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Empowering Women in Serbian Rural Areas with Entrepreneurial Initiatives



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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurial initiatives represent an important tool for the economic empowerment of women in rural areas, allowing them to generate additional sources of income, reduce poverty rates, and improve their social integration. This research analyzes the role of entrepreneurial initiatives in empowering women in rural areas of Serbia, with a particular focus on their economic and social aspects. The direct economic effects of entrepreneurial initiatives, such as generating additional income and creating new jobs, are key aspects of economic empowerment for women in rural communities. At the same time, women entrepreneurship in rural areas can serve as a tool to mitigate migration and promote more balanced regional development. For the purposes of this research, a survey method was used, and the study was conducted on a sample of 73 women living in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia from July to September 2024. The data was analyzed using SPSS software. The results of this research indicate significant economic and social benefits of entrepreneurial initiatives, which contribute to the economic independence and social empowerment of women in rural areas but also highlight challenges such as limited access to finances, education, and training. This research emphasizes the need for greater support

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from local and state institutions, as well as the importance of networking among women entrepreneurs to enhance their access to resources and markets.

KEYWORDS: *women empowerment, rural areas, entrepreneurial initiatives, female entrepreneurship*

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a key factor for economic and social development. It not only creates new opportunities but also stimulates innovation and serves as a key driver of competitive advantage in various sectors (Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). As a fundamental element of economic development, entrepreneurship addresses important societal challenges, such as high unemployment rates, poverty, and regional disparities, making it a powerful tool for creating equitable growth (Majeed et al., 2024; Cardella et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial initiatives, especially in rural areas, can play a significant role in stimulating economic growth and providing new employment opportunities for the local population, thereby positively impacting the reduction of regional disparities (Ramírez, 2023). This is particularly relevant in countries with significant rural populations, where economic challenges are often exacerbated by a lack of infrastructure, limited job opportunities, and a dependency on a narrow set of industries. In Serbia, women's entrepreneurship presents an underutilized potential (Jovanović & Lazić, 2018), with the opportunity to contribute significantly to economic growth, improve living standards, and empower women, particularly in rural communities. The development of women's entrepreneurship plays an important role in the economy, particularly in transition countries like the Republic of Serbia. It helps reduce unemployment, increase GDP, enhances living standards, facilitates the adoption of new technologies and innovations, and fosters regional and rural development (Domazet et al., 2021). Despite the potential to drive substantial economic change, women's entrepreneurial participation has been historically limited due to various social, cultural, and institutional barriers. The position of women in the labor market in the Republic of Serbia remains unfavorable, with numerous challenges in accessing employment and economic resources (Reva, 2012). According to data from the Statistical Office, the Republic of Serbia, as a developing country, faces a double-digit unemployment rate, which is particularly pronounced among women, with annual rates ranging from 10.0% in the north to 15.0% in the

south of the country (SORS, 2023). In this context, promoting self-employment and the development of women's entrepreneurship is one of the keyways to improve the status of women in society. The development of women's entrepreneurship not only enhances women's economic independence but also contributes to overall economic growth and the reduction of gender inequalities (Ameen, 2022).

To support these initiatives, various measures and programs have been implemented in Serbia aimed at empowering women as entrepreneurs and encouraging their involvement in entrepreneurial activities. Despite the challenges, women entrepreneurship in rural areas in Serbia holds a strong potential for society and the economy. Research into specific barriers and the development of targeted support measures can create conditions for more successful inclusion of women in rural areas in entrepreneurial activities, thereby promoting economic independence and the creation of sustainable communities. By doing so, it is possible to create conditions for more sustainable economic growth and empowerment, thereby ensuring that women in rural areas can fully contribute to the development of their communities and the economy.

Literature Review

Women's economic empowerment is a multidimensional process aimed at improving their financial status by ensuring access to key resources, opportunities, and rights that enable their full and equitable integration into the economy (Haque & Zulfiqar, 2016). This includes improved access to employment, financial services, property, productive assets, skill development programs, and market information (ILO, 2019; Domazet & Marjanović, 2024). This concept plays an essential role in reducing gender inequality and achieving sustainable economic development (Bayeh, 2016). Women's economic empowerment is often constrained by various socio-cultural barriers, including limited access to employment opportunities, wage disparities based on gender, and harassment, which restrict their ability to access and control assets (Kabeer, 2018). Globally, entrepreneurial activities are growing, and women are increasingly expected to contribute to economic growth (Achakpa & Radović-Marković, 2018). Women in rural areas face unequal representation in leadership and decision-making roles at all levels (Mandara et al., 2017; Shafinaj, 2024) and lack sufficient access to healthcare, education, social services, financial resources, and other

essential amenities (Khatun & Ghosh, 2021; Abbas et al., 2018; Mishra et al., 2017). The lifestyle of rural women remains rooted in tradition and patriarchy (Abbas et al., 2018), with housework and childcare being primarily their responsibility (Sugawara et al., 2010). In addition to intensive agricultural labour, they often have limited access to income, property, and decision-making within the household (Kanyagui et al., 2024). In developing countries, gender inequality significantly hampers the socio-economic development of rural households by limiting women's income opportunities, decision-making roles, and access to education and healthcare, while increasing their vulnerability to poverty and violence (Ivanović et al., 2021). Antonijević et al. (2022) also found that rural women engaged in small-scale farming significantly improved their livelihood, decision-making power, and income generation, which enhanced their independence and empowerment within the family and society, while also overcoming gender-based discrimination and violence. Social empowerment involves creating opportunities that enhance women's social relations and improve their position in social structures. It seeks to tackle societal discrimination stemming from factors such as disability, race, ethnicity, religion, or gender (Mandal, 2013). Over the past two decades, women's entrepreneurship in Serbia has undergone a significant and challenging journey, transitioning from a social to an economic and developmental category. However, there are still certain risks, given the numerous crises that have impacted the economic situation and the development of the entrepreneurial sector, both in Serbia and globally (Popović-Pantić, 2020; Marjanović et al., 2024). Also, the role of psychological factors in entrepreneurship has gained increasing attention. Psychological capital has become a key concept in understanding entrepreneurial behaviour. Psychological capital has been found to positively influence entrepreneurial spirit and psychological empowerment (Bhandari et al., 2024). Tejada et al. (2024) claimed that psychological factors such as purpose in life, personal growth, and positive societal relations significantly influence the empowerment of women entrepreneurs, with a strong relationship between empowerment and their psychological well-being, which in turn plays a key role in driving entrepreneurial ventures and addressing unemployment and poverty. Efendi et al. (2024) highlighted that entrepreneurial attitudes positively impact entrepreneurial interest, and entrepreneurial subjective norms significantly influence interest in entrepreneurship. Technological advancements have also played a key role in fostering women's entrepreneurship. The use of ICTs by rural

women fosters innovation and entrepreneurial mindset, enhancing their micro-entrepreneurial activities (Chatterjee et al., 2020; Domazet et al., 2022). Laxmi & Gochhait (2023) have examined different factors' effects on women's entrepreneurial success and highlighted those factors such as achievement, risk-taking, technology adaptation, as well as economic and socio-cultural influences significantly contribute to the success of women entrepreneurs. Vujadinović (2024) highlighted that there is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the development of women's entrepreneurship and women's empowerment and the institutional framework plays a crucial and direct role in fostering the development of women's entrepreneurship. This highlights the importance of a supportive institutional environment in fostering the growth of female entrepreneurship, contributing not only to economic growth but also to the social empowerment of women.

Previous studies have identified several key motivations driving women in the Republic of Serbia to start their own businesses. These include the need for higher income, unemployment, which often serves as a catalyst for entrepreneurial ventures, and the desire for economic and professional independence (Popović-Pantić, 2014; Ivanović-Đukić & Petković, 2020; Marjanović et al., 2022). Moreover, many women are motivated to pursue entrepreneurship to better care for their children and families, ensuring a brighter future for their offspring (Ivanović-Đukić & Petković, 2020). Although data from the Serbian Business Registers Agency (SBRA) shows an increase in the number of female entrepreneurs in the Republic of Serbia, women remain underrepresented compared to men in entrepreneurial activities. However, women entrepreneurs in Serbia face numerous challenges that limit their development and success in business, which is especially pronounced in less developed areas. The most significant barriers include a lack of personal capital to start a business, insufficient managerial knowledge and experience, as well as unfamiliarity with the nature of business operations and market mechanisms (Raghuvanshi et al., 2017; Marjanović & Đukić, 2020; Domazet et al., 2018). Additionally, responsibilities related to childcare and family obligations also present a significant barrier to the development of women's entrepreneurship (Tur-Porcar et al., 2016). These studies highlight the need for further support and the development of measures that would enable women to overcome these obstacles and successfully start and manage their businesses.

Rural tourism is a significant factor in the economic empowerment of women in rural areas of Serbia. According to Radović & Radović-Marković (2016), the development of rural tourism can greatly stimulate women's entrepreneurship, providing them with economic opportunities and contributing to their economic empowerment. Beyond economic benefits, the development of rural tourism and women's entrepreneurship can serve as an effective mechanism for preventing depopulation and ensuring balanced regional development. Therefore, this approach highlights the crucial role of women in improving rural communities and emphasizes the potential of rural tourism for the sustainability of these communities. Targeted initiatives to support women entrepreneurs in rural tourism are crucial for ensuring their long-term success and overcoming historical sectoral constraints (Nordbø, 2022).

Methodology

The research was conducted using an integrated approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods, to provide a comprehensive insight into the topic. The study was carried out in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia, where rural communities are among the most traditional and patriarchal in this part of Europe. Women in these areas face numerous challenges, including limited access to employment, pay inequality, and a lack of financial independence (Kolin & Čičkarić, 2010), which further deepen their social and economic marginalization. For the purposes of this research, a specially designed questionnaire was created in accordance with the objectives of the study. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part collected general data on the age structure, level of education, and other characteristics of women entrepreneurs in Serbia. The second part of the question provides insight into entrepreneurial initiatives, while the third part of the question deals with the challenges that women entrepreneurs in rural areas in the Republic of Serbia face in their daily business.

The study was conducted on a sample of 73 respondents during the period from June to September 2024. The collected data was systematized and processed using *SPSS* software, which specializes in data analysis in social sciences. This methodological approach enabled a detailed identification of trends, challenges, and opportunities for the development of women's entrepreneurship in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia. The data

obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics, which enabled the presentation of the basic characteristics of the sample and the identification of key patterns. This approach offers a comprehensive insight into the social and economic aspects of women's entrepreneurship in rural areas, as well as into their perspectives and challenges they face.

The main drawback of this study is the small sample size, which can be attributed to the specific characteristics of the research context. The study focused on rural Serbia, where collecting primary data required extensive fieldwork, limiting the number of participants. Additionally, women entrepreneurs in rural Serbia represent a narrow and specific demographic group and identifying active participants within this community naturally resulted in a smaller sample size. Despite these limitations, the findings provide valuable insights into the entrepreneurial landscape for women in rural areas. This study serves as a pilot for future research, helping refine the methodology before conducting a broader, multi-country analysis. Future research should aim to include a larger and more diverse sample, potentially expanding to other rural regions.

Results and Discussion

This section examines the main findings of the research, providing a comprehensive overview of the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, their entrepreneurial motivations, the nature of their business ventures, and the challenges they face in rural areas in the Republic of Serbia. The analysis also highlights key support mechanisms that could enhance the entrepreneurial efforts of women in these areas. By comparing the findings with relevant literature, this discussion seeks to deepen the understanding of the economic and social contributions of women entrepreneurs in rural communities, while identifying systemic barriers that hinder their progress. These insights are crucial for shaping effective policies and programs aimed at empowering rural women and fostering sustainable economic development.

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents included in the sample for this research.

Table 1: The Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

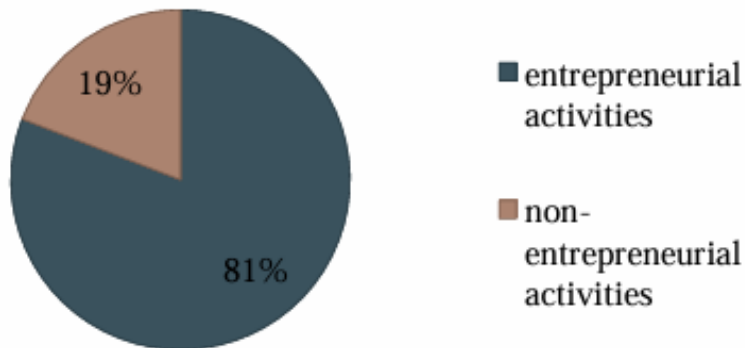
Age	Frequency (N=73)	Percentage (%)
Up to 30	15	19 %
31-40	24	33%
41-50	20	26%
More than 51	17	22%
Level of education	Frequency (N=73)	Percentage (%)
Primary school	21	29%
Secondary school	39	53%
College/Faculty	13	18%
Marital status	Frequency (N=73)	Percentage (%)
Married	59	81%
Unmarried	14	19%
Monthly income (in Euros)	Frequency (N=73)	Percentage (%)
Up to 250	12	16%
251-400	32	44%
401-550	18	25%
551 and more	11	15%

Source: Authors' calculation

Table 1 provides an overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, offering valuable insights into the profile of women engaged in entrepreneurial activities in rural areas in the Republic of Serbia. The age distribution reveals that most respondents fall between 31 and 40 years old (33%), an age group often associated with both career development and family obligations, while 19% are under 30, indicating a growing interest in entrepreneurship among younger women. The education levels highlight a significant concentration at the secondary school level (53%), which may reflect the typical educational attainment in rural areas but also points to a lack of access to higher education that could enhance entrepreneurial skills. At the same time, 29% have only primary school education, which underscores the importance of providing targeted training and capacity-building programs for this group. Marital status data shows that 81% of respondents are married, suggesting that family roles may strongly influence their entrepreneurial activities, potentially shaping the

types of businesses they pursue and their work-life balance. Income levels indicate that a large portion (44%) earn between €251 and €400 per month, which suggests that most of these women operate small-scale businesses with modest profitability. However, the 16% earning below €250 and only 15% earning above €551 highlight the financial challenges and limited economic returns often faced by rural women entrepreneurs.

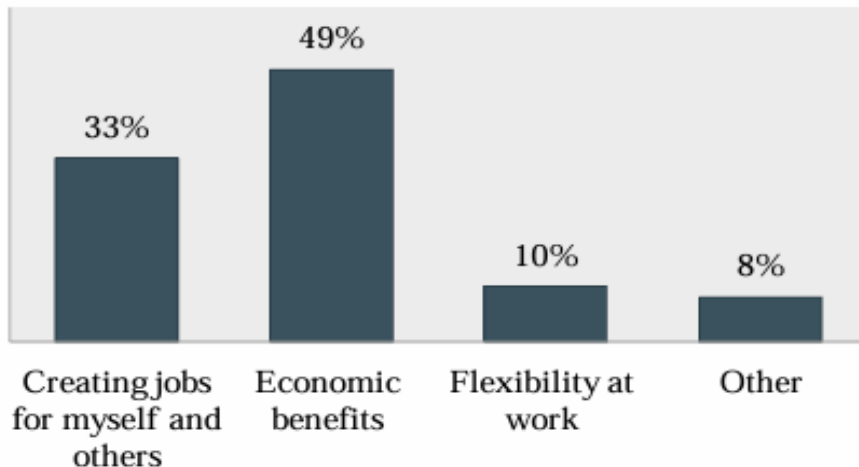
Figure 1: The participation of women in entrepreneurial activities in rural areas of Serbia



Source: Authors

The data presented in Figure 1 highlights the active involvement of women in entrepreneurial activities in rural areas of Serbia. The majority of respondents (81%) in rural areas are engaged in some form of entrepreneurial activities. Women in rural areas in Serbia often turn to entrepreneurship to address local economic challenges, such as low-income employment or the absence of suitable jobs. This trend is consistent with broader patterns, where entrepreneurial activity is seen as a vital solution to poverty, unemployment, and limited access to resources. However, it is also important to consider that 19% of respondents are not involved in entrepreneurial activities for some reason.

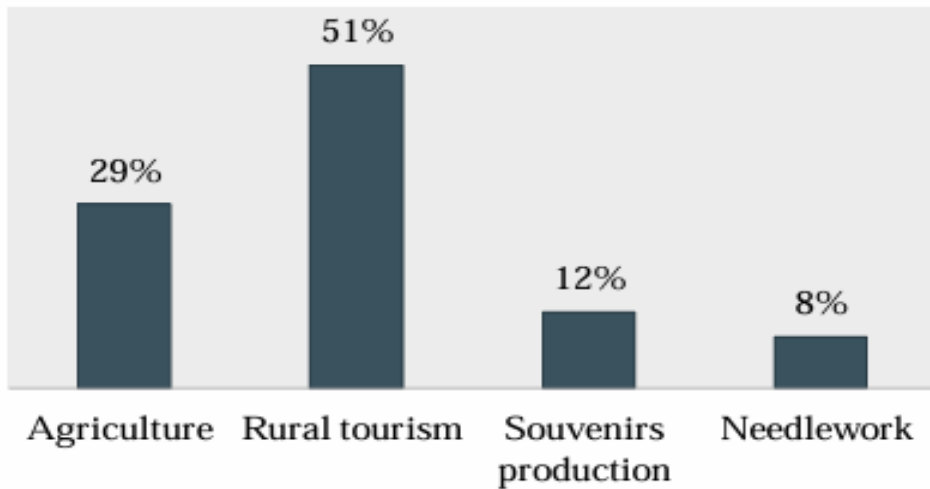
Figure 2: The primary motivation for starting a business



Source: Authors

As shown in Figure 2, the primary motivation for starting a business among the respondents is economic benefits (49%). In addition to economic benefits, 33% of respondents indicate that creating employment opportunities for themselves and others is a key motivator. A smaller proportion of respondents (10%) are motivated by the flexibility that entrepreneurship offers in terms of work-life balance, reflecting the significant role that family responsibilities play in the decision to become self-employed, and other reasons (8%). These results align with other studies that conclude most women entrepreneurs in developing economies are motivated to start their own business out of necessity, reflecting a lack of employment alternatives or dissatisfaction with existing employment opportunities (Ferrín, 2021). Additionally, women often start their own businesses to find a balance between professional obligations, earning potential and family responsibilities (McGowan et al., 2012).

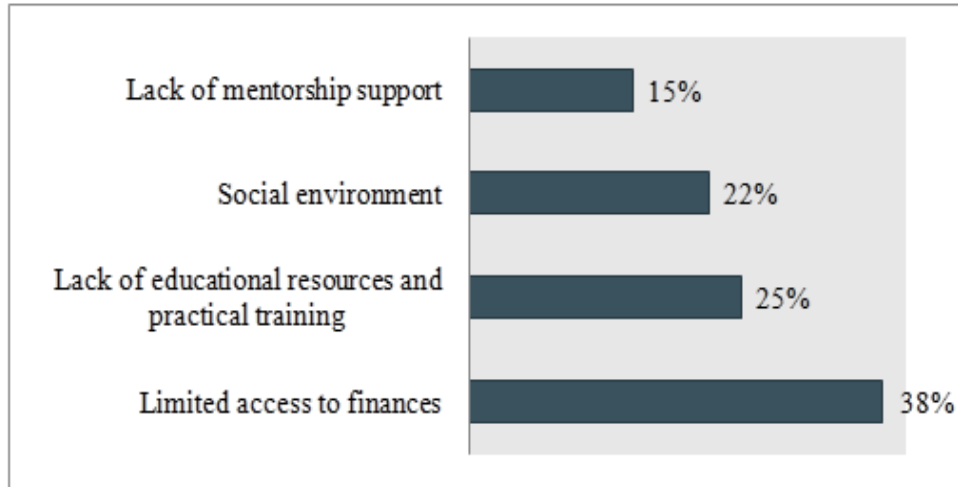
Figure 3: The type of entrepreneurship initiatives



Source: Authors

Figure 3 illustrates the diversity of entrepreneurial ventures undertaken by women in rural areas in the Republic of Serbia. A significant proportion (51%) of respondents is involved in rural tourism, highlighting the potential of this sector to generate income and employment in rural areas. Rural tourism has become an increasingly popular business choice due to its reliance on local heritage, natural resources, and unique cultural experiences, which are in many Serbian rural regions. Agriculture comes second, with 29% of respondents choosing it as their primary business activity. This is unsurprising given the prominence of agriculture in rural areas, where women often engage in farming, livestock, and food production. Souvenir production (12%) and needlework (8%) represent smaller but still important sectors, often driven by local crafts and traditions. These entrepreneurial initiatives reflect the diverse opportunities available to women in rural areas, but they also point to the need for additional support and resources to help women scale and diversify their businesses further.

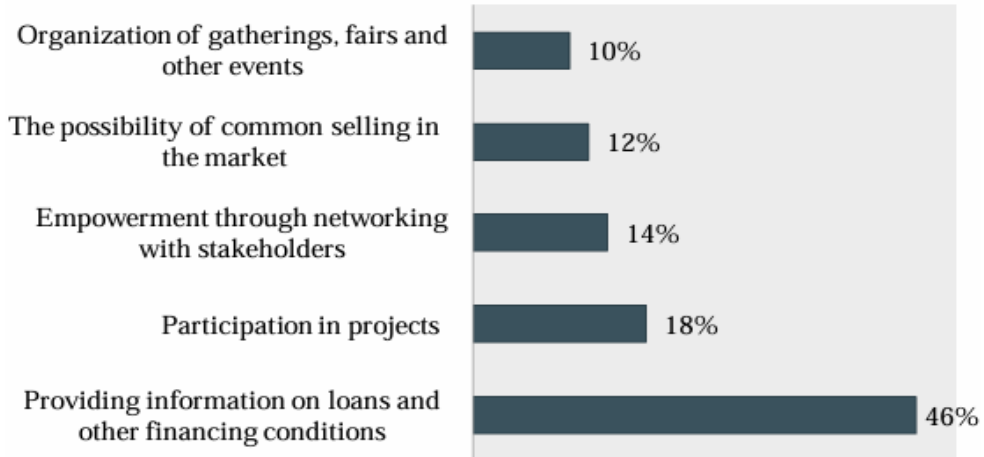
Figure 4: The challenges that women entrepreneurs in rural area of Serbia face in their business



Source: Authors

Figure 4 shows the most common challenges and barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in rural areas of Serbia in their daily business. The most significant challenge, identified by 38% of respondents, is limited access to financial resources. This reflects a widespread issue in developing economies, where women entrepreneurs often face difficulties in obtaining loans or grants due to lack of financial literacy, or trust from financial institutions. In rural areas, these challenges are exacerbated by limited access to banks and financial services, which makes securing capital for business startups or expansions even more difficult. The second most common challenge, reported by 25% of respondents, is the lack of educational resources and practical training. Many women in rural areas do not have access to business development programs or entrepreneurship education, which are essential for acquiring the skills needed to manage a successful business. Social environment challenges were cited by 22% of respondents. Finally, 15% of respondents noted a lack of membership support, which refers to the absence of business networks or organizations that can provide resources, mentorship, and advocacy for women entrepreneurs.

Figure 5: The essential support for women's entrepreneurship in rural areas



Source: Authors

Figure 5 illustrates the key areas of support identified as crucial for empowering women entrepreneurs in rural areas of Serbia. The most significant support, as indicated by 46% of respondents, is access to information on loans and financing conditions. Financial literacy and access to affordable credit are crucial for women who want to start or expand their businesses. Providing accessible information on financial services and loan conditions would empower women to make informed decisions and secure the capital they need to start their businesses. The second most significant form of support, identified by 18% of respondents, is participation in projects, such as government programs or EU-funded initiatives, which provide financial support and networking opportunities. These projects can offer vital resources, such as grants, mentorship, and market access, which are critical for the development of small businesses. Another important area of support, cited by 14% of respondents, is networking with stakeholders. Building connections with other entrepreneurs, business leaders, and potential clients is essential for women entrepreneurs to expand their reach and access new business opportunities. Then 12% of respondents identified the possibility of common selling in the market as a key support. Lastly, 10% of respondents highlighted the importance of organizing gatherings, fairs, and other events to promote their businesses, engage with the community, and enhance their visibility.

The findings of this study highlight that women in rural areas in Serbia possess strong entrepreneurial potential, evidenced by their high participation rates and diverse business ventures. These findings suggest that while women in rural areas in Serbia are keen to engage in entrepreneurship, they face significant hurdles that should be addressed through targeted policies, financial support, and training programs. Women in rural areas often operate in isolation, limiting their access to resources, markets, and collaborative opportunities. Limited access to financial resources remains the most significant barrier. Additionally, the lack of educational resources and practical training presents a critical gap that prevents women from acquiring the skills necessary for business development and innovation. Beyond financial and educational support, fostering a supportive social and professional environment is crucial. This data underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to supporting women's entrepreneurship, which combines financial support, training, networking, and marketing initiatives to create an environment conducive to business growth and sustainability.

The results of this study align with previous research while also revealing some notable differences. Our findings on financial constraints, reported by 38% of respondents as the most significant challenge, align with Raghuvanshi et al. (2017), who found that limited access to credit remains the primary barrier for women entrepreneurs in developing economies. It corresponds with Chordiya (2013), who also highlights that the main problems faced by women entrepreneurs in rural areas include lack of capital. However, our results differ from those of Ivanović-Đukić & Petković (2020), who found that the lack of education was the most significant barrier to women entrepreneurship in Serbia, our results indicate that financial limitations (38%) pose a greater challenge than educational gaps (25%). Additionally, the role of rural tourism in empowering women, observed in 51% of respondents, aligns with the findings of Radović & Radović-Marković (2016) in Serbia. However, it differs from Nordbø (2022), who noted a lower participation rate of women in rural tourism in Norway due to structural constraints. Research for Serbia emphasizes the importance of enhancing women's entrepreneurial capacities and strengthening their empowerment through different forms of informal support mechanisms such as networking and similar initiatives, which can help women become better equipped to seize available opportunities and navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship more effectively.

Conclusion

The research findings indicate that women's entrepreneurship in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia has significant potential for development and can serve as a key factor in the socio-economic empowerment of women and the improvement of local communities. Although rural women are motivated to engage in entrepreneurial activities, they face numerous challenges, such as limited access to financial resources and the lack of adequate education and practical training. Additionally, women often balance business responsibilities with family obligations, which further hinders their entrepreneurial growth. Therefore, it is essential to enhance support through improved access to financing, education and training, as well as the creation of networks for collaboration and experience-sharing among women entrepreneurs. Empowering women in rural areas of the Republic of Serbia through entrepreneurial initiatives requires a holistic approach that combines economic activities with education, policy support, and local community engagement. By addressing systemic barriers and using opportunities in tourism and agriculture, rural women can achieve economic independence and contribute to the development of sustainable communities. This conclusion highlights the necessity of supporting women-led initiatives in rural areas, thereby improving not only the economic position of women but also the overall sustainability of rural communities.

The results of the conducted research reveal several limitations in this study, which can be addressed in future research by considering specific recommendations. The first limitation is the sample size of respondents, suggesting that increasing the sample size would improve the reliability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused only on rural areas within Serbia, the second recommendation is to expand future research to include rural areas in other countries with similar levels of economic development, which could enable comparative analysis and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. The third limitation is that the research methodology primarily relied on survey methods, which could be enhanced by incorporating diverse approaches, such as face-to-face interviews or focus groups, to gather qualitative insights. The fourth limitation is that this research covers only a shorter period, highlighting the need for future studies to analyze trends over an extended period. These improvements would significantly enhance the relevance and applicability of future research results.

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