

# The Influence of Entrepreneurial skills of DR Congolese Refugee Women on Economic Growth in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

## Abstract

*Refugee women's entrepreneurship plays a vital role in fostering economic development and alleviating poverty in both sending and receiving countries. In South Africa, despite their significant contributions to socioeconomic progress, these women encounter various challenges, including limited access to proper identity documentation, financial resources, and services necessary for entering the labor market. This study aims to investigate the impact of the entrepreneurial skills of Congolese refugee women on economic development in KwaZulu-Natal Province. Utilising the PRISMA approach, a comprehensive search strategy was employed to identify relevant studies published in English that examine the entrepreneurial skills of Congolese refugee women in KwaZulu-Natal, through databases such as Scopus and Web of Science for quality assessment, data extraction, and synthesis. The findings indicate that entrepreneurial activities serve as a means of empowering refugee women, thereby alleviating poverty and contributing to economic development in their host countries. The economic contributions of Congolese female entrepreneurs in South Africa could be substantial, particularly with the implementation of gender-responsive policies and the provision of valid identification documents. Such measures would not only enhance their well-being but also support the overall economic growth of the province. It is essential to develop and implement government policies that are sensitive to gender, aimed at providing the necessary support to refugee women for the economic development of their host country.*

**Keywords:** *Refugee women entrepreneurship, economic development, poverty alleviation, Migrants, Congolese Refugee women*

## 1. Introduction

Refugee women's entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognised as a pivotal to economic development and poverty alleviation in both sending and receiving countries. Refugees, especially women from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), have faced significant displacement, with over 25,000 having settled in South Africa for more than five years (UNHCR, 2018). In the absence of sufficient governmental support or formal employment opportunities, many Congolese refugee women in South Africa, particularly in KwaZulu Natal province, turn to entrepreneurship as a means of survival and empowerment. While refugee women contribute to economic and social development through entrepreneurial activities (Al-Hamad et al., 2024), the conditions under which they operate are often challenging. Although South African constitution recognises the socio-economic rights of all people, however many asylum seekers, particularly women, are excluded from receiving social grants (Nzabamwita & Dinbabo, 2022). Faced with this exclusion, Congolese refugee women in cities like Durban and Pietermaritzburg engage in informal economic activities, such as hairdressing, tailoring, and small-scale retail, to support themselves and their families (Kenge, 2017). Although Congolese refugee women engaging in casual economy they are consistently marginalized in both public discourse and policy, resulting in their exclusion from the formal labor market and society at large on equal terms with South African citizens (Nyamnjoh, Hall, and Cirolia, 2022).

Regardless of their vital role in the informal economy, these women face numerous barriers to entrepreneurial success. They often lack access to startup capital, formal business skills, and resources needed to expand their ventures (Collins, 2017). Moreover, refugee women tend to be marginalized in the host country, with their economic activities often overlooked or unsupported by local policies (Umubyeyi & Mtapuri, 2024).

Given the challenges of Congolese refugee women entrepreneurs in KwaZulu Natal, the aim of this study is to investigate the impact of entrepreneurial skills on Congolese refugee women on the economic advancement in the province. Following the purpose of this study, three objectives were established: i) to identify the entrepreneurial

skills of Congolese refugee women in Durban; ii) to assess the impact of entrepreneurial skills on Congolese refugee women's economic activities and livelihoods; iii) to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by Congolese refugee women in their entrepreneurial endeavors. To conclude this study, the authors focused on two research questions:

1. What factors motivate Congolese refugee women entrepreneurs to engage in entrepreneurial activities?
2. What barriers and challenges do Congolese refugee women entrepreneurs encounter in establishing their own economic activities?

A similar study undertaken in a place with a distinctive geography, like South Africa, would also provide interesting results. Most previous studies have been done in developed nations (Collins, 2017; Adeeko ~~and~~ & Treanor, 2022; Al-Hamad et al., 2024). Consequently, little is known about refugee women entrepreneurship from developing parts of the world such as African nations and South Africa in particular. Accordingly, this gender gap merits both women personal empowerment and experimental research in the areas of refugee women entrepreneurs in economic landscape.

## 2. Conceptual background

To achieve conceptual clarity, it is essential to examine the various definitions associated with refugee women's entrepreneurship, identify the attributes that characterize this concept, and analyse how these elements collectively contribute to its overall utilisation and intent. The existing literature currently lacks clarity and coherence in defining and operationalising this issue. Despite the growth of scholarship and research on refugee women's entrepreneurship in recent years, especially concerning themes of resilience, empowerment, gender, and livelihoods, this field of study is still in its early stages (Al-Dajani, 2022). The establishment and growth of businesses by women refugees are influenced by various factors, including their home country, transitional journey, and the context of the host country (Ranabahu ~~et al.~~, ~~de Vries & Basharati~~, 2021). For that reason, ~~it~~ is important to consider these multifaceted layers when addressing their entrepreneurial activities. One effective strategy for empowering refugee women in their host countries is to increase their economic participation by promoting entrepreneurship (Street, Ng, & Al-Dajani, 2022). The analysis of entrepreneurship among refugee women provides valuable insights into their unique challenges and opportunities. It presents a comprehensive understanding that integrates economic, social, and cultural dimensions (Bikorimana ~~and~~ & Nziku, 2023). This framework positions entrepreneurship as a strategic approach to addressing the impacts of displacement, which has significant implications for both policy and practice.

## 3. Literature Review

Globally, the movement of refugees presents a diversity of economic and social challenges, especially for host countries. Refugees, including Congolese women in KwaZulu Natal (KZN), South Africa, often find themselves with limited resources and opportunities. However, entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised as a key pathway of economic survival and social integration for refugees. This literature review investigates the entrepreneurial skills of Congolese refugee women and their influence on the economic development of KZN focusing on three main objectives, (i) to identify the entrepreneurial skills of Congolese refugee women in KZN; (ii) to assess the impact of entrepreneurial skills on Congolese refugee women's economic activities and livelihoods; and (iii) to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by Congolese refugee women in their entrepreneurial endeavors.

### 3.1. Entrepreneurial skills of Congolese refugee women in KZN

Entrepreneurial skills are essential for the success of refugee women's economic activities. Research on refugee entrepreneurship emphasises the diverse skills that women often acquire, such as resilience, adaptability, financial literacy, and basic business management. In the case of Congolese refugee women in KZN, these skills may include the capacity to identifying market opportunities, networking effectively, and managing small-scale businesses such as street vending, tailoring, or food production.

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Refugee Women's Entrepreneurship can be understood as a holistic process that extends beyond mere survival or self-employment (Al-Hamad et al., 2024). This phenomenon arises from the limited formal employment opportunities and livelihood requirements encountered in host countries. It encompasses economic, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions, driven by a refugee woman's aspiration for self-reliance, innovation, and the pursuit of challenging stigmatized identities. This path ultimately provides opportunities for empowerment, stability, and meaningful contributions to society, despite the challenges faced (Al-Hamad et al., 2024).

Several studies emphasise the importance of these skills for refugees to navigate their new environment. For instance, Bikorimana and Nziku (2023), noted that refugees often possess strong personal traits such as persistence and adaptability, which enable them to cope with challenges in unfamiliar environments. In addition, research suggest that refugee women often gain skills informally due to their lived experiences, enabling them to manage businesses despite facing numerous constraints such as access to resources (Al-Dajani, 2022).

### **3.2. Influence of Entrepreneurial Skills on Economic Activities and Livelihoods**

Entrepreneurial activities are essential for Congolese refugee women as they provide income generation opportunities and foster independence. Refugee women in KZN leverage their entrepreneurial skills to navigate employment barriers, resulting in economic empowerment, enhanced well-being and contribution to the local economy. For example, Al-Hamad et al. (2024) note that the entrepreneurial activities also serve as a means of fostering gender equality and challenging national gender norms.

The ability of refugee women to engage in entrepreneurial activities positively impacts not only their economic livelihoods but also the broader social fabric of their host communities. Their businesses, although often informal, contribute to local communities by providing goods and services, creating jobs, and fostering cross-cultural exchanges. However, they face several obstacles, including weak social networks, limited markets access, and inadequate management skills (Bikorimana and Nziku, 2023). These challenges highlight the need for target support and interventions from governments and NGOs.

### **3.3. Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Congolese Refugee Women Entrepreneurs**

Despite the critical role of entrepreneurship in supporting refugee livelihoods, Congolese women face significance barriers in establishing and sustaining their businesses. These include societal prejudice, limited access to capital, xenophobia, and legal restrictions. Gumede and Moyo (2023) found that African migrant women, including refugees, often engage in informal enterprises not by choice, but due to the lack of alternative employment opportunities. These challenges faced by Congolese refugee women are compounded by issues of discrimination, particularly in accessing markets and resources in urban centres like Durban (Nyamnjoh et al., Hall, and Girolia, 2022).

### **3.4. Women refugee Entrepreneurs in South Africa**

South Africa is a major destination for refugees and migrants from various African countries. Despite its reputation as a sanctuary, refugees face substantial socio-economic challenges, including high levels of xenophobia, unequal access to resources, and discrimination (Crush et al., 2017). Post-apartheid South Africa's self-settlement approach allows refugees to move freely, but the absence of formal support often result in economic exclusion, with many turning to informal entrepreneurship to survive.

In Durban, for example, Congolese women refugee engage in informal trading activities, selling goods like clothing and food to sustain themselves. However, their entrepreneur efforts are often constrained by their legal status, lack of access to financial services, and the ongoing threat of xenophobic violence (Kenge, 2017; Umbyeyi, 2024). These conditions have led to a precarious existence for many, yet they continue to play an important role in local economies by providing essential goods and services.

In conclusion, entrepreneurial activities are essential to Congolese women refugees in South Africa, particularly in KZN, where they provide a means of economic survival and empowerment. Although they face significant challenges, including limited access to resources, xenophobia, and legal restrictions, their entrepreneurial endeavors contribute meaningfully to both their families and the local economies. Recognising the economy potential of refugee women entrepreneurs is crucial for both government and local leaders to address their needs and dismantle the barriers

they face. Enhance support, such as access to business training, financial services and legal protection, could significantly improve the entrepreneurial success of economic integration of Congolese women refugees in KZN.

#### 4. Research Methods

The study ~~will~~ has ~~employed~~ the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework in its systematic review methodology. PRISMA is a widely recognized approach for conducting systematic reviews and ensuring transparency in the scientific process. A systematic literature review (SLR) is a rigorous and evidence-focused form of literature review that seeks to minimize bias ~~in order to~~ to accurately evaluate the evidence (Hagen-Zanker & and Mallet, 2013). A comprehensive search of relevant scholarly databases, such as Web of Science and Google Scholar, will be conducted to identify peer-reviewed articles, reports, and studies regarding the entrepreneurial skills influence of Congolese refugee women on economic growth in Durban, South Africa. Various combinations of keywords and controlled vocabulary terms, such as "Congolese refugee women," "refugee women entrepreneurship," "South Africa," and their variations, will be utilised in the search process. Search queries will be refined using Boolean operators. Pertinent information, including study design, sample size, key findings, and methodological details, will be extracted from selected studies using a standardized data extraction form. The results of the selected studies will be synthesised to identify common themes, trends, and patterns related to the influence of entrepreneurial skills of Congolese refugee women on economic growth in KZN, South Africa. Any conflicting or inconsistent results will be carefully reviewed and resolved. This research aims to provide a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and the influence of Congolese refugee women on economic growth of KZN by adhering to a systematic review approach based on PRISMA principles (Moher et al., 2015; Anwana & and Aroba, 2022; Aroba et al., 2023).

##### 4.1. Data Flow-Chart Processing

In order to finalise the data extraction process, the year of publication was limited to include only documents published from the inception of the study onwards. Subsequently, all documents that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. The included documents, limited to those published in English, were utilised for the study.

##### 4.2. Search Strategy

The selection process of exported publications from the Scopus and Web of Science databases was based on specific keywords relevant to the research topic. Following the extraction process, a total of 90 documents were retained from the Web of Science (WoS) database and 30 from the Scopus database. The keyword search results for each database are outlined in Table 1 below.

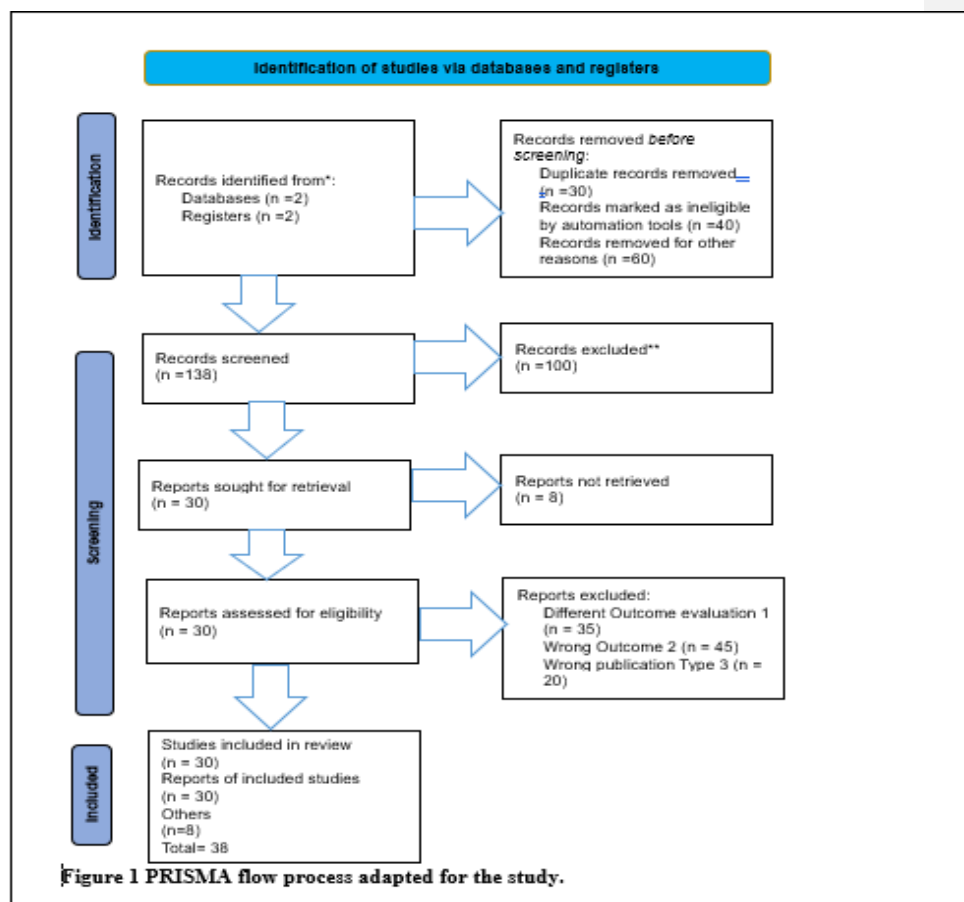
**Table 1: Keyword search for individual database**

Database	Keyword Search
Web of Science	("Congolese refugee women") AND ("refugee women entrepreneurship") AND ("informal economy* OR informal trade)
Scopus	("Congolese refugee women,") AND ("refugee women entrepreneurship") AND ("informal economy* OR informal trade)

##### 4.2.1. Study Selection

A total of 38 publications were identified using the Bibliometric R-application. After a thorough screening process to eliminate duplicates, 100 publications were excluded from the dataset. Automation tools detected an additional 138 records that did not meet the inclusion criteria due to reasons such as insufficient keyword relevance or being outside the specified timeframe of the search. Furthermore, 100 more records were removed due to incorrect publication categorisation. In total, 138 publications were eliminated for not meeting the search parameters. Following the screening process, 38 papers that satisfied the inclusion and exclusion criteria were selected for this

study. The author critically reviewed the abstracts of these papers to ensure their relevance to the research. The selection process adhered to the guidelines outlined in the Preferred Reporting of Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) template, as depicted in Figure 1 (Moher et al., 2015).



## 5. Research Results

The findings of the present study utilised a systematic review methodology to investigate the impact of entrepreneurial skills possessed by Congolese refugee women on economic development in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. Several significant themes and patterns emerged from the analysis of existing literature. The results indicated that Congolese refugee women in the KZN demonstrated various entrepreneurial skills, including identifying market opportunities, establishing effective networks, and excelling in specific industries such as hairdressing, street vending, tailoring, and food production. These women actively contribute to the informal economy which plays a crucial role in supporting their livelihoods despite of the challenges they faced.

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This study aligns with the findings of Bikorimana and Nziku (2023), which highlights that refugee women often possess a range of entrepreneurial skills that enable them to navigate unfamiliar markets and sustain their economic activities in host communities. However, the present research also highlights the socio-economic challenges Congolese refugee women face in South Africa, which hinder their entrepreneurial activities. These include societal prejudice, xenophobia, limited access to financial resources, and legal barriers, such as difficulties in obtaining proper identification documents. Gumede and Moyo (2023) observed that African migrant women, including refugees, often engage in informal enterprises not out of preference, but as a result of limited available employment opportunities.

Although refugees are often viewed as a burden to South Africa, Congolese refugee women are increasingly recognised as active contributors with the potential to drive local economy growth and development (Crush et al., 2017). The results revealed that entrepreneurial activities have been identified as a key means of empowering refugee women and alleviating poverty in host countries. Despite their marginalisation and lack of access to resources, the findings show that many refugee women have demonstrated resilience, using entrepreneurship to improve their socio-economic condition. However, their abilities to launch or expand new enterprises is constrained by a lack of financial history, credits, assets, or security to obtain bank loans. Consequently, the support of organisations like UNHCR, NGOs and South African government is critical in improving business training, sponsoring projects, and ensuring access to proper identification documents (Kandolo, 2010). The study further reveals that the marginalised status of refugees in South Africa perpetuates a narrative of victimisation, exploitation, and vulnerability. As a result, their presence in urban populations is often evaluated based on perceived burdens rather than potential contributors. However, the economic impact of Congolese refugee women entrepreneurs could be significant if they were supported by gender-responsive policies and provided with a valid identification document. This would not only enhance both their well-being but also contribute to the economic growth of KwaZulu-Natal Province.

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In conclusion, the findings revealed that entrepreneurial activities play a crucial role of income for Congolese refugee women to avoid victimisation, exploitation, and vulnerability especially to cope with their socio-economic challenges in SA. Therefore, the needs of the UNHCR, the government and other stake holders to see the presence of women refugees and Congolese refugee women within urban populations not as burdens rather than advantages capable to transform and to contribute through policy and practice to the economic growth of the country.

## 6. Research Discussion

The findings of this study show that entrepreneurial skills play a critical role in the income generation, to enabling Congolese refugee women living in KZN to the socio-economic challenges they face. This is consistent with previous research highlighting how factors influencing refugee entrepreneurship can impact performance (Rukuni et al., 2022). The study revealed these women encounter numerous barriers to advancing their entrepreneurial activities, including societal, legislative, financial and infrastructural challenges, which align with broader challenges faced by refugee entrepreneurs globally.

To enhance entrepreneurial performance, strategic interventions in the five areas – societal factors, financial and business practices, legislation, infrastructure, and market opportunities are essential. As supported by previous research, there is a pressing need for policy reform and the creation of new policies that specifically cater refugee entrepreneurs' needs. In South Africa, this could involve implementing appropriate regulations governing refugee business operations, which would help address the unique challenges these entrepreneurs face.

Additionally, this study confirmed a positive correlation between entrepreneurial activities and economic empowerment among refugee women entrepreneurs. Congolese refugee women who possess entrepreneurial abilities and are committed to business development are more likely to experience economic empowerment. This finding support previous studies that position entrepreneurship as a pathway to poverty alleviation and economic development for refugee women (Street, Ng and Al-Dajani 2022). By engaging in entrepreneurial activities, refugee women not only contribute to their own livelihoods but also stimulate local economies, demonstrating the potential for entrepreneurship to serve as a powerful tool for poverty reduction and empowerment.

The results and findings are presented clearly, supported by quotes from studies that highlight the challenges faced by Congolese refugee women entrepreneurs in Durban, such as a lack of access to financial resources and services. Despite these challenges, the findings also underscore their resilience and determination to succeed. However, the discussion could be expanded to explore the broader implications of these findings for policy and practice. Policymakers should consider how the unique experience of refugee women in entrepreneurial settings could inform the development of more inclusive and supportive frameworks. This includes insuring access to financial services, tailored business training, and legal support for refugee entrepreneurs.

In conclusion, while Congolese refugee women face significant socio-economic and entrepreneurial challenges, enhancing their entrepreneurial skills and providing targeted support could unlock their entrepreneurial potential. By fostering environment where refugee entrepreneurs can thrive, not only can their livelihoods be improved, but they can also contribute meaningfully to the host country's economy. Further research should explore how policy reforms and strategic support initiatives can be implemented to maximize the entrepreneurial potential of refugee communities.

## 7. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the entrepreneurial leadership capabilities of refugee women from the Democratic Republic of Congo and the ways in which these skills contribute to poverty alleviation in their communities within KwaZulu-Natal. It is essential to acknowledge that while refugees may often be viewed as a challenge in South Africa, they particularly possess valuable entrepreneurial skills and talents that can foster economic development when supported by appropriate gender policies. The findings reveal that Congolese refugee women in various cities of KZN face numerous challenges that impede their socio-economic advancement, especially in their entrepreneurial endeavors in South Africa. Addressing the needs and difficulties faced by refugee entrepreneurs may necessitate the revision or development of new policies. For instance, enforcing relevant regulations governing refugee businesses is crucial in South Africa.

As with any research, this study has certain limitations that should be recognized. The focus of this investigation is specifically confined to the context of KwaZulu-Natal, which may lead to challenges in generalising the findings related to Congolese refugee women entrepreneurs. Future research could delve into targeted areas such as financial literacy and may benefit from incorporating qualitative methodologies to gain a more thorough understanding of the challenges faced by refugee women entrepreneurs in South Africa.

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