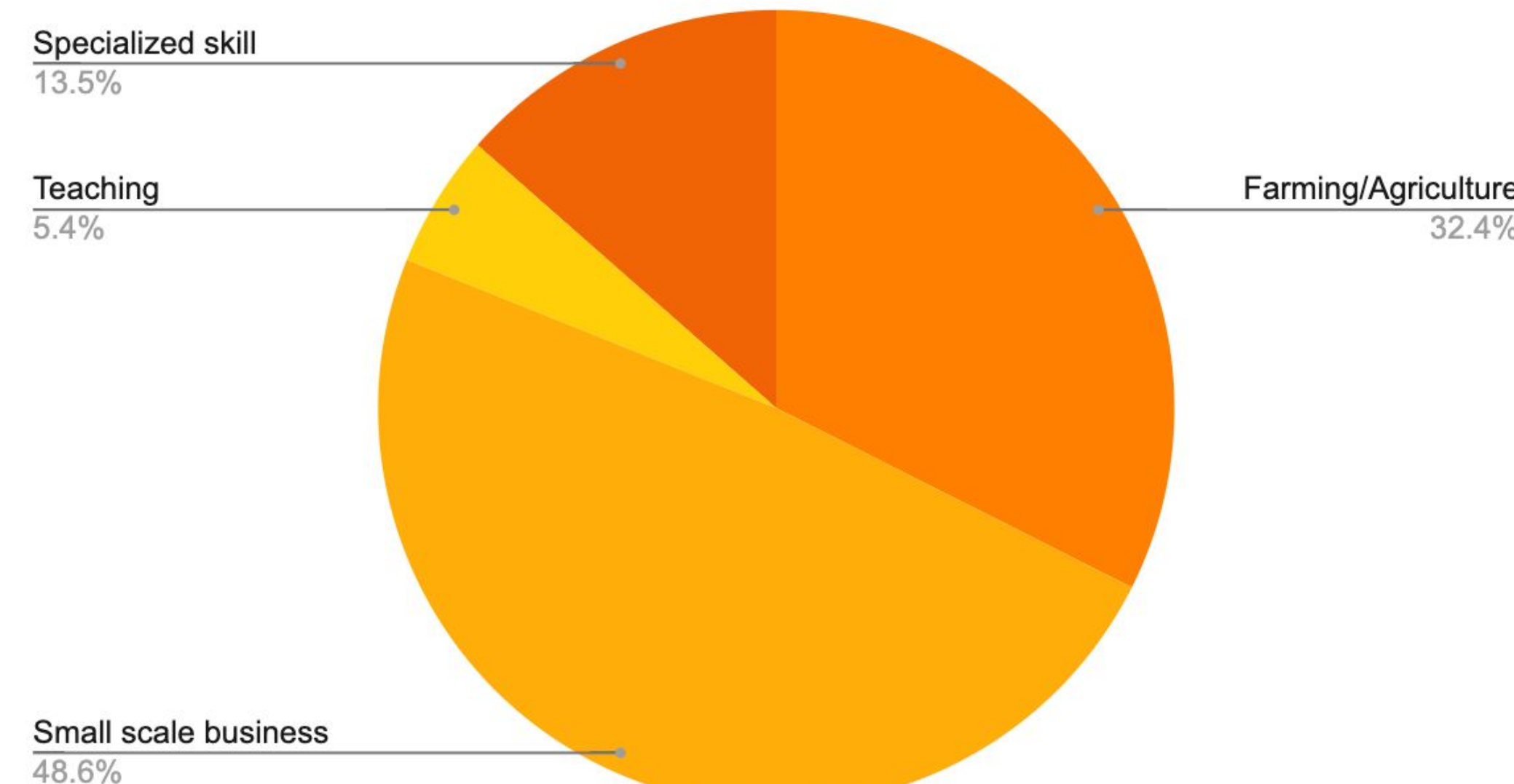


Fig 3. Previous Occupation

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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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FINDINGS CONT.

Who has been most important to your success?

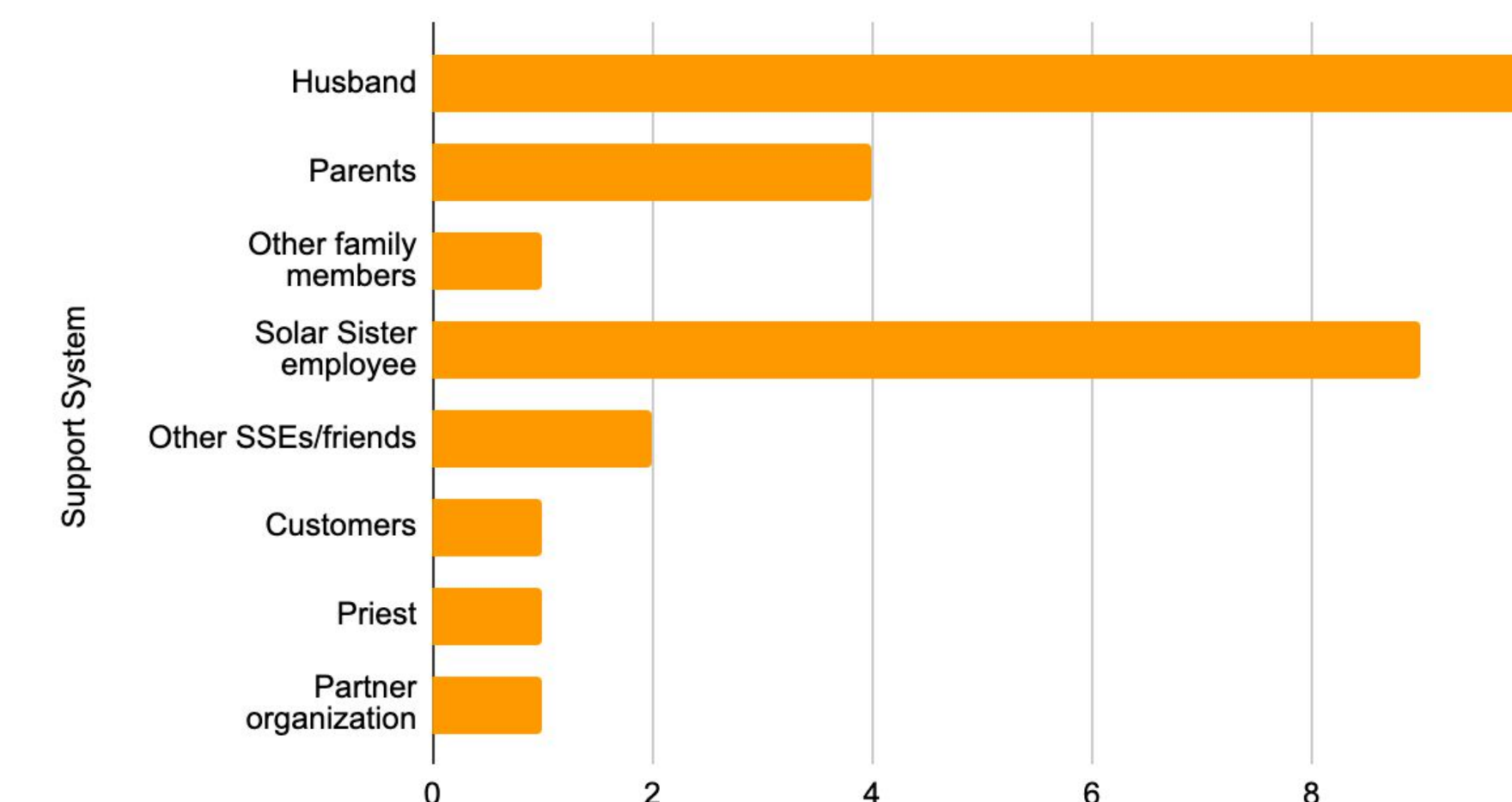


Fig 4. Support Systems

Have you inspired or recruited other women to become SSEs?

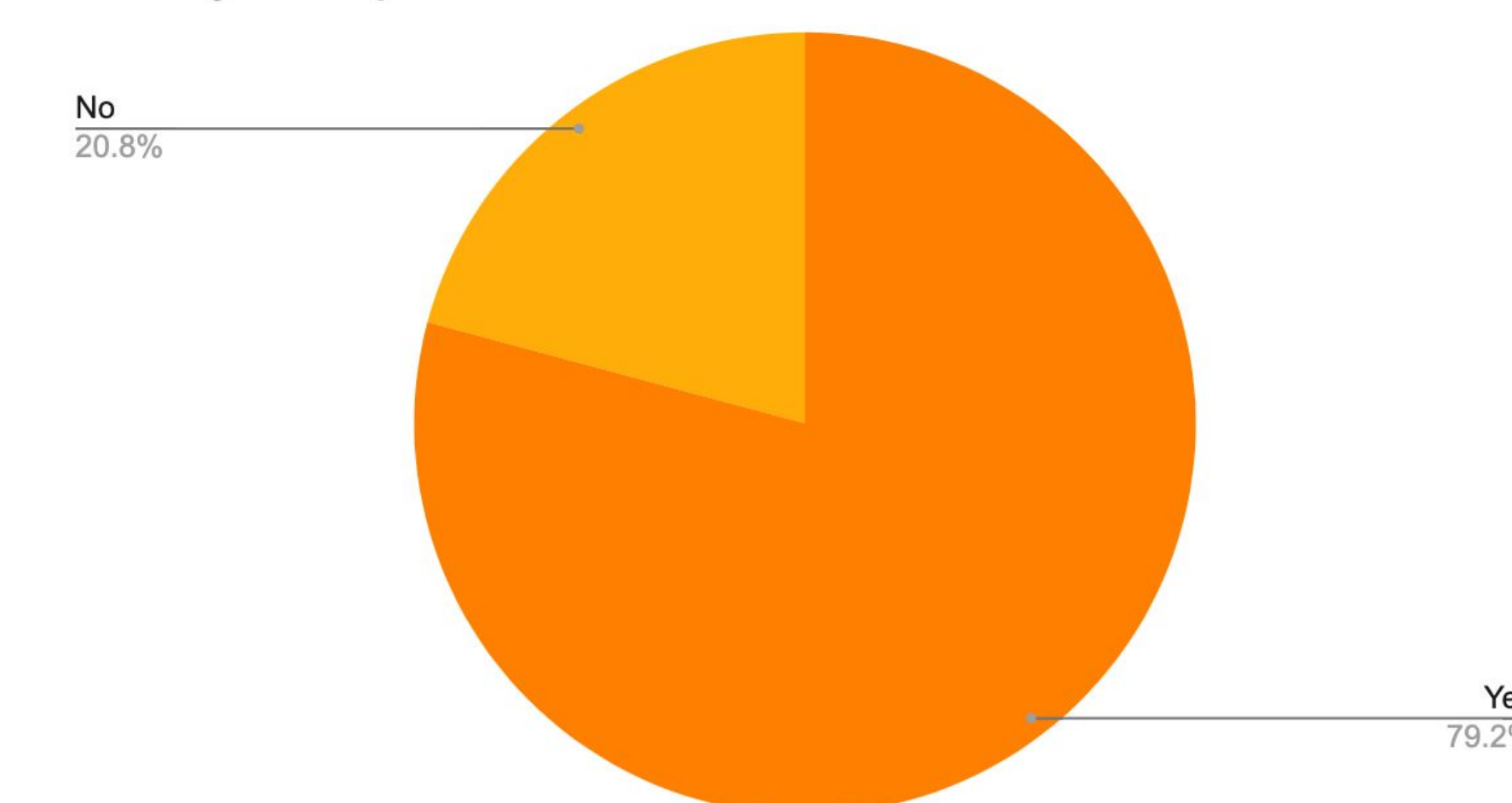


Fig 5. Micro entrepreneur recruitment

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.

DISCUSSION

My research has identified three key factors that influence women's micro entrepreneurial success. The first success factor, "access to resources" highlights the importance of education and work for women. High achieving SSE's were those who took the human and financial capital they were given and utilized them strategically to grow their businesses.

The second success factor, "community networks" reinforces the importance of networks in both initial and subsequent entrepreneur recruitment allowing them to grow their businesses. In addition, having a strong support system is crucial for continued success. This is especially important because in many Tanzanian communities women are not expected or even in some cases, permitted to work outside the home. Having a supportive family, and particularly a husband can be the difference between a woman generating an income for herself and her family or remaining in poverty.

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 resourceful distributors of clean energy and ultimately, agents of sustainable development.