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Situated agency in precarious labor: intersectional insights from women in Lebanon's informal economy

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine women's participation in informal employment in Lebanon through an intersectional lens that foregrounds power, positioning and agency under conditions of protracted crisis. It advances intersectional scholarship by conceptualizing women's informal labor in Lebanon as a translocational and relational field of power, where agency emerges within shifting configurations of legality, gender, citizenship and crisis.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on interviews with 20 women and Anthias's frameworks of translocational positionality, the study shows that women's economic lives are shaped not by fixed identities but by dynamic intersections of legality, gender, economy, space and social networks. Legal status, citizenship and displacement anchor women in distinct forms of precarity, while adaptive practices, social ties and moral commitments enable survival, recognition and micro-resistance. Informality is thus both a site of vulnerability and a space where relational, situated and ethically grounded agency emerges.

Findings – The paper illuminates the differentiated experiences of Lebanese, Syrian refugee, Palestinian refugee and migrant women and advances intersectional analyses by linking macro-level structures to micro-level practices and translocational positionality. Legal status, displacement and crisis structure differentiated forms of precarity. Within these constraints, women negotiate work, identity and aspiration through relational and moral practices that produce context-bound and situated agency.

Originality/value – This study offers grounded empirical evidence from Lebanon on how women navigate informal labor under crisis conditions, while extending intersectional analysis beyond Western contexts. It reconceptualizes informal work as a dynamic site where vulnerability and agency are co-produced. The findings challenge homogenizing interpretations of informal work and offer critical insights that support dignity, resilience and context-sensitive empowerment in precarious labor contexts. It extends intersectional analysis beyond Western settings and offers a comparative, multi-level framework for understanding gendered labor in crisis-affected economies.

Keywords Women's informal employment, Agency, Translocational positionality, Intersectional situatedness, Lebanon

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Lebanon's prolonged political, economic and social crises have profoundly reshaped its labor market, accelerating a shift into informality that now dominates employment. Informality, here, refers to work that operates outside formal legal protections and regulatory frameworks, shaping both opportunity and vulnerability. By 2022, informal work accounted

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for approximately 62% of the workforce, up from 55% in 2018, leaving most workers without legal protection, social security or institutional recourse (Zoughaib and Maktabi, 2024). This transformation has unfolded amid a broader polycrisis, including financial collapse, currency devaluation, deteriorating public services, the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion, large-scale refugee displacement and renewed armed conflict in 2024 (UNDP, 2024). Informal work has thus become less an entrepreneurial choice than a survival mechanism. It serves as a critical site where precarity is produced, managed and contested – particularly for women whose labor market participation is shaped by intersecting structures of gender, citizenship, class and legal status (ILO, 2021; FAO, 2023).

This paper responds to calls to deepen understanding of how power is distributed and resisted in employment and entrepreneurship by foregrounding intersectionality and women's lived experiences. It focuses on women in Lebanon's informal sector, including migrant and nonmigrant women in dependent and self-employment. It situates informality not as "outside" the formal economy but as a structural outcome of policy failure, regulatory absence and discriminatory labor regimes. Women's vulnerability cannot be understood apart from institutional arrangements that govern access to work, mobility and protection. Examples include legal restrictions on refugee employment and the kafala system for migrant domestic labor (Kassamali, 2021b; Ahwach, 2024).

The crisis has affected women unevenly. It functions as a translocational force that destabilizes social positions and pushes women into new, often more precarious labor market roles (Yamout, 2024). Pre-existing gender inequalities, low labor force participation, occupational segregation, limited income and weak social protection have intensified since 2019 (UN Women, 2023). Syrian and Palestinian refugee women – many heads of household – have been driven into informal agricultural and low-paid service work under legal exclusion and heightened exploitation (UNRWA, 2017; Nassar, 2025). Migrant domestic workers, facing wage devaluation and contract breakdowns, have either left Lebanon or moved into fragmented, informal hourly arrangements marked by extreme insecurity (UN Women, 2023). Meanwhile, Lebanese women, particularly those formerly in the public or formal private sector, increasingly rely on informal self-employment and remote freelance work to offset income loss (Yamout, 2024). These differentiated trajectories illustrate the heterogeneity of informality, encompassing diverse spatial, temporal and occupational locations with distinct risks, capacities and forms of agency.

Analytically, the paper integrates Anthias's concept of translocational positionality (2008 and 2012) with Rodriguez *et al.*'s (2023) notion of intersectional situatedness. Translocational positionality examines how macro-level social locations (e.g. nationality, legal status, class and spatial embeddedness) intersect with micro-level power relations and subjective experiences over time, particularly in crisis context. Intersectional situatedness foregrounds women's own accounts of shifting positionalities and the simultaneity of privilege and disadvantage. This integrated framework treats difference and inequality not as fixed traits, but as dynamic processes produced through historically situated intersections of structure, power and agency. Agency in this study accordingly refers to context-dependent action exercised within constraints, not autonomous choice. Resilience refers to women's capacity to sustain livelihoods, adapt and maintain dignity under crisis.

Empirically, the study draws on semistructured interviews with three clusters of women navigating Lebanon's informal sector: Lebanese self-employed women, Palestinian and Syrian refugees and migrant domestic workers. By analyzing their differential positions, the paper shows how informality functions as a stratified domain of exploitation and belonging. It also highlights women's everyday coping strategies, negotiations and forms of resistance. In doing so, it contributes to interdisciplinary debates on gender, informality and labor, demonstrating how

crisis-driven informality reshapes women's work, agency and vulnerability across intersecting social locations.

This study accordingly makes three contributions. Theoretically, it advances intersectional scholarship by integrating translocational positionality with intersectional situatedness. It thus conceptualizes informality as a dynamic field of shifting social locations rather than a static category of vulnerability. Empirically, it comparatively analyzes Lebanese citizens, refugees and migrant domestic workers within a single framework. It accordingly demonstrates how differentiated citizenship statuses produce layered forms of informal labor and agency. Methodologically, the study operationalizes a multi-level analytical design linking macro-structural conditions, micro-level positioning and translocational shifts. It hence illustrates how agency emerges relationally across scales.

This study engages management and entrepreneurship debates by challenging dominant assumptions embedded in mainstream organizational theory. Conventional models of management and entrepreneurship presuppose institutional stability, formal contracts, regulatory protection and opportunity-driven entrepreneurship (Naguib and Barbar, 2025; Barbar, 2025a). In contrast, women's informal work in Lebanon unfolds within legal precarity, economic collapse and stratified citizenship regimes. For Lebanese, refugee and migrant women, self-employment and informal labor are rarely growth-oriented ventures. Rather, they function as strategies of household stabilization, income diversification and regulatory navigation (Itani *et al.*, 2025; Kuran and Khabbaz, 2026). Agency is enacted not through expansion or formal leadership roles. Instead, it emerges through adaptive practices such as network-based coordination, flexible adaptation, reputational management and transnational resource mobilization (Tlaiss and Khanin, 2025; Barbar, 2026). By conceptualizing informality as a site of management practice rather than institutional absence, the paper reframes survival entrepreneurship. It presents it as situated crisis management embedded in intersecting structures of gender, nationality and class. It accordingly demonstrates how intersectional power structures shape not only access to labor markets but also the meaning of management, leadership and entrepreneurship in contexts of institutional breakdown. Informality becomes a critical analytical lens for understanding entrepreneurial practice, agency and resistance. It shows how gendered structures of citizenship, migration governance and labor regulation reconfigure these dynamics in crisis-affected economies.

2. Women's work in Lebanon context: An intersectional lens and translocational positionality framework

Intersectionality has become a central framework for analyzing power relations and social inequalities, particularly in feminist and gender scholarship (Collins, 2015). Originally developed to examine how gender intersects with race, class and other axes of inequality, intersectionality has evolved into a broader analytical approach. It now explains complex configurations of power shaping lived experiences across social domains, including labor markets (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2023).

Scholars diverge in how they conceptualize intersectionality. While some regard it as a fully developed theoretical paradigm (Hancock, 2007), others approach it as an academic concept that draws attention to the multidimensional nature of social relations (Collins, 2015). Anthias (2008, 2012) advances intersectionality as a heuristic device and analytical framework that foregrounds power, context and temporality, rather than fixed identities or additive categories. She proposes a shift away from traditional sociological concepts of "identity" and static forms of "intersectionality" toward a framework of translocational positionality (Anthias, 2002, 2008).

Anthias (2012) presents a particular intersectional framing, which pays attention to spatial and temporal dimensions and broader social relations of power. She proposes a translocational lens,

within the intersectional framework, that enables a dynamic focus on social locations rather than identities. This approach focuses on processes of inclusion and exclusion, subordination and privilege, across multiple dimensions simultaneously. It also enables the understanding of contradictory social locations. For example, a person may experience disadvantage in one location (e.g. gender) while holding a dominant position in another (e.g. class or ethnicity). They may also experience mobility in one sphere while facing blockage in another (Anthias, 2012). In the context of Lebanon, the economic crisis has adversely acted as a "translocational force," destabilizing existing social locations and compelling women into new, often precarious, positions (UN Women, 2023).

Central to Anthias's translocational positionality framework is a shift from identity-based analysis to an examination of social locations. These are positions embedded within intersecting hierarchies across local, national and transnational spaces. In the Lebanese context, women's labor market positions are produced at the intersection of gender, class, nationality, legal status, ethnicity and sect. These positions are mediated by historically entrenched political-economic arrangements, weak labor regulation and high levels of informality (ILO, 2021; Saghir, 2023). For migrant and refugee women in particular, transnational ties and border regimes structure access to work. They also shape entrepreneurial strategies and economic participation, and condition exposure to precarity and exploitation (Diab and Saban, 2024; Kassamali, 2021b; Gunzelmann, 2020).

The translocational positionality framework allows for different levels of analysis that are often overlooked in traditional intersectional approaches (Anthias, 2012). This framework distinguishes between social position (structural location in relation to economic, legal and symbolic resources) and social positioning (how women interpret, negotiate and act upon these locations). This distinction allows for an integrated analysis of macro-level forces, such as labor informality, migration governance and institutionalized social boundaries. It also enables the examination of micro-level agency, including women's entrepreneurial practices, informal work and coping strategies. In Lebanon's informal economy, women's economic participation often emerges not as a sign of empowerment alone, but as a situated response to exclusion from formal employment and welfare systems (Hajdarowicz, 2023). Therefore, this analytical framework is particularly relevant for understanding women's participation in Lebanon's informal economy, where labor trajectories are shaped by overlapping structural constraints and differentiated forms of agency.

A translocational lens also emphasizes temporality and context, highlighting that the salience of gender, nationality or class varies across institutional arenas and historical moments (Anthias, 2012). In the same vein, Rodriguez *et al.* (2023) argue that research focusing primarily on gender often essentializes women and fails to account for the spatial and temporal dynamics through which intersecting social divisions shape lived experiences. Their critique shows how treating, for instance, "woman leader" as a universal category erases the diverse histories, social locations and cultural contexts that influence women's trajectories and encounters with inequality. Hence, they introduce "intersectional situatedness" to address such limitations of gender-in-leadership scholarship. In Lebanon, overlapping crises – including economic collapse, protracted displacement and state retrenchment – have reconfigured the boundaries of informality and entrepreneurship. This has produced differentiated outcomes for citizens (Lebanese) and noncitizen women (Syrian and Palestinian refugees and migrant domestic workers). Intersectionality, understood in this way, avoids the "listing" of differences and instead conceptualizes inequality as a dynamic process of boundary-making within shifting fields of power.

By situating women's informal work within transnational and locally embedded relations of power, the translocational positionality framework and intersectional situatedness offer a

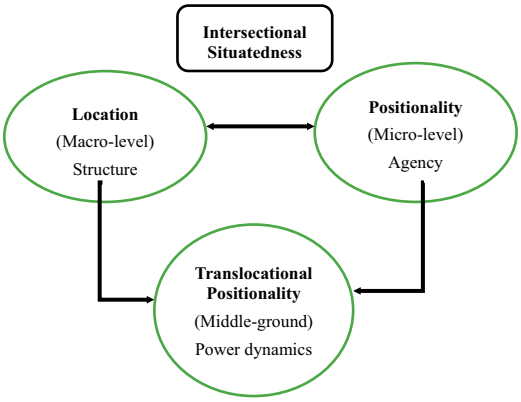

Figure 1. Theoretical framework

robust analytical tool for examining how intersecting inequalities are produced, contested and reworked. As illustrated in Figure 1, this integrated framework considers spatial and temporal dynamics through the intersectional situatedness. It builds on three core components, allowing for a multi-level analysis. The Location refers to the specific place within the social structure, defined by macro-level and institutional factors like legal status, nationality, economic class and where people live and work. The positionality component captures the micro-level subjective experience of power relations, vulnerability and opportunity that affect women's social positioning. Translocation serves as a meso-level or middle-ground. It highlights the shift or movement between different locations, social contexts or situations that are often caused by major events such as migration, war or economic collapse.

This framework aligns closely with calls for more intersectional analyses of women's labor that attend to informality, migration and entrepreneurship, while remaining sensitive to context-specific configurations of power in Lebanon. It allows an integrated analysis of macro-level structures and micro-level agency without collapsing one into the other.

3. Gendered pathways into informality in Lebanon's labor market: Intersecting inequalities

The literature on gender, labor markets and informality in Lebanon highlights that women's participation in the informal economy is rooted in structural constraints and exclusionary institutional frameworks. Informality is shaped by intersecting legal, regulatory and socioeconomic barriers that systematically limit women's access to formal economic opportunities (Tlaiss *et al.*, 2025; Yamout, 2024; ILO, 2021, 2024).

For Lebanese women, engagement in informal work often responds to costly, opaque and bureaucratically demanding business environments. These challenges are compounded by limited institutional support and persistent economic crises. Research shows that women face significant obstacles in accessing finance, business networks and institutional support. These obstacles reflect broader gendered constraints in the formal economy that push many toward informal work or self-employment as a survival strategy rather than a preference (Saghir, 2023; UN Women, 2023).

Migrant domestic workers, predominantly women, are structurally confined to informality by the kafala (sponsorship) system. This system ties legal residency and work authorization

to a single employer and excludes them from protections under the national Labor Code (Human Rights Watch, 2022). They are not covered by minimum wage guarantees, regulated hours or social security, nor can they pursue formal employment outside their sponsor's household. This exclusion heightens legal and economic vulnerability, reinforces dependence on employers and entrenches risk of exploitation (Mezher *et al.*, 2023; Gunzelmann, 2020).

Refugee women, especially Syrians, face similarly severe constraints. Precarious legal status and restricted labor rights limit formal employment options, pushing many into informal, low-wage sectors such as agriculture, reflecting broader patterns of exclusion driven by displacement and restrictive labor regimes (Nassar, 2025; Diab and Saban, 2024).

Overall, women's participation in Lebanon's informal economy is shaped by intersecting inequalities in legal status, labor governance and socioeconomic policy. Informality emerges not as a voluntary choice but as a structural coping mechanism produced by gendered labor hierarchies, regulatory exclusion and stratified citizenship regimes. Women's engagement in informal work, therefore, reflects broader inequalities in Lebanon's political economy and migration governance rather than isolated decisions (see Table 1). This paper examines the intersecting macro-structural and micro-level factors that constrain and enable women's participation in the informal economy through qualitative analysis.

Table 1. Structural constraints and their impact on women's informal economic participation across different groups in Lebanon

Group	Key structural constraints	Effect on informal economic participation
Lebanese women	Costly, opaque and bureaucratic business registration; limited institutional support; gendered barriers to finance, networks and mobility	Pushes women toward informal economic activities to avoid regulatory hurdles and maintain flexibility
Migrant domestic workers	Kafala (sponsorship) system restricting mobility and legal residency; prohibition on independent economic activity	Makes formal work or independent economic activity legally inaccessible; informality becomes the only viable option
Refugees	Precarious legal status; restricted labor rights; exclusion from formal markets; differentiated governance regimes across groups	Informal economic participation becomes a survival strategy; forms of informality vary between Palestinian and Syrian refugees

Table 2. Comparative overview of Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Lebanon

Aspect	Palestinian refugees	Syrian refugees
Registration	UNRWA	UNHCR
Arrival	1948 onward	2011 onward
Settlement	Official UNRWA camps	Informal settlements
Residency	Long-term, inherited	Temporary, annually renewed
Work rights	Severely restricted	Limited, fewer formal bans
Property ownership	Largely prohibited	Legally possible but rare
Citizenship	Stateless; travel documents	Syrian citizenship
Integration	Segregated, multi-generational	Framed as temporary

Note(s): UNRWA = United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East; UNHRC = United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Table 2 compares Palestinian and Syrian refugees, illustrating how distinct legal, institutional and temporal arrangements produce different forms of economic marginalization and informality.

4. Methodology and data

4.1 Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine how women engage with, navigate and sustain livelihoods within the informal economy in Lebanon. The sample includes Lebanese nationals, refugees and migrant workers. The study focuses on women's everyday economic practices, survival strategies and income-generating activities that operate outside formal regulatory frameworks. Rather than relying on broad surveys or statistical comparisons, it emphasizes in-depth, semistructured interviews that capture participants' personal experiences and reflections. Such an approach aligns with recent calls for context-sensitive investigations in gendered informal work and economic participation (Barbar, 2026; Naguib, 2022; Shamieh and Bastian, 2025; Naguib and Jamali, 2015; Zucchella *et al.*, 2025) and responds to scholarship on Lebanon highlighting the importance of localized, nuanced study (Tlaiss, 2018; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019; Kuran and Khabbaz, 2024).

Quantitative methods often reduce informal economic participation to general patterns, missing the complex interplay of social, cultural and institutional factors. In contrast, qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of how women interpret and act within conditions of informality, how they construct economic identities beyond formal employment or entrepreneurship and how relationships and contextual factors shape their work trajectories and livelihood decisions (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Henry *et al.*, 2015; Naguib, 2022). This study prioritizes depth of insight, interpretive richness and engagement with context over breadth, aiming to uncover the nuanced realities of women's economic practices within the informal economy.

4.2 Data sample

Accessing women working in the informal economy, especially those engaged in unregistered or precarious forms of work, in Lebanon is challenging due to limited public data and dispersed populations (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2023). To address this, the study relied on purposive sampling, complemented by referral-based recruitment through social networks and professional contacts (Neergaard, 2007; Patton, 2002). This strategy enabled the identification of participants with rich, informative experiences who might otherwise be difficult to reach.

Recruitment focused on women engaged in informal income-generating activities, ensuring that participants could provide firsthand accounts of opportunities, constraints and coping strategies within informal economic arrangements. Referral sampling also incorporated key informants and experts familiar with Lebanon's informal economy and self-employment landscape, adding depth and validation to the findings (Neergaard, 2007). Selection criteria prioritized participants' ability and willingness to provide detailed, reflective accounts, in line with established qualitative standards (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Tremblay, 1957).

The final sample comprised 20 women active in the informal economy, aged 28–55, from diverse nationalities, representing a range of industries and locations across Lebanon (Table 3). This diversity was deliberate, following the maximum variation logic, to capture common patterns across different contexts and highlight the key features of women's informal economic participation (Neergaard, 2007; Patton, 1990). All participants were actively engaged in income-generating activities outside formal regulatory structures, either through self-directed work or by owning unregistered or semiformal businesses, over which they exercised direct control of daily operations.

Table 3. Profiles, demographics and characteristics of respondents

Participant	Age	Marital status	Children	Country	Education level	Industry	Region
P1	43	Single	0	Lebanon	Bachelor	Food services	North Lebanon
P2	32	Single	0	Palestine	High school	Food services	Mount Lebanon
P3	55	Married	4	Syria	Middle school	Fashion/apparel	Akkar
P4	36	Married	2	Lebanon	Master	Decorations/handicrafts	Mount Lebanon
P5	48	Single	5	Syria	Middle school	Housekeeping	South Lebanon
P6	47	Married	3	Nepal	Middle school	Housekeeping	Mount Lebanon
P7	35	Married	3	Philippines	High school	Pet services	Beirut
P8	33	Single	0	Lebanon	Master	Education	Mount Lebanon
P9	34	Married	0	Lebanon	Bachelor	Arts and crafts/handicrafts	Mount
P10	29	Married	0	Lebanon	Master	Fashion/apparel	North Lebanon
P11	34	Married	2	Lebanon	Bachelor	Fashion/apparel	Beirut
P12	33	Married	1	Lebanon	Bachelor	Decorations/handicrafts	Mount Lebanon
P13	36	Married	0	Lebanon	Master	Creative industries/design	Mount Lebanon
P14	41	Married	4	Lebanese	Master	Food services	South Lebanon
P15	52	Married	3	Lebanon	Bachelor	Food services	Bekaa
P16	30	Single	0	Kenya	High school	Beauty services	North Lebanon
P17	39	Divorced	2	Philippines	High school	Beauty services	Mount Lebanon
P18	41	Married	3	Sri Lanka	Middle school	Housekeeping	Beirut
P19	28	Single	0	Palestine	Bachelor	Arts and crafts/handicrafts	South Lebanon
P20	31	Single	0	Syria	Middle school	Agriculture	Baalbek-Hermel

4.3 Data collection and analysis

Data collection took place between September and November 2025 and was carried out online or via telephone. Semistructured interviews were conducted in either English or Arabic, depending on participants' preferences and lasted between 60 and 120 min. Each interview began with clear assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. All interviews were transcribed *verbatim*, and those conducted in Arabic were translated into English prior to analysis by an academic fluent in both languages. The data were examined through a manual, iterative analytical process. Drawing on the "large-sheet-of-paper" technique (Gordon and Langmaid, 2022), interview material was segmented into analytical units and reorganized into emergent thematic groupings using a combination of theory-driven and data-driven approaches. The analytical framework directed attention to macro-level/structural factors through the social positions. Micro-level/individual factors are reflected in the social positioning. And the meso- or middle-grounded level conveyed in the translocational positionality captured the involved and deployed power dynamics, while allowing space for emerging themes.

Data analysis followed an interpretive thematic strategy following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage approach, beginning with repeated engagement with the transcripts and progressing through coding, theme development, refinement and synthesis. Initial coding focused on identifying salient ideas and meanings within participants' accounts (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Corley and Gioia, 2004), with patterns continuously compared across interviews to sharpen analytical distinctions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Locke, 1996; Patzelt *et al.*, 2014). Through axial coding, related codes were clustered into broader thematic categories, allowing relationships between concepts to be examined (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). These categories were subsequently consolidated through selective coding into higher-level analytical dimensions that formed the study's thematic structure.

Consistent with Naguib (2022) and given the depth-oriented nature of the data set, all analysis was conducted manually rather than through qualitative data analysis software. This

approach facilitated sustained interpretive engagement with the narratives and preserved sensitivity to contextual nuance and relational meaning.

Data collection and participant access in Lebanon and the broader Arab region face persistent challenges. These challenges stem from limited population-level information and fragmented economic records (Tlaiss, 2015a, 2015b). To address these constraints, the study used purposive and referral-based sampling (Neergaard, 2007). A final sample of 20 interviews is consistent with established qualitative research standards, which suggest that focused studies can generate sufficient depth and analytical insight with samples of this size (Guest *et al.*, 2006). The study aims for analytical rather than statistical representativeness. Following maximum variation logic (Patton, 1990), participants were selected to reflect diversity across age, nationality, industry and region within Lebanon, enabling identification of recurring structural patterns in women's informal economic participation. In Lebanon, informal economic activity is under-documented, dispersed and often deliberately low-visibility, particularly amid ongoing economic collapse and regulatory instability. These conditions render probabilistic sampling impractical, making purposive recruitment methodologically appropriate for accessing hidden populations while preserving contextual validity. Recent Lebanon-based qualitative studies similarly rely on comparable sample sizes (e.g. Tlaiss and Khanin, 2025: 23 interviews; Barbar, 2026: 20 interviews), reinforcing that this range reflects prevailing methodological practice in the context.

This study acknowledges that the researcher positionality shapes access, data collection and interpretation. Data were collected by one author with familiarity with the Lebanese context, which facilitated access to participants through social and professional networks, particularly given the low visibility of informal economic activity. At the same time, this proximity required reflexive attention to the risk of assumed shared meanings. Fieldwork was also shaped by contextual constraints, including the dispersed nature of informal work and the occasional use of remote interviews. These challenges were addressed through adaptive recruitment and careful probing during interviews. Ongoing dialogue between the author and iterative engagement with the data also helped ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives while maintaining analytical rigor.

Table 4 presents the data analysis process and the manner in which the theoretical themes were developed.

5. Findings: thematic analysis

Power, as reflected in women's narratives, emerges not as a fixed resource but as a set of relational, legal, economic and moral conditions shaping how women are positioned within social fields and how their actions become possible, legitimate or constrained. The findings are organized according to the integrated framework presented in Figure 1, structured across three mutually constitutive components: location, positionality and translocation. Location captures macro-level structural determinants of social position, including legal status, nationality, class and material context. Positionality foregrounds the micro-level subjective experience of power, vulnerability and opportunity. Translocation functions as the meso-level mediating dimension, accounting for movement between social contexts precipitated by migration, economic disruption or conflict. Intersectional situatedness cuts across all three, attending to the spatial and temporal dynamics that render each woman's experience specific and historically embedded. Across interviews, women's actions unfold through adaptation, endurance, negotiation and responsibility, revealing forms of agency embedded within constraint. The analysis traces how these practices are produced and shaped across analytical levels.

Table 4. Thematic analysis

Theoretical dimension	Categories	Provisional categories and first-order codes	Interview quotes
Locations: structural, legal and economic resources and constraints (macro level)	Legal status and hierarchies of citizenship	– Access limitations due to citizenship or refugee status – Dependence on the employer for legal work authorization – Lack of formal protections or contracts	"There's no real protection for small businesses like us." (P1) "As refugees, our status limits what we can do and significantly decreases our employment opportunities. It's hard for to work officially." (P2) "We work without contracts or guarantees." (P5) "My legal papers are tied to my main employer, so officially I can only work in her house." (P18)
	Economic and structural boundaries	– Income instability due to market volatility and inflation – Resource-constrained production (electricity shortages, low-tech tools) – Cost-minimizing adaptations (manual tools and small batch production)	"Prices of butter, sugar, and flour tripled. I have to renegotiate prices constantly … I bake late at night when electricity is available." (P1) "Payments in LBP lost significant value so I gradually adjusted my pricing and shifted to earning in USD." (P13) "I work long hours but earn almost nothing sometimes." (P14) "Sometimes we barely make profit, but stopping is not an option, it's my only source of income … I rely on wood-fired ovens." (P2) "My sewing machine does not need power; it is an old machine that works manually … a little money is better than no money at all." (P3)
	Spatial location	– Home as workspace: negotiation credibility and balancing domestic responsibilities – Refugee or camp-based microeconomies: social visibility and constraints – Employer-controlled environments: limited autonomy and dependence – Digital platforms: anonymity, expanded reach and transactional focus	"Inside the camp, we all share similar struggles. Outside, it's harder and more complicated." (P19) "Some neighbors are supportive; they tell me about jobs or clients. But others look at us as if we are bad news or dangerous. We were not comfortable at first, but now the neighborhood got more used to us and to our presence." (P5) "Because I work from home, I can save more and take care of my child. But some people don't always take my work seriously because they see it as just a hobby rather than a real business." (P12) "Some people question my home-based business and don't consider it as real work despite my degrees and qualifications. And they take me even less seriously because I am a woman." (P10) "Running an online business allowed me to reach clients across the country; even without knowing me personally, they trusted and recognized my products." (P11) "I live in the house where I work." (P6) "I am mainly in the neighborhood with people I or my employer know. On weekends, I am with my community." (P7)

(*continued*)

Table 4. Continued

Theoretical dimension	Categories	Provisional categories and first-order codes	Interview quotes
	Gendered expectations and respectability	– Conflict between income-generating work and domestic expectations – Social scrutiny and moral regulation of women's labor – Conditional social acceptance: work legitimated only under certain circumstances	"They tell me they are proud of what I do, but at the same time nothing changes at home. I'm still responsible for everything, as if my work doesn't count as real work" (P4). "I was encouraged to focus on finding a husband who can take care of me." (P2) "Even when women's income is essential for the family, it is still considered less important than their domestic responsibilities. In our community, women are still expected to stay home and take care of the family." (P3) "Many people see domestic work as low or invisible, but for me, it's honest work from the heart." (P18)
Positionality/ social positioning (micro-level)	Social relationships as sources of power	– Emotional and logistical support from family – Resource sharing, collaborative strategies and solidarity within ethnic/ community networks	"I would not have been able to grow the business if it wasn't for my parents." (P1) "Thanks to my family helping me take care of the children and being there for me, I can manage both work and home responsibilities." (P4) "We help each other like sisters." (P2) "The Nepali community helps a lot; we share information about job and support each other." (P6) "On weekends, I help my African sisters, braid their hair, and support them emotionally." (P16)
	Awareness and use of skills and education	– Translation of formal education to entrepreneurial management – Application of domestic skills or prior experiences for income generation – On-the-job learning through experimentation enabled iterative skill adaptation and diversification	"I studied accounting and worked in a bank, so I know how to manage money, that's what kept me going when I started my business." (P1) "The recipes my mother taught me as a kid became my way of earning and supporting my family." (P14) "I never had a job before, but I accepted my reality and was determined to learn step by step." (P5) "I learned nail training back home, but I never used it. Now I do nails for extra income, and that really helps me and my family." (P17)
	Emotional and identity work	– Emotional labor to sustain motivation under crisis – Identity negotiation between professional, caregiver and marginalized roles – Resilience practices and self-reliance – Pride and self-worth tied to contribution to household/ family	"I built this from nothing. I see myself as a survivor." (P8) "I am someone who doesn't let go easily and keeps pushing forward." (P19) "I developed thicker skin to deal with stigma and judgment." (P15) "At first, I felt embarrassed and powerless. But over time, I have come to feel proud. My children see how hard I work every day, and they respect me for my resilience and determination to keep our family going despite everything." (P5) "What gives me pride is sending money home every month." (P18)

(*continued*)

Table 4. Continued

Theoretical dimension	Categories	Provisional categories and first-order codes	Interview quotes
	Imagined mobilities and aspirations elsewhere	– Future-oriented strategies and plans – Time-bound sacrifices for long-term goals – Desire to leave vs obligation to stay – Transnational family obligations and support	"As soon as we can leave for Europe, we will." (P3) "After my studies, I definitely would like to leave and work abroad, especially in a country that would give me the right to citizenship. I am doing all this so that One day I can leave and fulfill my dream." (P19) "I need to stay and work until my children finish school and can start working. Then I return home." (P6) "I send money to support my family and build our dream home back home." (P17) "Not once did I wish to go there. My life is here." (P1)
Translocation positionality: shifts across locations (middle ground)	Movement between social worlds	– Social mobility across contexts (home, employer, camp and digital) – Role negotiation in different social spaces – Perceived invisibility vs recognition in various contexts – Online/offline differential judgment	"Inside the camp, I feel part of a big family. Outside, I sometimes feel invisible or judged." (P2) "Sometimes I feel like I'm living Two lives, One where I'm seen only as a worker or a refugee, and another where I'm simply a mother and a woman trying to live with dignity." (P5) "Each space brings a different part of me." (P11) "In our village, many people think women should only work in jobs that let them take care of their homes. Working from home is more accepted." (P9) "Online platforms allowed me to reach people without them knowing who I am; they focused on the product itself, not on judging me." (P13) "In my employer's home, I'm always the worker. With my community, I feel like myself." (P7)
	Transnational support and remittances	– Financial and moral support from relatives abroad – Promotion and material support from diaspora networks – Pride in sustaining the family through remittances	"My brother in Germany always sends us money." (P2) "I send money back home every month so my family can live better." (P7) "I have relatives abroad who sometimes buy my products or promote my work online. It's more about opening opportunities and visibility." (P11)
	Adaptive practices and survival strategies	– Adjusting products/services to client purchasing power – Income diversification across multiple streams – Learning and improvising to survive – Constrained decision-making under employer control and community boundaries	"I started producing items in different sizes so they would fit a range of prices and be more affordable for everyone." (P11) "Instead of customizing products, I focus on repair services to help clients save money." (P3) "I adapted by learning faster techniques, carrying heavier loads, and working longer hours to maximize what we earn." (P20) "I have very little choice over what I do each day; I just follow my employer's instructions. On weekends, I do my braiding services in my community but remain mindful of the boundaries." (P16)

(*continued*)

Table 4. Continued

Theoretical dimension	Categories	Provisional categories and first-order codes	Interview quotes
	Negotiating legitimacy and respect	– Trust-building through quality and reliability – Customer relationship management and relational acknowledgment	"People respect me because they see results." (P13) "I don't have a registered business and I don't have any formal certificates for the work I do, but I make sure my customers trust me by being reliable and delivering good work every time." (P14) "When customers come back, it shows they trust my work. Their loyalty motivates me to keep improving and doing my best." (P3)
	Resisting marginalization and gender norms	– Endurance as subtle resistance – Strategic negotiation of gendered expectations – Persistence in male-dominated or undervalued sectors	"People told me this work is not for women, but I kept going—not only because I had no other choice— but because I had to prove—to myself and to others—that I can do it." (P20) "Sometimes just staying is resistance. They expect you to stop, but you don't." (P19) "Even though some people question what I do, I continue working. It's my way of showing that women can succeed despite all the obstacles they face and all the responsibility they have." (P10)
	Responsibility and moral agency	– Provider role and ethical labor – Familial obligations as motivation – Sending remittances as a moral duty – Pride and dignity are derived from supporting family	"I work not just for myself, but to make sure my parents are taken care of." (P8) "I started this work to contribute to our household income and to support my husband. I feel a strong sense of responsibility, especially given the difficult circumstances we are living in." (P9) "Providing a dignified life for my children is my greatest source of power." (P3) "Even if I am tired, I know my work helps my family back home. That responsibility gives me purpose." (P16) "I feel it's my duty to provide for myself so I'm not a burden on my family. Working gives me dignity and lets me contribute, even in small ways." (P2)

5.1 Location/social position (macro level)

5.1.1 Legal status and hierarchies of citizenship. Legal status structured differentiated regimes of security, visibility and recognition. Citizenship did not automatically translate into protection. Lebanese women described formal belonging alongside legal and economic abandonment: "there's no real protection for small businesses like us" (P1). For refugee women, exclusion was explicit. Palestinian and Syrian participants emphasized their inability to "work officially" with formal contracts and guarantees (P3, P5 and P20), describing employment restrictions and persistent insecurity. As one participant noted, refugee status "limits what we can do" (P2), exposing them to delayed payments and exploitative conditions. Migrant domestic workers occupied the most restrictive position.

Their residency was tied to employers, producing structural dependency: "my legal papers are tied to my main employer" (P18). Informal side work was undertaken cautiously under the constant risk of dismissal or deportation. Across groups, legal positioning shaped not only access to work but also the degree of risk embedded in everyday economic survival.

5.1.2 Economic and structural boundaries. The economic crisis formed a shared but unevenly experienced constraint. Lebanese women described constant recalibration amid inflation: "prices of butter, sugar, and flour tripled" (P1), while payments rapidly lost value due to currency fluctuations (P13). Planning gave way to short-term adjustment. Refugee women framed work as a continuous necessity: "stopping is not an option" (P2); "a little money is better than none" (P3). Participants emphasized shrinking margins and limited returns: "I work long hours but earn almost nothing sometimes" (P14). Infrastructure shortages further reshaped practices. Women baked at night (P1), relied on manual tools (P3), returned to agricultural labor (P20) or used wood-fired ovens (P2). These adjustments reflect ongoing recalibration to unstable conditions rather than opportunities for expansion.

5.1.3 Spatial location. Space structured visibility, legitimacy and exposure to risk. Refugee camps offered solidarity but intensified social scrutiny (P2 and P5), creating environments that felt supportive internally yet restrictive externally, where work became "harder and more complicated" (P19). Migrant domestic workers experienced sharper spatial constraints. Living and working within employer households, they limited additional work to trusted community spaces (P6, P7 and P17). Lebanese women frequently relied on home-based work. While this reduced costs (P14 and P15), it was often dismissed as "just a hobby" (P4 and P12) or not recognized as "real work," thereby undermining professional identity (P10). Online platforms partially mitigated this by shifting attention to products rather than location (P9 and P11).

5.1.4 Gendered expectations and respectability. Across groups, gender norms shaped expectations and the social valuation of women's labor. Lebanese women described a dual burden: family pride alongside unchanged domestic obligations – "they are proud […] but nothing changes at home" (P4). Others expressed feeling undermined and not taken seriously, with their work undervalued on the basis of gender (P10). Refugee women faced stronger expectations tied to marriage and femininity. One participant was encouraged to "focus on finding a husband" (P2), even when her income was essential. Another noted that women's work was often viewed as secondary or inappropriate despite its necessity (P3). Migrant domestic workers highlighted the devaluation of caregiving labor: "many people see domestic work as low," one explained, while framing it as "honest work" (P18). Respectability remained closely tied to caregiving and dependence, even where women were primary providers.

5.2 Positionality/social positioning (micro level)

5.2.1 Social relationships as sources of power. Individual autonomy was rarely emphasized. Instead, women described networks of care and reciprocity as enabling work continuity. Lebanese participants credited family support: "I would not have been able to grow the business if it wasn't for my parents" (P1). Others highlighted that childcare, emotional support and the involvement of spouses and family members made it possible to manage competing domestic and economic demands (P4, P14 and P15). Refugee women emphasized community solidarity – "we help each other like sisters" (P2) – while migrant workers relied on ethnic networks and gatherings for information and emotional support (P6 and P16). In the absence of institutional protection, relationships functioned as informal infrastructures.

5.2.2 Awareness and use of skills and education. Women identified their skills, education and prior experience as key to confidence, problem-solving and decision-making. Lebanese women often drew on formal education or prior experience: "I studied accounting and worked in a bank, so I know how to manage money, that's what kept me going when I started my business" (P1). Others mobilized domestic skills, particularly cooking, acquired earlier in life (P14 and P15). Refugee and migrant women described learning through necessity – "I never had a job before, but I accepted my reality and was determined to learn step by step" (P5) – drawing on informal knowledge and prior experience (P16 and P17). Competence often emerged through practice rather than credentialing.

5.2.3 Emotional and identity work. Women described movement from shyness, shame or uncertainty toward confidence, pride and self-worth. These transformations unfolded as negotiated and gradual processes. A Lebanese woman reflected, "I built this from nothing. I see myself as a survivor" (P8). Another Palestinian participant described herself as someone who "doesn't let go easily" (P19). Emotional labor likewise included managing stigma and judgment (P5). Participants spoke of developing "thicker skin" (P15) as a strategy for sustaining self-worth amid chronic precarity. For migrant workers, remittances were central to dignity, as sending money to their families affirmed their sense of purpose and commitment (P7, P16 and P18).

5.2.4 Imagined mobilities and aspirations elsewhere. Women's aspirations, imagined futures and temporal horizons shaped how their work was framed. Refugee women often saw Lebanon as temporary: "as soon as we can leave […] we will" (P3); "I am doing all this so that one day I can leave and fulfill my dream." (P19). Present labor was accordingly tied to anticipated mobility. Migrant women similarly framed work as a time-bound sacrifice – continuing until their children completed school (P6) or until projects and family obligations back home were fulfilled (P17 and P18). In contrast, several Lebanese women expressed rootedness: "not once did I wish to leave. My life is here" (P1). Their negotiations centered on stability within place rather than exit.

5.3 Translocational positionality: Shifts across locations (middle ground)

5.3.1 Movement between social worlds. Women's sense of self and belonging shifted across social and special contexts. A Palestinian participant described feeling part of "a big family" inside the camp but "invisible" outside (P2). Others reflected that "each space brings a different part of me" (P11). Migrant workers similarly distinguished sharply between employer households and community spaces: "In my employer's home, I'm always the worker. With my community, I feel like myself" (P7). Lebanese women navigated rural–urban and digital divides, balancing normative expectations with professional experimentation. Rural settings reinforced traditional norms, while online platforms enabled evaluation based on skill rather than reputation (P9 and P13). Identity and recognition were therefore situational rather than fixed.

5.3.2 Transnational support and remittances. Transnational connections functioned as both material and emotional scaffolding. Refugee women mainly relied on remittances from relatives abroad (P2 and P3), while some Syrian participants sent money to relatives in Syria (P20). Migrant workers similarly emphasized the importance of sending remittances to their families (P7), linking their labor to obligation and care. For Lebanese participants, diaspora ties were supplementary and opportunity-oriented, providing occasional financial or promotional support (P11).

5.3.3 Adaptive practices and survival strategies. Everyday practices reflected ongoing adaptations and adjustments: resizing products to client budgets (P4 and P11), repairing rather than producing (P3), using manual or low-tech tools (P2 and P20), relying on

domestically or previously acquired skills (P14 and P15), drawing on skilled-based rather than capital-investment labor (P8 and P16) or combining income streams (P12). These were survival strategies rather than growth strategies. Migrant domestic workers, however, described narrower room for adaptation: "I have very little choice over what I do each day; I just follow my employer's instructions" (P16).

5.3.4 Negotiating legitimacy and respect. Legitimacy was achieved through trust and quality: "People respect me because they see results" (P13). Returning customers signaled credibility and reliability: "When customers come back, it shows they trust my work" (P3). Recognition was hence built through consistency and care rather than formal certification or institutional validation (P14).

5.3.5 Resisting marginalization. Resistance appeared as persistence rather than confrontation. "Sometimes just staying is resistance" (P19), shared one participant. Continuing in male-dominated or socially devalued sectors became a symbolic assertion of presence under constraint: "people told me this work is not for women, but I kept going—not only because I had no other choice— but because I had to prove—to myself and to others—that I can do it" (P20).

5.3.6 Responsibility and moral agency. Provision was central to how women understood themselves. Women framed themselves as responsible actors, supporting parents (P1, P2, P8 and P19), children (P3, P5, P12, P14 and P15) and families locally (P4, P9, P10, P11 and P13) and abroad (P6, P7, P16, P17, P18 and P20). As one participant stated, "providing a dignified life for my children is my greatest source of power" (P3). Across narratives, agency was enacted through sustaining others, underscoring its moral and relational dimensions rather than material and economic practices alone.

6. Discussion

This study demonstrates that women's engagement in informal employment in Lebanon is produced through intersecting macro- and micro-level power relations that generate differentiated and shifting social positions rather than fixed categories of disadvantage. As captured in Figure 1, these relations operate across three mutually constitutive components – location, positionality and translocation – held together by intersectional situatedness. Informality thus emerges not as the absence of organization, but as a structured field shaped by crisis governance, gender norms and stratified citizenship regimes. Resilience is expressed through sustained adaptation, emotional labor and the negotiation of social and spatial constraints.

At the level of Location, legal status, economic precarity, spatial context and gender norms jointly mediate access to resources, protection and recognition. Citizenship provided Lebanese women with formal inclusion but limited material security, while refugee and migrant women faced legal exclusions that intensified vulnerability and constrained labor opportunities. The economic crisis reinforced reliance on low-capital, flexible forms of work, positioning informal labor primarily as a means of survival rather than accumulation. Spatial contexts, from camps and settlements to domestic and digital workplaces, shaped visibility, legitimacy and mobility. Meanwhile, gendered expectations around caregiving and respectability structured socially acceptable forms of labor.

At the level of positionality, women's practices reveal how action is sustained relationally within constraint. Social networks functioned as informal infrastructures compensating for absent institutional support, enabling access to childcare, employment and everyday protection. Competence emerged through a combination of formal education, prior experience and adaptive learning. Emotional and identity work involved managing stigma and sustaining self-worth under conditions of chronic instability. Temporal orientations

further shaped engagement with work: for refugee and migrant women, labor was frequently tied to anticipated mobility, whereas Lebanese women more often oriented their efforts toward stability within place.

Translocation captures how these positions shift across social, spatial and transnational contexts. Drawing on Anthias's (2008, 2012) concept of translocational positionality, the findings show that recognition and belonging are not fixed but reconfigured as women move across camps, households and digital spaces, each governed by distinct norms and hierarchies. Transnational networks further connect structural constraints to everyday economic and moral practices, linking local labor to obligations that extend beyond national borders. Social positioning thus emerges as dynamic and often contradictory, producing simultaneous experiences of inclusion and exclusion that cannot be understood within a single analytical scale. Intersectional situatedness further highlights that women's experiences emerge from the interplay of gender, nationality, legal status, class and spatial context, rather than from a single axis of identity.

A central contribution of this study lies in its reconceptualization of agency as situated, relational and translocational. Rather than an expression of autonomy, agency is enacted through context-bound practices embedded in unequal configurations of gender, legality, class and space. These practices include the continual recalibration of labor, time and resources in response to scarcity, infrastructural breakdown and market volatility. Legitimacy is produced relationally through trust, care and repeated interaction, while persistence within socially devalued or constrained sectors constitutes a form of everyday resistance. Importantly, the capacity to enact such practices is unevenly distributed. Migrant domestic workers, in particular, faced acute constraints due to legal dependency and employer control, illustrating how structural positioning can sharply delimit the scope of possible action. Across contexts, however, women's practices remained oriented toward sustaining households and fulfilling obligations to others, underscoring the moral and relational dimensions through which agency is enacted.

By linking macro-level structures to micro-level practices through a translocational lens, this study advances existing research in three distinct ways. Theoretically, it reconceptualizes agency in informal labor not as entrepreneurial autonomy or mere coping, but as situated and translocational, emerging relationally within stratified regimes of legality, gender and space. Empirically, it comparatively examines citizens, refugees and migrant domestic workers within a single analytical frame, revealing how differentiated citizenship regimes produce layered informalities rather than a uniform condition of precarity. Methodologically, it operationalizes translocational positionality through the structured multi-level analysis of location, positioning and translocation and demonstrates that macro-level hierarchies and micro-level practices are co-constitutive rather than analytically separable.

The findings of the study show that women's social positioning and capacity to act are produced through dynamic relations linking legality, economy, space, gender and social ties. Understanding agency as situated within these intersecting constraints provides a more precise account of how power, vulnerability and resistance are negotiated in highly informalized and crisis-affected labor contexts.

6.1 Research implications

This study contributes to research on informal labor, gender and migration by demonstrating that women's engagement in informal work in Lebanon is shaped by dynamic configurations of legality, economy, space, gender and social ties rather than fixed identity categories. In doing so, it supports intersectional and translocational approaches that prioritize process, relationality and social location over static group classifications

(Anthias, 2012; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2023). It further challenges dichotomous framings of formal versus informal work and victimhood versus entrepreneurship by foregrounding how vulnerability and capacity to act are produced together within conditions of constraint. By tracing how recognition and legitimacy emerge across households, neighborhoods, camps and transnational networks, the study underscores the importance of analyzing how positionality shifts across contexts rather than treating it as fixed.

In engaging with intersectional scholarship, this study responds to calls for more processual and spatially grounded analyses (Anthias, 2012). It extends this body of work beyond its predominant focus on Western contexts by applying a transnationally oriented framework that foregrounds the temporal and spatial dimensions of power. This approach connects macro-level structures to everyday micro-level practices, demonstrating how broader relations of legality, migration and crisis governance are enacted and negotiated in daily life.

While prior research on refugee and migrant women in Lebanon has documented legal exclusion, exploitation and survival strategies (e.g. Kassamali, 2021a; Diab and Saban, 2024), such studies often examine groups in isolation or treat vulnerability as the primary analytical outcome. This study differs in two important respects. First, it places Lebanese citizens, refugees and migrant workers within a shared comparative framework. This reveals informality as a stratified continuum shaped by differentiated citizenship regimes rather than a refugee-specific condition. Second, it moves beyond documenting coping mechanisms to theorizing how legitimacy, moral responsibility, spatial belonging and transnational ties actively constitute forms of situated agency. As such, it shifts the analytical lens from "exclusion from formality" to the relational production of power, recognition and endurance within informality itself.

This study accordingly extends research on informality, entrepreneurship and gender scholarship in five key ways. First, it builds on prior research (Mhaissen and Alaa Aldien, 2020; Diab and Saban, 2024; Saghir, 2023) by demonstrating how legal, economic, spatial and social structures operate together to shape women's informal labor participation. It hence complements existing work on everyday political agency among national, refugee and migrant women (Hajdarowicz, 2023; Kassamali, 2021b; Ahwach, 2024) by demonstrating that agency is simultaneously micro-level, relational and translocational. Second, it brings intersectional analyses of informal and precarious work into the Lebanese context while moving beyond a "vulnerable group" lens. Building on work that conceptualizes informality as a continuum embedded in social and historical relations (Hammer and Ness, 2021; Steiler, 2021), it advances a translocational perspective that foregrounds shifting positionalities shaped by legality, space and social ties rather than fixed categories. Third, it contributes to scholarship that critiques vulnerability as static and calls for intersectional, processual accounts of marginalization (Baumann and Moore, 2023; Kuran *et al.*, 2020; Baird *et al.*, 2021; Flamand *et al.*, 2023). It hence complements studies on coping and resilience among citizens, refugees and migrant workers in Lebanon and the region (El Masri, 2020; Nabulsi *et al.*, 2020; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019; Nassif, 2024; Honein-AbouHaidar *et al.*, 2019; Almakhamreh *et al.*, 2022), while more explicitly analyzing power, recognition and moral economies within informality itself. Fourth, it advances comparative and transnational perspectives by situating Lebanese citizens, refugees and migrant workers within a shared analytical frame. In doing so, it links macro-level structures – citizenship regimes, crisis governance, migration policy and labor regulation – to micro-level practices of work and social reproduction, addressing a gap in Lebanon-focused research that often examines these groups separately (Dagher *et al.*, 2025; Sanyal, 2017; Scala, 2022; Diab, 2025). Fifth, it extends existing research in crisis settings (Itani *et al.*, 2025; Kuran and Khabbaz, 2026) by centering informality within a protracted polycrisis. It demonstrates how economic collapse,

displacement and institutional breakdown operate as translocational forces that continually reconfigure gendered labor, agency and survival strategies. While prior studies often treat informality or crisis as contextual backdrops, this study conceptualizes crisis as analytically constitutive, showing how shifting political-economic conditions actively reshape positionalities, power relations and forms of resistance over time.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal and comparative designs that trace how these dynamics evolve over time and across settings, while addressing limitations related to sample size, geographic concentration and the partial visibility of the most constrained workers.

6.2 Policy recommendations

The findings call for a systemic reorientation of prevailing approaches to women's informal employment in Lebanon. Women's participation in informal work is structurally produced through intersecting regimes of legality, gender norms, caregiving responsibilities, spatial constraints and economic precarity rather than individual choice or failure. Policy responses should therefore move beyond binary distinctions between formal and informal work. They should develop legal and regulatory frameworks that recognize layered and survival-based informality. They should also extend labor protections and social assistance independently of formal employment, citizenship or legal status. Finally, social protection systems should be redesigned to prioritize women informal workers, particularly refugees, migrants and single-headed households.

The findings further demonstrate that women's economic activity is inseparable from care work. This underscores the need for investment in accessible childcare and explicit recognition of care as productive labor. Livelihood and entrepreneurship programs should be reframed around sustainability and dignity rather than growth, debt or formalization as an end in itself. Protections for migrant domestic workers must be strengthened by reducing employer control and expanding freedom of movement and access to legal redress mechanisms. Finally, policies should support women-led community networks without substituting for state responsibility and adopt intersectional, participatory and context-sensitive designs that center women informal workers' lived experiences (Barbar *et al.*, 2023; Barbar, 2025b).

7. Conclusion

This study examines women's engagement in informal employment in Lebanon through an intersectional lens that foregrounds power, positioning and agency under conditions of protracted crisis. The analysis draws on Anthias's framework of translocational positionality and the concept of intersectional situatedness. It demonstrates that women's economic lives are shaped through relational configurations of legality, gender, economy, space and social ties that simultaneously constrain and enable action. Vulnerability and agency emerge as mutually constituted: while legal status, citizenship and displacement anchor women in distinct forms of precarity, informal networks, adaptive labor strategies and moral commitments enable survival and recognition.

At the macro level, informal employment is structured by layered legal, economic and spatial hierarchies that distribute risk and legitimacy unevenly. At the micro-level, women enact situated, relational and morally grounded agency through adaptive labor practices, emotional and identity work and the cultivation of social networks. Translocational positionality highlights how power and recognition shift across households, neighborhoods, camps and transnational spaces, producing contradictory positions of inclusion and exclusion.

Empirically, this study provides rich evidence on how Lebanese, Syrian refugee, Palestinian refugee and migrant women navigate informal labor under crisis conditions in

Lebanon. Theoretically, it advances intersectional scholarship by applying a transnational, context-specific lens beyond Western-centered analyses. It likewise links macro-level legal, economic and power structures to women's micro-level everyday labor experiences and situates agency within relational and translocational dynamics. Centering women's lived experiences, it challenges homogenizing interpretations of informal work and offers guidance for context-sensitive policies that support women's survival, dignity and agency in unequal and unstable labor environments.

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