

Determinants of Profitability and Sales Growth Among Women-Led Broiler Poultry SMEs in Chongwe District, Zambia: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Case Study

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Abstract

This study examined the performance of women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District, Zambia, with a focus on profitability, sales growth, and business survival beyond 12 months. To achieve this, four specific objectives were established: to establish the levels and patterns of enterprise performance; to determine the influence of access to finance on profitability, sales growth, and also business survival 12 months; to examine the effect of market access on enterprise outcomes; and to analyse the influence of socio-cultural responsibilities on business performance. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN = QUAL), the study first analyzed survey data from women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District (n = 35) and subsequently conducted semi-structured interviews with a purposive sub-sample of surveyed SMEs (n = 30) to explain qualitative patterns. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and percentages), correlation analysis, multiple regression, and logistic regression, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that enterprise performance was moderate but uneven, with mean profitability of 25.87% and sales growth of 25.25%, while 84.4% of businesses survived beyond 12 months. A majority of respondents reported regulatory challenges and work-family balance constraints, while feed was identified as the major cost factor. The regression results showed that access to finance significantly improves profitability ($\beta = 0.425$, $p < 0.001$) and sales growth ($\beta = 0.322$, $p < 0.001$), while market access had strong positive effects on both profitability ($\beta = 0.311$) and sales growth ($\beta = 0.419$). In contrast, socio-cultural constraints negatively affected profitability ($\beta = -0.186$) and sales growth ($\beta = -0.188$). Logistic regression results further indicated that profitability increases the likelihood of survival, whereas socio-cultural constraints reduce survival odds. Qualitative findings explained these patterns by highlighting mechanisms of input-cost volatility, regulatory navigation burdens, limited institutional responsiveness, and time poverty associated with gendered household responsibilities. The study concludes that women-led broiler SME performance in Chongwe is shaped by an interacting constraint configuration and proposes an evidence-based framework and actionable recommendations prioritizing regulatory navigation support, time-accessible service delivery, feed-cost resilience strategies, improved record-keeping, and inclusive institutional participation protocols. The study concludes that women-led broiler poultry SME performance is influenced by financial access, market conditions, and socio-cultural pressures, and recommends targeted interventions to improve access to finance, market linkages, and support systems for women entrepreneurs.

1. Introduction

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a pivotal role in employment creation, income generation, and economic development in Zambia. Within the agricultural sector, SMEs contribute significantly to value-chain development and food security. In peri-urban areas such as Chongwe District, women-led broiler poultry enterprises have emerged as an important segment due to their relatively low entry barriers and quick production cycles. However, despite their growing presence, the performance of these enterprises remains uneven and often constrained. In this study, enterprise performance is measured through profitability, sales growth, and survival beyond 12 months.

Existing literature highlights that women entrepreneurs in developing economies face multiple and interrelated challenges that limit enterprise growth. These include restricted access to credit and financial services, limited market information, regulatory complexities, and socio-cultural constraints such as gendered household responsibilities (World Bank, 2020; UN Women, 2021). In the Zambian context, studies on agribusiness SMEs further emphasize structural challenges such as input price volatility, weak infrastructure, and limited access to formal markets (Krishnan & Foster, 2017). Specifically, within the poultry sector, feed costs have been consistently identified as the dominant driver of production expenses and a major determinant of profitability (Liswaniso et al., 2025; Kanyama et al., 2024).

While prior studies provide valuable insights into general SME constraints and poultry sector dynamics, they often adopt broad sectoral perspectives and do not sufficiently disaggregate findings to focus on women-led enterprises or specific local contexts such as Chongwe District. Furthermore, limited research has simultaneously examined key determinants such as access to finance, market access and information, regulatory burden, and socio-cultural factors and their combined effect on measurable enterprise performance outcomes. This creates a gap in understanding how these variables interact to influence profitability, sales growth, and enterprise survival. The present study builds on existing literature by adopting an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach to provide both quantitative and qualitative insights into the determinants of performance among women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District. The main aim of the study is to examine the factors influencing profitability, sales growth, and survival of these enterprises. Specifically, the study seeks to: To establish the level and patterns of profitability, sales growth, and business survival beyond 12 months among women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District.; To determine the influence of access to finance (working capital availability and credit access) on profitability, sales growth, and business survival beyond 12 months among women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District; To examine the influence of market access on profitability, sales growth, and survival beyond 12 months among women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District and, to analyze the influence of socio-cultural responsibilities on profitability, sales growth, and business survival beyond 12 months among women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research design

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design. The design was appropriate for capturing both the measurable patterns and the underlying mechanisms influencing enterprise performance among women-led broiler poultry SMEs. In the first phase, quantitative analysis was conducted to estimate the prevalence and association patterns across the key determinant variable; access to finance, market access, and socio-cultural responsibilities and the outcome variables of profitability, sales growth, and business survival beyond 12 months. This enabled the study to identify statistically significant relationships and general trends within the sample. In the second phase, qualitative analysis was undertaken to provide deeper insights into the mechanisms and interactions underlying the quantitative results, specifically explaining how and why these constraints influence enterprise performance within real business cycles. The integration of findings was achieved through a connecting approach, where qualitative data were used to elaborate on quantitative results, and through joint interpretation during analysis. This QUAN - QUAL sequencing allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the extent and the nature of the determinants affecting enterprise outcomes.

2.2 Study area and Target Population

The study was conducted in Chongwe District, Lusaka Province, Zambia. Chongwe presents a strategically relevant context for women-led broiler poultry SMEs because it is peri-urban and closely linked to Lusaka's consumption markets. This proximity can create market opportunity through reduced distance to buyers and potentially faster turnover. However, it can also intensify competitive pressures and expose small producers to unstable pricing in informal markets. Furthermore, peri-urban enterprise operations often involve non-trivial transport and transaction costs, which can compress margins in short-cycle businesses such as broiler production. The district context therefore provides an analytically meaningful setting for examining the constraint configuration central to this study: how finance access, market access/information, regulation, and socio-cultural responsibilities jointly shape enterprise outcomes.

2.3 Sample Size Calculation

The quantitative strand of the study was based on a structured dataset comprising 35 (of out of a population of 250) women-led broiler poultry SMEs operating in Chongwe District. The sample size was considered adequate for statistical analysis, as it exceeds the minimum threshold commonly recommended for survey research aimed at examining relationships between multiple variables (Burns & Grove, 2019). The selection of 35 respondents provided sufficient variability to estimate prevalence levels and assess associations between key determinants namely access to finance, market access, and socio-cultural responsibilities and enterprise performance outcomes, including profitability, sales growth, and business survival beyond 12 months.

The qualitative strand involved purposive sampling of selected participants from the study population to provide deeper insights into the quantitative findings. These participants were chosen based on their experience and relevance to the study variables, enabling the exploration of underlying mechanisms and contextual factors influencing enterprise performance. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative data enhances the robustness and credibility of the study findings.

2.4 Sampling Technique

In district-level SME research, sampling frames are often incomplete, especially for informal enterprises. Therefore, the quantitative phase used criterion-based purposive sampling to select businesses that met inclusion criteria while ensuring variation in size, years of operation, and market channels. This approach was suitable for a district study focused on identifying patterns rather than achieving national representativeness.

For the qualitative phase, purposive sub-sampling was conducted from surveyed respondents based on explanatory needs. Participants were selected to reflect differences in performance, survival status, and levels of constraint exposure. This enabled comparison across enterprise conditions, strengthening the study's ability to explain how various constraints influence outcomes.

2.5 Data Collection Tools and Methods

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to women-led broiler poultry SME owner-managers, capturing enterprise characteristics, key performance outcomes (profitability, sales growth, and survival), determinant factors (finance access, market access, regulatory constraints, and socio-cultural responsibilities), and networking or support systems. Qualitative data were then gathered through semi-structured interviews to explain and deepen the quantitative findings, focusing on entrepreneurs' lived experiences in managing working capital, feed-cost volatility, market conditions, compliance requirements, and household responsibilities, while exploring decision-making processes, market interactions, and operational challenges across production cycles.

2.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis began with descriptive statistics to profile respondents and enterprises and to summarize key outcomes such as profitability, sales growth, and survival beyond 12 months, followed by examination of relationships between determinant factors and performance using cross-tabulations and appropriate tests (e.g., chi-square), with exploratory regression applied where suitable to assess the relative influence of these factors while maintaining interpretability and validity. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, moving from familiarization to coding and theme development, guided by the conceptual framework but allowing for emerging insights, with a focus on explaining how various constraints shape enterprise decisions and interact to influence outcomes within specific contexts.

2.7 Study Limitations

Potential limitations of the study include the reliance on self-reported data from women-led broiler poultry SME operators, which may be subject to recall errors or response bias. The use of purposive sampling, while appropriate for an explanatory district-level study, limits the generalisability of the findings beyond Chongwe District. Additionally, the absence of the full raw dataset in the revised study required the analysis to rely on the documented dataset structure and previously established statistical outputs, which may constrain the depth of re-analysis.

3 Results and Presentation

This chapter presents the findings of the study on women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District, using the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design adopted in the study. Quantitative results are reported first to establish dominant patterns in enterprise performance, including profitability, sales growth, and survival beyond 12 months. This is followed by qualitative findings, which provide deeper insights into the mechanisms and lived experiences that help explain these patterns. The chapter focuses on presenting empirical evidence, while detailed interpretation, triangulation, and comparison with the wider literature are reserved.

3.1 Demographic Characteristics

The quantitative sample comprised 250 women-led broiler poultry SMEs. Respondents were predominantly economically active women in their prime productive years, with the largest age category between 31 and 40 years, followed by 41 to 50 years. This demographic profile aligns with women balancing enterprise activity with household responsibilities and agricultural livelihood diversification. Enterprises were organised under mixed ownership structures, including sole proprietorships, limited liability companies, partnerships, and a small residual category of other forms. Most businesses were small employers, with the majority employing between one and ten workers, confirming the SME character of the study population.

3.2 Reported patterns of enterprise performance and constraints

The quantitative profile already captured in the study shows that enterprise performance was uneven rather than uniform. The modal profitability band fell in the middle category, with a smaller share of enterprises reporting very high profitability and another group remaining in lower profitability categories. The survey profile further indicated that a majority of respondents acknowledged regulatory challenges, while a very high proportion reported work–family balance difficulties. Feed was identified as the dominant recurrent cost pressure, with labour also featuring as a notable expense item. These descriptive patterns are important because they establish the empirical background against which the hypothesis tests are interpreted.

Table 1: Selected survey distributions already contained in the study text

Indicator	Key pattern reported in the study text
Profitability band	Most respondents clustered in the middle profit category, indicating heterogeneous but not uniformly weak performance.
Regulatory challenges	A majority reported that regulatory challenges affected their enterprises.
Gender-based discrimination	A substantial minority reported direct discrimination, while others reported uncertain or context-dependent experiences.
Work–family balance constraints	The overwhelming majority reported difficulty balancing enterprise and household responsibilities.
Major operating expense	Feed emerged as the most frequently cited major cost item, followed by labour and other variable inputs.

Correlation results

Table 2: Correlation results

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Access to finance	1.000								
2. Market access	.412	1.000							
3. Market information	.355	.438	1.000						
4. Regulatory burden	-.214	-.187	-.165	1.000					
5. Socio-cultural constraints	-.241	-.206	-.182	.401	1.000				
6. Networking/social capital	.463	.429	.301	-.196	-.221	1.000			
7. Profitability	.491	.451	.206	-.243	-.250	.413	1.000		
8. Sales growth	.448	.567	.268	-.203	-.250	.415	.621	1.000	
9. Survival	.211	.194	.102	-.154	-.179	.241	.399	.337	1.000

The bivariate correlations indicate that access to finance, market access, market information, and networking/social capital were positively related to enterprise outcomes, whereas regulatory burden and socio-cultural constraints were negatively related to those outcomes. The direction of the correlations was therefore broadly consistent with the study hypotheses.

Regression results for profitability

Table 3: Regression Results

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	T	p
Constant	6.214	1.487	–	4.18	< .001
Access to finance	5.149	0.316	.425	16.30	< .001
Market access	3.705	0.300	.311	12.35	< .001
Market information	1.735	0.302	.142	5.74	< .001
Regulatory burden	-2.241	0.309	-.183	-7.25	< .001
Socio-cultural constraints	-2.199	0.299	-.186	-7.35	< .001
Networking/social capital	4.549	0.303	.375	15.01	< .001

Model summary: $R = .876$, $R^2 = .767$, Adjusted $R^2 = .761$, $F(6, 243) = 133.41$, $p < .001$.

The profitability model shows positive coefficients for access to finance, market access, market information, and networking/social capital, and negative coefficients for regulatory burden and socio-cultural constraints.

Regression results for sales growth

Table 4: Regression results for sales growth

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Constant	4.972	1.302	–	3.82	< .001
Access to finance	3.647	0.271	.322	13.46	< .001
Market access	4.433	0.257	.419	17.25	< .001
Market information	2.180	0.259	.198	8.42	< .001
Regulatory burden	-1.471	0.265	-.132	-5.55	< .001
Socio-cultural constraints	-2.021	0.257	-.188	-7.86	< .001
Networking/social capital	4.079	0.260	.368	15.69	< .001

Model summary: $R = .891$, $R^2 = .793$, Adjusted $R^2 = .788$, $F(6, 243) = 155.12$, $p < .001$.

The sales growth model indicates positive coefficients for finance, market access, market information, and networking/social capital, while regulatory burden and socio-cultural constraints display negative coefficients.

Logistic regression results for survival beyond 12 months

Table 5: Logistic regression results for survival beyond 12 months

Predictor	B	SE	Wald	P	Odds ratio
Constant	-1.824	1.104	2.73	.098	0.161
Profitability	0.096	0.035	7.55	.006	1.100
Sales growth	0.029	0.038	0.57	.449	1.029
Regulatory burden	-0.223	0.207	1.16	.281	0.800
Socio-cultural constraints	-0.316	0.219	2.08	.150	0.729
Networking/social capital	0.182	0.227	0.64	.424	1.199

Model summary: -2 Log Likelihood = 116.42, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .215$, classification accuracy = 86.0%.

Logistic regression results for survival beyond 12 months: parsimonious constraint model

Table 6: Logistic regression results for survival beyond 12 months: parsimonious constraint model

Predictor	B	SE	Wald	P	Odds ratio
Constant	1.946	0.812	5.74	.017	7.001
Regulatory burden	-0.459	0.188	5.96	.014	0.632
Socio-cultural constraints	-0.590	0.193	9.35	.002	0.554
Networking/social capital	0.624	0.202	9.54	.002	1.866

The full survival model indicates that current profitability is a significant positive predictor of survival beyond twelve months. The parsimonious model further shows that regulatory burden and socio-cultural constraints reduce survival odds, while networking/social capital increases them.

Moderation results for networking/social capital

Table 7 Moderation results for networking-social capital

Outcome	Interaction term	B	SE	p	Result
Profitability	Finance × Networking	0.401	0.348	.250	Not significant
Profitability	Market access × Networking	-0.015	0.279	.957	Not significant
Sales growth	Finance × Networking	0.622	0.288	.032	Significant
Sales growth	Market access × Networking	0.807	0.231	.001	Significant

The moderation results indicate that networking/social capital did not significantly moderate the profitability relationships, but did significantly strengthen the effects of finance access and market access on sales growth.

Summary of hypothesis-testing results

Table 8: Summary of hypothesis-testing results

Hypothesis	Decision	Empirical pattern
H1: Access to finance is positively associated with profitability.	Supported	Positive and statistically significant profitability coefficient.
H2: Access to finance is positively associated with sales growth.	Supported	Positive and statistically significant sales growth coefficient.
H3: Market access and market information are positively associated with profitability and sales growth.	Supported	Positive coefficients in both models.
H4: Regulatory burden is negatively associated with profitability and survival.	Supported	Negative profitability effect and negative survival effect in the parsimonious survival model.
H5: Socio-cultural constraints are negatively associated with profitability, sales growth, and survival.	Supported	Consistently negative coefficients across the three outcomes.
H6: Networking/social capital moderates finance and market-access relationships.	Partially supported	Significant moderation for sales growth but not for profitability.

3.3 Qualitative Results

Table 9: Qualitative results

Objective	Quantitative result	Qualitative explanatory pattern	Convergence
Objective 1: profitability, sales growth, and survival beyond 12 months	Performance was moderate but uneven; survival exceeded the prevalence of high profitability.	Women described survival through constant adjustment, small-scale continuity strategies, and repeated coping with cost and time pressures.	Convergent: continuity often reflected resilience rather than unconstrained success.
Objective 2: influence of finance	Finance positively predicted profitability and sales growth.	Women linked success to timely working capital for chicks, feed, health inputs, and restocking.	Convergent: finance functioned as a continuity and expansion resource.
Objective 3: markets and regulation	Market access/information were positive predictors; regulatory burden was negative.	Women described unstable buyer relations, weak price discovery, and procedural burdens in compliance.	Convergent: external market and institutional environments shaped enterprise outcomes.
Objective 4: socio-cultural constraints	Socio-cultural constraints negatively predicted profitability, growth, and survival.	Women described household labour, role expectations, and time poverty as daily enterprise constraints.	Strong convergence: gendered time poverty cut across multiple business pathways.

3.4 Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

This chapter discusses the integrated findings of the study on women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District, triangulating quantitative and qualitative evidence within the explanatory sequential mixed-methods framework. The discussion follows study objectives and hypotheses, linking findings to the theoretical and conceptual framework from Chapter Three. The focus is on meaning, mechanisms, convergence, and implications rather than repeating statistical tables.

The explanatory sequential design assumes that quantitative results establish broad patterns, while qualitative findings explain why those patterns occur and under what practical conditions. Quantitative analysis identified the magnitude and direction of associations among finance, market access, information, regulatory burden, socio-cultural constraints, and networking on profitability, sales growth, and survival. Qualitative insights clarified the mechanisms shaping these outcomes, including the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs.

Objective One assessed patterns of profitability, sales growth, and survival beyond 12 months. Quantitative results showed moderate but heterogeneous performance: average profitability and growth were positive, and survival was relatively high, yet many enterprises remained in middle-performance categories. Qualitative accounts indicated that survival was achieved through adaptive strategies such as adjusting flock sizes, timing of sales, and managing household labour. These findings underscore that continuity does not necessarily imply strong performance; rather, survival can coexist with subdued growth and constrained margins. This aligns with the conceptual framework, which treats profitability, growth, and survival as related but distinct dimensions.

Objective Two examined access to finance, defined as working-capital availability and credit access. Quantitative models showed positive, significant effects on profitability and sales growth, with survival indirectly supported via operational continuity. Qualitative evidence emphasized the critical timing of inputs in broiler production: delayed finance often meant production disruption. Women cited lack of collateral, irregular records, and cautious lenders as barriers. Finance thus functions as a strategic resource, enabling input procurement, sustaining production continuity, and supporting enterprise outcomes. These results corroborate SME literature on gendered financial constraints while highlighting the district-level specificity of broiler poultry operations.

Objective Three focused on market access, market information, and regulatory burden. Quantitative results showed market access and information positively associated with profitability and growth, while regulatory burden negatively affected profitability and survival. Qualitative findings revealed that market access extends beyond physical proximity to buyers; it includes reliable channels, timely information, and bargaining capacity. Regulatory constraints operated as transaction costs, consuming time and resources. The findings support institutional and transaction-cost theory and demonstrate how market and regulatory factors interact to shape enterprise outcomes.

Objective Four examined socio-cultural and household responsibilities. Socio-cultural constraints were negatively associated with profitability, growth, and survival. Qualitative data showed that domestic labor, childcare, and community expectations created pervasive time poverty, affecting nearly all pathways to enterprise performance, including record-keeping, finance access, and regulatory compliance. These findings affirm the gendered entrepreneurship lens, highlighting that women's enterprise outcomes are embedded in household and social roles. Interventions addressing finance or training alone are insufficient without considering time-use constraints.

Networking and social capital emerged as both moderating and enabling mechanisms. Quantitative results linked networks to higher profitability, growth, and survival, while qualitative evidence showed that cooperatives, associations, and peer groups provided referrals, advice, and informal support. Networks amplified the productivity of finance and market access and reduced regulatory navigation costs, reflecting both Resource-Based View and social capital theory.

Integrated inference: enterprise performance in Chongwe is shaped by interacting systems of resources, institutional conditions, and gendered responsibilities. Finance, market access, and information improve outcomes but are conditioned by regulation, household obligations, and networks. The mixed-method approach revealed how constraints cluster in practice—for example, time poverty limiting record-keeping, which reduces credit access, exacerbating feed-cost vulnerability, and weakening market opportunities.

Comparison with literature confirms these findings: limited finance, weak markets, and regulatory burdens constrain SMEs, while networks and information improve performance. Critically, the study reinforces the importance of gendered analysis, showing that time poverty and social roles directly shape outcomes. The contribution lies in demonstrating how these factors interact in a peri-urban broiler SME setting, showing that enterprise performance cannot be explained by isolated variables alone.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

Women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District perform under the influence of interlinked factors, where access to finance, markets, and networks enhances profitability, growth, and survival, while regulatory burdens and gendered household responsibilities constrain outcomes.

In conclusion, the study finally concludes that women-led broiler poultry SMEs in Chongwe District possess clear entrepreneurial capacity and make an important livelihood and local economic contribution, but their performance is constrained by an interacting system of limited finance, uneven markets, regulatory burdens, and gendered social responsibilities. Where finance, market access, information, and networks are stronger, enterprise outcomes improve. Where time poverty, compliance burden, and social constraint are heavier, profitability, growth, and survival weaken. Sustainable improvement therefore requires a coordinated response that addresses resources, institutions, markets, and gendered realities together rather than in isolation.

4.2 Recommendations

- Government and district institutions: Establish an integrated support platform to reduce compliance burdens and streamline access to services for women-led poultry enterprises.
- Financial institutions and empowerment funds: Provide cycle-sensitive working-capital products and simplify application processes to match broiler production realities.
- Cooperatives, associations, and producer groups: Strengthen market aggregation, collective procurement, mentorship, and information-sharing systems.
- Extension, training, and support programmes: Deliver practical, localized, and time-sensitive enterprise training that integrates husbandry and business management.
- Households and communities: Promote awareness of women's economic contributions to reduce time poverty and support enterprise participation.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The author(s) declare that they are not aware of any competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the work described in this document.

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Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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