

Women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon's crisis: a multi-level analysis of challenges, opportunities, leadership and socio-economic contributions

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon amid a prolonged crisis, exploring how individual motivations, relational networks and structural and socio-cultural barriers shape entrepreneurial agency. It highlights how women's ventures, often necessity-driven, sustain households, strengthen socio-economic resilience and promote relational, community-oriented and inclusive forms of leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – Grounded in institutional theory, the study draws on 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs across diverse sectors in Lebanon to examine the institutional conditions that affect them, the leadership styles they enact and the socio-economic contributions they generate. A multi-level framework captures the interplay of micro-, meso- and macro-level dynamics, providing a basis for analyzing the challenges and opportunities that shape women's entrepreneurial trajectories.

Findings – This study finds that women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon is primarily driven by necessity and household responsibilities and affected by institutional collapse, limited resources and socio-cultural norms. Despite these constraints, their ventures provide vital safety nets, support livelihoods and reinforce community resilience. It also underlines that women enact leadership characterized by empathy, inclusivity and relational support. They rely on informal networks, adaptive strategies and improvisational learning to navigate systemic neglect, while making significant socio-economic contributions through job creation, household sustenance and the preservation of local markets.

Originality/value – This study situates women's entrepreneurship in a fragile crisis context, challenging trait-based and Western-centric models. It frames entrepreneurship as a gendered survival strategy rooted in necessity, responsibility and adaptation. By highlighting women's dual role as socio-economic providers and community leaders, the findings offer actionable insights for designing inclusive, context- and gender-sensitive policies to support women entrepreneurs in crisis settings.

Keywords Women entrepreneurship, Multi-level analysis, Women's entrepreneurial leadership, Socio-economic contributions, Crisis-context

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a driver of socio-economic development, contributing essentially to innovation, employment and economic diversification (Al-Qahtani *et al.*, 2022; Al-Roubaie and Mubarak, 2021; Deng *et al.*, 2023). Within this landscape, women's entrepreneurship carries distinctive weight: it generates income, increases female labor participation, challenges restrictive gender norms and introduces alternative forms of leadership (Bianco *et al.*, 2017; Dabić *et al.*, 2022). In crisis-prone environments, however, women-led enterprises often emerge less from opportunity than necessity, serving as grassroot responses to institutional failure that sustain



livelihoods and reinforce community resilience (Deng *et al.*, 2025; Gupta *et al.*, 2024). What begins as an avenue for economic participation thus shifts from a vehicle of opportunity to a strategy of survival, particularly for women whose access to formal employment, institutional support and decision-making remains limited (Woldesenbet Beta, 2025). In such contexts, women's entrepreneurship is less a pursuit of empowerment than a gendered response to the absence of state support, economic stability and social protection (Khoury and Prasad, 2016). It arises under duress, shaped by economic exclusion, care responsibilities and the critical need to provide for families amid systemic collapse (Khabbaz and Kuran, 2024).

Lebanon provides a stark illustration. Since 2019, the country has endured one of the world's worst economic implosions, marked by severe currency depreciation, soaring unemployment, political disorder and the decline of public services (World Bank, 2024). Formal employment is largely inaccessible to women, whose participation in the labor force is constrained by prevailing socio-cultural norms, legal and policy gaps and restricted opportunities (Nikolova, 2021; UN ESCWA, 2022). Consequently, many women pursue micro- and home-based entrepreneurship as necessity-driven endeavors (Abdo and Kerbage, 2012; Zgheib, 2018) to uphold households, mitigate income loss and often replace earnings lost by male breadwinners, while circulating money in local markets and creating informal jobs (World Bank, 2024; UNDP, 2025). In doing so, such enterprises serve as livelihood coping mechanisms and grassroots socio-economic stabilizers (Nikolova, 2021). By generating income, fostering informal employment (Al-Roubaie and Mubarak, 2021) and reinforcing community networks (Abdo and Kerbage, 2012), women-led ventures contribute both economically and socially to fragile systems (Al-Qahtani *et al.*, 2022; Gupta *et al.*, 2024). In Lebanon's ongoing collapse, they exemplify how gendered entrepreneurship can function as a means of survival, adaptation and transformative local leadership, becoming central to both household sustenance and local socio-economic resilience (Tlaiss and Khanin, 2025).

Understanding women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon, therefore, requires moving beyond celebratory or deficit-focused narratives. It is simultaneously agentic and constrained by structural collapse and socio-cultural norms, reflecting women's capacity to adapt, innovate and lead within informal networks (Khabbaz and Kuran, 2024). Women entrepreneurs hence emerge not merely as survivors or innovators, but as situated actors navigating and reshaping the fragmented socio-economic order around them (Deng *et al.*, 2020; Haj Youssef *et al.*, 2024).

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 *Women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon's crisis and the need for responsive policymaking*

The contemporary Lebanese context is marked by a prolonged crisis in which institutional failure, political stagnation, financial collapse, economic disintegration and social distress intersect with major shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion (Dagher *et al.*, 2025). Together, these conditions reconfigure the landscape of everyday survival, displacing governance functions and social reproduction onto informal, relational and predominantly gendered forms of labor (Jamali, 2009). Within this environment, female entrepreneurship has emerged as a survival strategy amid systemic breakdown, institutional paralysis and the erosion of formal employment, rather than as a pursuit of autonomy (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019; Khabbaz and Kuran, 2024). Women accordingly enact relational "micro-leaderships" rooted in care, solidarity and obligations to family and community, thereby sustaining households, local economies and social cohesion (Riley, 2023; Nikolova, 2021). While these practices contribute to livelihood and socio-economic resilience (Belitski and Desai, 2021; Pathak, 2021), they also unfold within intersecting constraints—caregiving burdens, institutional voids and patriarchal norms—that both shape and limit agency (Deng *et al.*, 2023). Well before the onset of the crisis, the country had already been characterized by an enduring balance between tradition and modernity across its political, economic, and social

systems, reflecting deep-rooted structural and institutional dualism. A layered understanding of these challenges and opportunities is therefore essential for designing targeted policies and support mechanisms that address existing barriers while leveraging women's entrepreneurial practices and leadership as drivers of socio-economic development (Naguib and Barbar, 2025). The literature underscores that institutional support and policies are central to shaping women's entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes (Hechavarría and Ingram, 2019; Foss *et al.*, 2019). In Lebanon, the prolonged crisis has severely weakened these policy and institutional mechanisms, magnifying the barriers women face (Haj Youssef *et al.*, 2025). Strengthening and tailoring policy interventions is therefore critical not only for mitigating structural constraints but also for enabling women's entrepreneurship to contribute meaningfully to socio-economic resilience and recovery (Harrison *et al.*, 2020).

2.2 Motivation beyond trait-based models

Women's entrepreneurial activity is strongly shaped by personal traits, including self-confidence, perceived management skills and entrepreneurial self-efficacy, which influence their belief in their ability to succeed despite external obstacles (Polas and Afshar Jahanshahi, 2021; Vamvaka *et al.*, 2020). Nonetheless, these individual dispositions and orientations are often constrained by socio-cultural expectations, particularly the prioritization of household and caregiving responsibilities, which can limit the time, energy and resources available for business development (Bullough *et al.*, 2022). Personal attitudes and beliefs about gender roles and professional competence, therefore, play a central role in influencing entrepreneurial decisions and persistence (Llados-Masllorens and Ruiz-Dotras, 2022; Kamberidou, 2020). Skills deficits, lack of business training and limited exposure to professional networks further interact with these personal factors, affecting women's capacity to navigate complex market environments (Naguib, 2024). Psychological and social constraints, such as fear of failure or perceived discrimination hence often weigh as heavily as skill-related and knowledge barriers in shaping women's entrepreneurial outcomes (Siba, 2019).

Traditional entrepreneurship research has privileged psychological and trait-based models, emphasizing ambition, self-efficacy, autonomy and risk tolerance as predictors of entrepreneurial behavior (Al-Ghazali *et al.*, 2022). While useful for understanding individual-level dispositions, these frameworks, when used in isolation, inadequately account for the structural and socio-cultural conditions that determine women's entrepreneurship in many MENA countries (Naguib and Barbar, 2025). In contexts marked by economic precarity, crisis and exclusion—such as Lebanon—entrepreneurial activity frequently arises not from personal ambition but from necessity, driven essentially by relational and familial responsibilities and the urgent need to safeguard livelihoods amid pervasive uncertainty (Deng *et al.*, 2025; Khabbaz and Kuran, 2024; Tlaiss and Khanin, 2025). Such findings challenge the applicability of dominant cognitive models like the Big Five [1], revealing how individual dispositions are themselves contextually constituted. In such environments, personality and psychological resilience are not merely internal traits but adaptive responses to a fractured, volatile context defined by relational and material conditions (Hashim, 2023; Gray *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, women navigate blurred boundaries between income generation and care, often encountering burnout, exhaustion and persistent struggles to maintain balance (Barbar *et al.*, 2023). As studies across the region confirm (e.g. Brush *et al.*, 2019; Jamali, 2009; Tlaiss, 2014; Welsh *et al.*, 2014), women's entrepreneurship is deeply relational and necessity-driven, requiring a reconceptualization of micro-level traits through a socially embedded lens.

2.3 Structural rupture and gender norms

Building on these micro-level insights, scholarship has increasingly turned to macro-level forces to explain the landscape within which women entrepreneurs operate (Martins *et al.*, 2024; Vecchio, 2003). At the macro-level, female entrepreneurship is essentially guided by

structural and institutional arrangements, economic conditions and entrenched patriarchal norms (Henry *et al.*, 2022). In Lebanon, socio-cultural norms define expectations around women's roles, while political instability, regulatory failures, weak enforcement of labor protections and limited policy support constrain women's entrepreneurial agency (Breisinger *et al.*, 2023; Leaders Consortium, 2019), transforming entrepreneurial initiatives from opportunity-seeking to necessity-driven coping strategies (Nikolova, 2021; Khabbaz and Kuran, 2024). This means that women's entrepreneurial choices and trajectories are influenced by economic instability that pushes them into self-employment, legal and institutional systems that often fail to protect or support women business owners and patriarchal norms that shape their decisions and practices while constraining the types of businesses they are expected or permitted to pursue.

The structural vacuum in Lebanon is hence reinforced by enduring socio-cultural norms that have long positioned women as caregivers, not economic actors (Jamali *et al.*, 2005), restricting their legitimacy, perpetuating skepticism about their leadership (Itani *et al.*, 2011; Sidani, 2002) and marginalizing them from policymaking (Ergün *et al.*, 2025). Yet, under the weight of the crisis in Lebanon, women's economic participation is increasingly accepted as a necessary form of resilience and contribution (Tlaiss and Khanin, 2025). Nonetheless, this recognition remains precarious (Jamali, 2009). Women are expected to generate income while shouldering the full burden of care, with no redistribution of domestic responsibilities (Jamali *et al.*, 2005). Entrepreneurship thus becomes both a source of empowerment and intensified pressure, as women fill systemic gaps while navigating unchanged gender norms (Naguib, 2024).

2.4 Organizational and relational conditions

Although organizational practices may seem peripheral to entrepreneurship—given that entrepreneurial ventures operate outside traditional employment structures—they are in fact deeply consequential. This is, first, because a considerable share of women in Lebanon straddle both wage employment and business ownership (ILO, 2009), and second, because accumulated organizational experiences, past and present, define and cultivate (or constrain) the skills, dispositions and expectations that women carry into their entrepreneurial endeavors (Cai *et al.*, 2019).

The meso-level, although often overlooked, is critical in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes (Brush *et al.*, 2009; de Bruin *et al.*, 2007). Supportive organizational culture, flexible management practices and mentorship foster capabilities, social capital and psychological safety (Ebewo *et al.*, 2025; Täg *et al.*, 2016; Vidic *et al.*, 2016), enabling women to navigate pervasive constraints and transform entrepreneurial intent into sustainable ventures (Robb and Watson, 2012). Conversely, rigid or exclusionary environments—such as those prevailing in Lebanon (Jamali *et al.*, 2006)—restrict agency (Vecchio, 2003). Additionally, access to training, role models and capital, and gender-sensitive financial resources remains limited (Belwal *et al.*, 2014), especially in Lebanon (USAID, 2019), leaving women reliant on experiential learning, peer exchange, or trial and error (Emami *et al.*, 2023) and on informal networks and family support (Al-Mulla *et al.*, 2022; Kuran and Khabbaz, 2024). Family and community support thus takes on outsized significance, offering legitimacy, resources and emotional backing that sustain women's entrepreneurial efforts (Durrah *et al.*, 2024; Al Boinin, 2023). In some cases, familial ties provide critical emotional reassurance, labor support and even financial assistance, enabling women to manage both domestic responsibilities and entrepreneurial risks (Durrah *et al.*, 2024). Yet such support is uneven; while some families encourage participation, others reinforce traditional gender roles that limit autonomy (Hatoum *et al.*, 2023; Jamali *et al.*, 2005). Community networks also function as informal ecosystems of advice, referrals and solidarity (Kuran and Khabbaz, 2024), but in the absence of professional networks, their reach is fragmented and insufficient to offset structural barriers (Mulla *et al.*, 2022).

Across all these levels, Lebanese women's entrepreneurship is defined by the interplay of necessity, relational obligations, institutional gaps and socio-cultural norms. Micro-level

motivations reflect household needs and survival imperatives; meso-level structures mediate skills, networks and resources; and macro-level ruptures impose political, regulatory and economic constraints while redefining gender norms. Recognizing these intersecting dynamics underscores that women's entrepreneurial activity is not merely a personal endeavor but a socially embedded, adaptive response to systemic crisis, with critical implications for socio-economic resilience, leadership and policy design.

2.5 Theoretical framework

A multilevel analysis grounded in an institutional perspective provides a robust framework for understanding the different dynamics shaping female entrepreneurship (Naguib and Barbar, 2025). Institutional theory offers valuable insights into how both formal institutions—such as political, economic, financial and regulatory frameworks and practices—and informal ones—such as socio-cultural norms and collective or underlying tenets—(North, 1990) define entrepreneurial activity. Building on the foundational premises of institutional theory, neo-institutional theory outlines three dimensions: regulative, normative and cognitive (Scott, 2013) that shape entrepreneurship in distinct yet interconnected ways (Deng *et al.*, 2020; Naguib and Jamali, 2015). The regulative dimension includes formal rules, laws and policies that govern economic, financial, political and regulatory activity, the normative dimension reflects social norms, values and expectations, and the cognitive dimension involves mental models, guiding principles and shared beliefs, assumptions and understandings. At the macro-level, national economic, political and regulatory structures and normative ideals exert pressures that can either enable or constrain women's agency (Al-Qahtani *et al.*, 2022). These include outdated legal regulations, political instability, economic downturn, institutional inefficiencies and entrenched socio-cultural expectations surrounding gender roles (Martins *et al.*, 2024). At the meso-level, within organizational or sectoral contexts, entrepreneurs must contend with regulative barriers imposed by institutions that control access to critical resources such as financial institutions, incubators, networks, training, labor policies and formal market actors, while simultaneously managing normative expectations arising from organizational culture and managerial systems, as well as expectations of support from family and community (Alsaad *et al.*, 2023; Al-Mulla *et al.*, 2022). At the micro-level, individuals internalize these institutional logics through cognitive mechanisms, shaping their perceptions of what is legitimate or possible (Abdelwahed and Alshaikhmubarak, 2023). For women in Lebanon, this entails aligning entrepreneurial behavior with socially sanctioned roles—often centered around caregiving and family responsibility—while also striving to establish credibility and authority within male-dominated economic spaces (Khabbaz and Kuran, 2024). These cognitive frames are not rooted in fixed individual traits but in adaptive responses to crisis-induced pressures, where entrepreneurship is interpreted less as an aspirational choice and more as a necessity-driven strategy for survival (Coffman and Sunny, 2021; Dencker *et al.*, 2021).

Within this institutional terrain, entrepreneurial leadership must accordingly be understood as a socially embedded and gendered process (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). Rather than a fixed set of traits, leadership is context-dependent, emerging where identity, opportunity recognition and decision-making are shaped by surrounding conditions (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Harrison *et al.*, 2015; Kempster and Cope, 2010). Similarly, women's socio-economic contributions are context-dependent, influenced by institutional fragility, gendered expectations and cultural and moral responsibilities toward others (Chikh-Amnache and Mekhzoumi, 2024). Gender thus functions as a dynamic construct, interacting with expectations and power structures, which women navigate, negotiate and sometimes resist to assert authority (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; García and Welter, 2013). In Lebanon, where institutional breakdown intersects with entrenched gender norms, examining how women enact and reframe agency underscores the locally grounded, relational and adaptive character of their entrepreneurial leadership and the socio-economic contributions of their endeavors (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019).

Research on women's entrepreneurship in MENA countries remains fragmented, typically focusing on either micro-level traits or macro-level regulatory constraints and entrenched gendered norms, while largely neglecting meso-level dynamics such as organizational systems, networking opportunities, access to resources and family and community support (de Bruin *et al.*, 2007; Naguib and Barbar, 2025). This analytical gap limits understanding of how entrepreneurial agency emerges within intersecting cultural, institutional, relational and personal dynamics. Moreover, contextually embedded studies (Yousafzai *et al.*, 2015; Welter, 2011)—particularly in protracted crises—remain rare (Woldesenbet Beta, 2025), despite evidence that institutional conditions significantly shape and often constrain women's entrepreneurial trajectories (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; Zahra and Wright, 2011). Lebanon exemplifies this complexity: institutional collapse, economic instability and gendered precarity have made entrepreneurship a critical yet constrained response to systemic failure (Tlaiss and Khanin, 2025). Within this context, the dynamics of women's entrepreneurship are particularly complex and merit deeper and contextually embedded investigation (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019), as they reveal how diverse barriers and challenges intersect with adaptive strategies, leadership styles and relational forms of agency (Jamali, 2009).

By situating women's entrepreneurship within a multi-level framework, this study aims to (1) identify the constraints and enabling conditions affecting women entrepreneurs at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels in Lebanon; (2) understand the contributions of women entrepreneurs to leadership practices and socio-economic continuity amid systemic crisis; and (3) offer policy insights for developing inclusive and contextually grounded support mechanisms. In doing so, the study challenges dominant, decontextualized models of entrepreneurship and offers a critical reconceptualization of it as a form of institutionally embedded, relational, adaptive and situated agency marked by resilience and contested legitimacy. It contributes not only to regional scholarship but also to global entrepreneurship literature by foregrounding how women entrepreneurs lead and contribute within, against and beyond institutional failure, transforming entrepreneurship into a practice of survival, resistance and reconfiguration under extreme precarity.

3. Methodology and data collection

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the factors shaping women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon across multiple levels, following the approach of other similar studies (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019; Khabbaz and Kuran, 2024). Responding to calls from gender and entrepreneurship scholars for more nuanced, context-sensitive and qualitative methodologies (e.g. Barbar, 2025a; Henry *et al.*, 2015; Beşpınar, 2010), it uses in-depth semi-structured interviews to capture the complex and multifaceted realities faced by female entrepreneurs. While numerous quantitative, large-scale comparative studies exist in the field, they often reinforce static and decontextualized views of women's entrepreneurial experiences. In contrast, a qualitative approach seeks to provide richer, more subjective insights into women's motivations, practices and the challenges they face within a specific context. As Beşpınar (2010) argues, qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of both enabling and constraining factors, offering vital insights that other approaches may overlook. As Ahl and Marlow (2012) likewise contend, narratives serve as powerful tools for interpreting human experience, providing deep insight into how entrepreneurs perceive and make sense of their worlds. They also illuminate how women's entrepreneurial identities are co-constructed within the culturally embedded repertoires that shape their lived realities (Henry *et al.*, 2015).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were hence conducted with 20 women entrepreneurs across different regions and economic sectors in Lebanon to ensure representation. All participants were owners actively involved in the daily operations of their ventures. An entrepreneur was hence operationalized as someone who owns and manages their own business (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). Recruitment was primarily conducted through social

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media platforms and word-of-mouth referrals within women’s entrepreneurial networks. Initially, 24 women were approached, but only 20 were available to participate in the interviews. The demographic and characteristics of respondents are presented in [Table 1](#) and the distribution of respondents by demographic and characteristics in [Table 2](#).

520

Table 1. Demographic and characteristics of respondents

Number	Age	Education	Marital status	Number of children	Employed	Region	Sector
1	40–45	Bachelor’s in Banking and Finance	Single	0	No	North Lebanon	Food Services
2	30–35	Bachelor’s in Management	Married	0	Yes	Akkar	Arts and Crafts/ Handicrafts
3	50–55	Bachelor’s in Education	Married	2	Yes	North Lebanon	Education
4	40–45	Bachelor’s in Education	Married	3	Yes	Beirut	Education
5	55–60	High School	Married	3	Yes	Beirut	Education
6	25–30	Master’s in Civil Engineering	Married	0	No	Beirut	Fashion/Apparel
7	30–35	Master’s in Finance	Single	0	No	Mount Lebanon	Financial Services
8	35–40	Master’s in Pharmacy	Married	4	No	South Lebanon	Food Services
9	30–35	Master’s in Architecture	Married	2	Yes	Mount Lebanon	Confectionery/ Hospitality
10	40–45	Master’s in Marketing	Divorced	0	No	Beirut	Marketing/ Advertising
11	30–35	Doctor of Dental Surgery	Single	0	Yes	Mount Lebanon	Healthcare
12	25–30	Bachelor’s in Graphic Design	Married	1	No	South Lebanon	Fashion/Apparel
13	30–35	Bachelor’s in Graphic Design	Married	2	No	Beirut	Jewelry/ Handicrafts
14	35–40	Master’s in Architecture	Married	0	Yes	Mount Lebanon	Fashion/Apparel
15	50–55	Bachelor’s in Chemistry	Married	3	Yes	Akkar	Agriculture
16	35–40	Bachelor in Management	Married	2	No	Bekaa	Food Services
17	30–35	Master’s in Architecture	Married	0	Yes	Mount Lebanon	Creative Industries/ Design
18	30–35	High School	Married	1	No	Akkar	Fashion/Apparel
19	30–35	Master’s in Nutrition	Single	0	Yes	Mount Lebanon	Healthcare
20	30–35	Bachelor’s in Public Administration	Married	1	Yes	Mount Lebanon	Event Planning/ Decorations

Note(s): Lebanon is administratively divided into eight governorates (muhafazat): Beirut, Mount Lebanon, North Lebanon, Akkar, Bekaa, Baalbek-Hermel, South Lebanon and Nabatieh. No respondents were drawn from Nabatieh and Baalbek-Hermel due to accessibility challenges and the inability of potential participants to take part in the study

Source(s): Author’s own work

Table 2. Distribution of respondents by demographic and characteristics

Demographic and characteristics	Response category	Distribution (%)
Marital Status	Divorced	5%
	Married	75%
	Single	20%
Children	With Children	55%
	No Children	45%
Region	Akkar	15%
	Beirut	25%
	Bekaa	5%
	Mount Lebanon	35%
	North Lebanon	10%
Employed	South Lebanon	10%
	Yes	42%
	No	58%
Age	25–30	10%
	30–35	45%
	35–40	15%
	40–45	15%
	50–55	10%
	55–60	5%
Sector	Agriculture	5%
	Arts and Crafts/Handicrafts	5%
	Confectionery/Hospitality	5%
	Creative Industries/Design	5%
	Education	15%
	Event Planning/Decorations	5%
	Fashion/Apparel	20%
	Financial Services	5%
	Food Services	15%
	Healthcare	10%
	Jewelry/Handicrafts	5%
	Marketing/Advertising	5%
Education	High School	10%
	Master	40%
	Bachelor	45%
	Doctorate	5%

Source(s): Author's own work

Data collection took place between June and July 2025 through semi-structured interviews conducted in English. Each interview lasted approximately 60–120 min and followed the study's multi-level framework, exploring key themes such as personal motivation, family and organizational support, and external structural challenges and socio-cultural influences (see [Table 3](#)).

Once the transcripts were finalized, data analysis proceeded using the “large-sheet-of-paper” method ([Gordon and Langmaid, 1988](#)), which involves breaking the transcripts into text segments and organizing them under thematically derived categories, both deductively and inductively. Responses were systematically organized and categorized according to the conceptual framework, allowing for the identification of micro-, meso- and macro-level factors shaping women's entrepreneurial experiences. This analytical process illuminated the dynamic interactions between institutional dimensions and multi-level influences (see [Table 3](#) for interview focus). The same method was used to extract key themes related to the socio-economic contributions of women entrepreneurs and the leadership practices they develop

Table 3. Analytical framework based on the interview guide

Level of analysis	Motivational or limiting factors	Category	Interview focus
Micro	Necessity-driven motivation	Motives and stimuli	Explore what prompted participants to start a business (e.g. job loss, income need). Was it by choice, necessity, or crisis-driven survival?
	Passion and personal interest	Motives and stimuli	Ask whether personal interests (e.g. cooking, decorating, teaching) influenced the decision to pursue entrepreneurship or side income
	Resilience, adaptability, persistence	Personal traits	Discuss key traits they developed (e.g. self-learning, problem-solving) and how these contributed to their entrepreneurial journey
	Role of family background and values	Personal traits	Ask whether upbringing, parental influence, or household responsibilities shaped their motivation and coping strategies
Meso	Family and informal support systems	Support and logistics	Explore what kind of support participants received from family, neighbors, or community and whether this support was emotional, practical, or financial
	Access to capital and funding	Financing	Ask how they funded their business; whether they relied on savings, loans, informal sources, or faced constraints in accessing finance
	Lack of mentorship and training	Support and logistics	Investigate whether they participated in any training, mentorship, or business networks and how useful or accessible these resources were
	Organizational policies and practices	Organizational practices	Ask how maternity leave, flexibility, benefits and discrimination in workplaces affected their career or business decisions
Macro	Workplace or sectoral culture	Organizational environment	Examine whether their prior workplaces nurtured their leadership skills or discouraged growth, especially in male-dominated sectors
	Economic and political instability and state neglect	Economic and political environment	Assess how economic crises, inflation, political disorder and lack of institutional support shaped their decisions, sustainability, or exit strategies
	Gender norms and social expectations	Socio-cultural environment	Ask how societal views on women's roles influenced their entrepreneurial activities or leadership aspirations
	Legal and policy gaps	Regulatory environment	Explore how the lack of legal protection, weak enforcement of labor laws, or absence of targeted policies hindered their growth or security

Source(s): Author's own work

(see [Table 4](#) for interview focus). The analysis followed [Braun and Clarke's \(2006\)](#) thematic approach. It began by identifying recurring concepts, which were subsequently organized into thematic categories. Thematic saturation was reached after 17 interviews. Key themes were triangulated with secondary sources, including existing research and policy reports, and refined through an iterative analytic process. In line with [Naguib \(2024\)](#) and given the small sample size, the analysis was conducted manually rather than using qualitative data software. This methodology facilitates a comprehensive understanding of women's entrepreneurship in

Table 4. Analysis of the implications of women's entrepreneurship for leadership and socio-economic outcomes

Category	Interview focus
Women's Socio-Economic Impact through Entrepreneurship	How women entrepreneurs navigate economic collapse, create livelihoods, support households and communities and sustain localized economic
Entrepreneurial Leadership and Strategic Agency	How women assert leadership identities, defy gender norms, lead through care and collaboration and construct new models of management

Source(s): Author's own work

Lebanon by situating individual experiences within broader organizational and socio-economic structures. It addresses gaps in existing research by prioritizing qualitative depth and contextual specificity.

4. Thematic analysis of women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon

Women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon operates amid institutional collapse, political disorder, economic precarity, limited resources and entrenched patriarchal norms (Tlaiss, 2021). Often born of necessity rather than opportunity, these ventures preserve household livelihoods, generate income and circulate resources within fractured communities, effectively substituting for absent institutions (Deng *et al.*, 2023). Drawing on institutional theory, this analysis examines gendered dynamics across micro- (individual), meso- (organizational and relational) and macro- (structural and normative) levels. Women navigate these intersecting constraints as caregivers, survivors and leaders, enacting relational, adaptive and inclusive forms of leadership that challenge restrictive norms. Their entrepreneurship thus extends beyond economic activity, constituting a socially transformative practice rooted in care, reciprocity and community resilience.

4.1 Socio-economic contributions of women entrepreneurs

Amid Lebanon's economic collapse and institutional vacuum, women entrepreneurs appear as pivotal agents of socio-economic resilience. Their work transcends survival; it actively reconstitutes the broken economy from the bottom up through relational labor, informal networks and community-rooted enterprises. Far from passive victims, these women mobilize skills, social capital and solidarity to sustain households, generate employment and rebuild local economies. As one interviewee asserted: *"I had to create my own opportunity. Cooking was my skill, and I turned it into a business."* Yet her ambition is collective: *"My dream is to create jobs for other women who lost their income, just like I did."* This impulse to convert personal hardship into shared opportunity reflects a broader ethic of care that underpins women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon.

These ventures are not driven by profit-maximization alone but by a deep-seated obligation to familial and communal survival. One participant captured this shift: *"It's fulfilling in a different, more personal way. I'm supporting my kids, being present for them, and still earning an income while doing my best to make up for what the crisis made us lose. But I also feel I'm supporting others whether by hiring someone who really needs the job or by buying my supplies from small, local shops that are often overlooked. I've become more aware of this mutual support. Just as I hope to receive help, I also want to offer it wherever I can."* Her story highlights how informal entrepreneurship carries gendered dimensions of care and responsibility, often substituting for failing social services. One entrepreneur underscored the relational logic of these micro-economies: *"Now I collaborate with a local artist . . . both*

the artist and me increased each other's visibility online, and we both benefited financially." These practices circulate income within communities and foster resilient production networks rooted in collaboration rather than competition.

This form of entrepreneurship also addresses the gaps left by state failure. *"After the crisis, my salary couldn't even cover groceries. But now, selling cakes from home helps us survive,"* one woman explained. Others noted the ripple effects: *"I'm not just helping myself and my family. I'm helping my employees, the suppliers, the delivery guy, even the local farmer I buy supplies from."* Through these everyday transactions, women are *"holding the community together,"* as one interviewee put it. Another woman shared: *"It's not what I dreamed of, but it allows me to support my children's education and give them the life they deserve."* In doing so, women entrepreneurs are also cultivating a moral economy based on trust, reciprocity and social embeddedness—foundational in contexts where institutional scaffolding has collapsed. As one respondent expressed: *"my neighbors are some of my best customers,"* underscoring how local trust sustains her business. In the absence of public infrastructure, such ventures take on quasi-institutional roles: upholding livelihoods, enabling care and sustaining consumption. A successful marketing agency owner employing over ten people added: *"My main motivation and goal are seeing my clients grow and succeed, but also building a business that can provide opportunities for my employees and contribute to the growth of the Lebanese economy amid these difficult circumstances."* Her words reflect how women's efforts, beyond responding to immediate needs, also embody long-term visions of collective advancement and national recovery.

These narratives illustrate how women's endeavors generate socio-economic contributions that extend beyond individual survival, encompassing household sustenance, job creation, community resilience and even national recovery (Sajjad et al., 2020). Ultimately, women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon is both a response to crisis and an act of reconstruction—a gendered counter-crisis grounded in resilience, care and collective survival. These entrepreneurs are redefining economic contribution not through capital accumulation, but through solidarity and the daily labor of holding families and communities together.

4.2 Women's entrepreneurial leadership: identity, defiance and a collective style

Women entrepreneurs in Lebanon do not simply operate enterprises; they consciously identify as leaders who shape outcomes within their families, communities and wider economic sectors. Their leadership is not defined by corporate titles or institutional authority, but by the roles they assume in navigating crisis, creating opportunity and enabling others. As one entrepreneur reflected: *"I never thought of myself as a leader before, but now I realize I'm setting an example for my daughters, for my employees, even for my community."* Another declared more assertively: *"I don't just run a business, I lead it. I make the decisions, I guide the team, and I take responsibility. That's what a leader does."* This sense of leadership is grounded in daily practice. It emerges from necessity, yet expands into intention, recognition and legitimacy. For many, entrepreneurship becomes the vehicle through which they redefine authority on their own terms.

While these women are deeply aware of the socio-cultural expectations that seek to confine their roles, they often confront and defy such norms with clarity and determination. They operate with a dual consciousness: understanding the weight of societal judgments while actively resisting their limitations. *"I know people talk when a woman runs her own business or works late. But I've learned to ignore it. If we wait for society's permission, we'll never do anything,"* said one respondent. Another woman noted: *"In our culture, people think a woman's priority is her family. I've heard it a thousand times. But I've also shown them that a woman can be a mother, manage, expand, and lead—and do it well."* Rather than accepting socio-cultural pressures and restrictions, these women engage with them critically,

challenging and reworking the norms that seek to define their roles, thereby asserting agency within patriarchal systems.

Empathy and relational support are also central to how these women lead. Their management styles often prioritize listening, care and adaptability—qualities essential in the volatile conditions of Lebanon's crisis. *"I don't lead by fear or pressure. I listen. I ask my workers what they need. We adjust together. Sometimes someone can't make it to work because of family problems or commitments. I understand. We find a way,"* explained one participant. Another shared: *"We talk. If someone is struggling, we support each other. That's how we survive. I don't want people to dread coming to work."* And another added: *"I always try to understand and support my employees with what they are going through. After all, we're all living in the same country, under the same pressure."* One entrepreneur also emphasized, as several others had, the importance of inclusion in decision-making: *"I always ask my team what they think before making changes. Their feedback matters, we're building this together."* Such approaches create cultures of trust and resilience, enhancing loyalty, well-being and retention even in the face of systemic uncertainty. They reflect relational and inclusive leadership grounded not in control, but in mutual empowerment, flexibility and trust. By centering relationships and well-being, these women are not simply managing businesses, they are building communities within their workplaces, fostering cultures of shared stewardship and care. In doing so, they nurture environments where loyalty, resilience and dignity thrive, even amid pervasive uncertainty.

Collaboration and community-building also define women's entrepreneurial leadership. Many women make deliberate choices to partner with other entrepreneurs, especially other women and to build local, gender-conscious supply chains. *"When I needed packaging, I found another woman who makes eco-friendly boxes from home. We both benefited,"* explained one respondent. *"Now I always try to work with women or buy local. It's my way of giving back and lifting others with me."* Others described how they make hiring decisions not just based on skill but based on solidarity and opportunity-sharing: *"If I know of a woman who is struggling to support her family, I'll find a way to include her, even if it's just part-time when I need a new employee."* These practices form networks of support and collaboration that enable not just individual business survival, but collective resilience. As one entrepreneur summarized: *"It's not about competition. It's about lifting each other up so we can all stay afloat."*

Together, these narratives reveal that women entrepreneurs in Lebanon are not only driving microeconomic recovery but are also practicing a distinct form of leadership; one that is relational, inclusive and transformative. By claiming authority, challenging gendered constraints, leading with empathy and embedding their ventures in collaborative networks, they are redefining what leadership looks like in crisis economies (Bianco et al., 2017). They are not simply responding to collapse, they are reconstructing systems of care, value and solidarity from the ground up.

4.3 Micro-level: entrepreneurship as a response to necessity

At the micro-level, women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon is best understood as increasingly becoming a reactive strategy to crisis rather than a pursuit of opportunity or self-actualization. The collapse of formal employment and the retreat of public institutions have forced many women into economic activity not by choice, but through necessity. As one woman put it: *"I had no other choice after losing my job. I had to survive and support my family."* Another shared: *"Desperation. My salary couldn't cover our expenses, so I started tutoring to make extra money and support my family."* These narratives challenge individualistic, trait-based theories by showing how entrepreneurial agency is shaped and constrained by external circumstances. Even when personal interests played a role, the imperative to generate income remained paramount. One business-owner, for instance, reflected: *"COVID lockdown made me want to do something creative and productive. But we also needed money. Passion alone wasn't enough."* Likewise, risk-taking—often celebrated as a defining entrepreneurial trait—was experienced not as a personality marker, but as an imposed necessity: *"I wouldn't say I'm*

a risk-taker. I just didn't have any other choice," one participant explained. These women's ventures are deeply entangled with care work and familial responsibility, where entrepreneurship functions as a survival mechanism rather than a growth trajectory. *"My children are my motivation. I work these long hours so they can have a better life,"* said one woman. For another, providing for her family became a form of resistance: *"I want to provide for my parents and not leave my country, so I keep going no matter how hard it gets."* Entrepreneurship, then, becomes less an expression of ambition and more a mode of endurance within a collapsed economic order.

The dynamics underpinning this form of crisis-driven entrepreneurship are characterized by four interconnected domains. The first three represent significant challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in this context, while the fourth highlights the core motivational opportunity that drives their agency. First, female entrepreneurs navigate a landscape of persistent instability and uncertainty, shaped by the broader economic collapse and political upheavals—conditions that not only constrain strategic planning and risk-taking but also generate chronic stress and psychological strain, particularly for women operating without safety nets or institutional support. As one respondent put it: *"The uncertainty around salaries, inflation, and the overall instability in Lebanon makes everything more stressful. It's not just about the job anymore, it's about surviving."* Another said: *"The financial and political instability and uncertainty make it challenging to feel safe and secure in the long term."* Second, a pronounced deficit in entrepreneurial skills and managerial know-how compounds these challenges, limiting the capacity to effectively navigate market demands. *"Running an online business requires constant marketing, managing stock, and dealing with suppliers. All of these are skills I don't have and did not learn. I am teaching myself everything by reading and learning-by-doing,"* one woman noted. *"I had no background in business, no training, no guidance. I'm figuring it out as I go, learning through trial and error every single day,"* another explained. Third, their entrepreneurial endeavor entails an intensive labor commitment, where prolonged working hours and blurred boundaries between professional and personal life underscore ongoing struggles with work-life balance. *"Running a business from home gives me more flexibility, but it also means I'm always working. There's no clear boundary between work and personal life,"* explained one interviewee. Another added: *"I finish my morning job, rush to my evening business. My time with my husband and family has suffered, and I barely get any rest."* Women undertake multiple jobs and unpaid care work, often without recognition or career progression. One woman described her exhausting routine: *"I work all day at my job, then run my business at night. I barely see my family."* Another echoed a similar experience: *"My day starts early in the kitchen and ends late at night preparing for the next day. Sometimes I feel guilty that I can't always be there for my family, but I remind myself; I'm doing this for them too."*

Whereas the first three dimensions describe the constraints, the fourth dimension captures the enabling conditions driving women's entrepreneurial agency in Lebanon. Familial obligation emerges as the primary motivational force, with caregiving responsibilities and the need to ensure household wellbeing fundamentally shaping entrepreneurial action in this context. As one woman shared when asked what motivates her to persevere: *"My family. My children's future depends on my sacrifices, and that keeps me going."* Another echoed this sentiment: *"My children are my motivation. I want them to have stability, opportunities, and a future that isn't shaped by the chaos we're living in now. Even when I'm exhausted, I push through because I know they depend on me."* These reflections were common among mother entrepreneurs. However, familial obligation was also the main motivation for unmarried women and those without children. One respondent explained: *"All the financial responsibility of the house, including my brother's education, fell on me. That's why I took on multiple jobs. I couldn't afford to slow down, even when I was burnt out."* A few other women expressed motivations rooted in self-fulfillment and autonomy. For them, entrepreneurship was not only a response to financial instability but also a means of reclaiming agency. As one participant said: *"I followed my passion and turned it into a business, not just for income, but to do something I love while gaining independence from a system where I was overworked and underpaid."*

Another added: “I wanted to build something of my own, something meaningful, while being in control of my time and choices amid the chaos around us.”

These micro-level configurations of women entrepreneurship—characterized by psychological strain, deficits in managerial and entrepreneurial skills, relentless labor demands and family-centered imperatives—constitute a set of analytical domains where targeted interventions in psychosocial support, skills cultivation, self-directed learning and societal legitimation can enhance women’s agency in Lebanon (see [Table 5](#)).

Table 5. Micro-level domains and strategies for women’s entrepreneurial support

Focus area	Intervention strategy
Emotional and Psychological Support	Integrate mental health services, peer-support groups and resilience coaching programs
Skills-Based Training	Offer mobile-accessible modules on digital tools, pricing, negotiation, management and customer care
Entrepreneurial Self-Learning Tools	Provide low-cost, user-friendly guides and tools to help women manage micro-enterprises and time effectively, especially during crises
Recognition and Legitimacy Campaigns	Promote necessity-driven entrepreneurship as a valued contribution to household and community survival through public campaigns

Source(s): Author’s own work

4.4 Macro-level: economic breakdown, structural abandonment and cultural entrenchment

At the macro-level, women entrepreneurs in Lebanon navigate a hostile structural terrain shaped by five interlocking systemic challenges. First, political upheavals, the collapse of the state and the absence of meaningful reforms have created a governance vacuum in which women’s entrepreneurial efforts emerge as responses to abandonment, not empowerment. As one participant observed: “There’s no plan, no support. It’s like the state doesn’t care whether women work or not.” Another echoed this sentiment, saying: “We’re on our own. There’s no system, no safety net. You either figure it out or you sink.” And a third emphasized: “We need a government that takes reforms seriously and improve the country’s conditions so we can go back to our normal lives.” This context actively obstructs progress by withholding infrastructure, guidance and protection, effectively shifting the burden of social reproduction and survival onto individuals—disproportionately women. Second, women must operate within an outdated legal and regulatory apparatus that has not been substantively revised in decades and no longer reflects Lebanon’s economic or social realities. The plural legal system—particularly personal status laws—continues to limit women’s rights to inheritance and property, thereby impeding their ability to accumulate assets or access financing. “Women still don’t have equal rights in personal status, inheritance, or property. That limits how much we can invest or use as collateral,” one respondent noted. Even when laws exist, enforcement is arbitrary: “Even if something is illegal, it doesn’t mean anything here,” one woman added, underscoring the breakdown of legal legitimacy. Third, the financial collapse—characterized by hyperinflation and currency devaluation—has had gendered effects, pushing women out of formal employment and into entrepreneurship as a last resort. One woman describing the collapse explained: “We lost our jobs and our savings. Our salaries became worthless. What else could we do?” Another shared: “It’s been devastating. We went from having a comfortable life to struggling to afford basic necessities. My salary alone can’t even cover the basics anymore.” Most of the women interviewed described their salaries as “worthless” due to the financial crisis and currency devaluation. To compensate for what they had lost and maintain a decent life for their families, they turned to entrepreneurial endeavors as a form of supplemental work. Fourth, women’s underrepresentation in political institutions further exacerbates their

exclusion from policymaking. Despite their growing economic contributions, women remain peripheral to formal decision-making structures. This democratic deficit ensures that gender-specific challenges—such as childcare burdens, maternity protections and informal work security—are systematically overlooked in national economic strategies. As one business-owner lamented: “*Most decision-makers are men, and they don’t see women’s economic participation as a priority,*” while another echoed what most respondents expressed: “*Women are underrepresented in decision-making positions. Their concerns are not seen as urgent.*” Fifth, and cutting across all levels, are entrenched socio-cultural norms that assign women primary responsibility for care and domestic labor, regardless of their economic roles. Women are expected to perform full-time caregiving while sustaining their jobs or entrepreneurial ventures—an almost impossible dual demand. As one participant expressed: “*Society expects us to work like we don’t have families and care for our families like we don’t work.*” These norms are not incidental; they are reproduced through policy neglect, media narratives and everyday institutional practices that undermine women’s legitimacy in the public sphere. Another woman observed this tension: “*Some people admire us, others think we don’t belong in business.*”

Yet within this hostile macrostructure, a notable countercurrent has emerged: the expansion of informal work as a substitute for failed formal systems. Women have begun to create adaptive micro-economies—rooted in digital platforms, home-based enterprises and community exchange—that sustain households and offer an alternative to absent state services. These efforts, while often fragile, illustrate not only resilience but systemic substitution. As one participant described: “*We’re not just working for ourselves, we’re replacing what the government no longer provides.*”

These macro-level dynamics in Lebanon—spanning governance vacuums, outdated legal frameworks, financial collapse, political underrepresentation and entrenched socio-cultural norms—delineate areas for intervention in governance, law, economic policy, political representation and care infrastructure to reinforce and sustain women’s agency and resilience (see [Table 6](#)).

Table 6. Macro-level domains and strategies for women’s entrepreneurial support

Focus area	Intervention strategy
Governance and Political Stability	Advance reforms that stabilize political systems, improve accountability, enhance institutional effectiveness and efficiency and reduce systemic uncertainties
Legal Reform	Modernize personal status and commercial laws and ensure the enforcement of gender-equal inheritance, property and business rights
Gender-Sensitive Economic and Financial Reform	Recognize informal enterprises in economic planning. Stabilize financial systems to mitigate currency volatility and inflation. Institutionalize gender budgeting across all economic recovery and development strategies
Political Inclusion	Introduce quotas and leadership training programs to increase women’s representation in economic and policymaking bodies and in local councils
Socio-Cultural and Care Support	Expand publicly funded childcare and community-based care cooperatives. Implement awareness campaigns to challenge norms that limit women’s public economic participation
Source(s): Author’s own work	

4.5 Meso-level: institutional neglect, financial exclusion and organizational barriers

At the meso-level, Lebanese women entrepreneurs contend with an environment characterized by pronounced institutional neglect and barriers, which coalesce into four interrelated challenges. First, organizational environments exhibit rigid and inflexible practices that systematically marginalize women’s caregiving responsibilities. Supportive policies—such as

adequate maternity leave, childcare services and flexible work arrangements—are either absent or inaccessible, reflecting a broader institutional disregard for women’s specific needs within the workplace. As one respondent observed: “*HR policies in Lebanon generally don’t consider women’s needs enough*,” a sentiment echoed by another, who lamented: “*There’s no support. No childcare, short maternity leave, no flexibility*.” A third participant further explained: “*Women taking care of their families are not provided with the necessary opportunities or support. A maternity leave of 10 weeks, for example, is just not enough*.” This institutional rigidity exacerbates the tension between women’s professional and domestic roles, particularly for those juggling formal employment with entrepreneurial side ventures, thereby constraining their capacity to fully invest in or expand their businesses. Second, the ongoing financial crisis and banking restrictions profoundly undermine women entrepreneurs’ access to capital, creating an environment where formal credit is scarce and difficult to obtain. The collapse of traditional financing channels, compounded by widespread economic instability, leaves women struggling to secure the resources needed to sustain and grow their businesses. As one interviewee noted: “*Since the financial crisis, loans are impossible unless you have land or a big connection. I don’t have either*.” Another participant echoed this reality, emphasizing that: “*There’s little formal support or access to financing. It’s mostly a struggle to survive on your own*.” One woman likewise explained how she had reverted to other sources of financing to fund her project: “*When the financial crisis started and the currency was devaluing, I began buying gold with any money I could save. A few years later, it was that gold I sold to fund my new clinic. Had I had access to a bank loan, I wouldn’t have needed to do that. I sold all my gold savings to invest in my clinic, as I had no other funding options*.” Third, the complexity, costly, and unclear nature of business registration and regulatory procedures constitute a significant barrier that pushes many women entrepreneurs toward informality, leaving them excluded from legal protections and institutional support. Several participants described formalization processes as cumbersome, expensive, and poorly explained – particularly in the post-crisis period – often involving multiple authorities with little clarity around requirements and benefits. As one interviewee shared: “*Registering a business here is complicated and costly, and no one explains what you actually have to do or gain from it*.” Another added: “*You spend money and time trying to get registered and end up paying taxes to a collapsed system that will not protect you*.” This regulatory uncertainty reinforces a survival-oriented entrepreneurial landscape in which many women remain outside formal structures to avoid additional burdens, yet in doing so forfeit access to legal recourse, financing opportunities, and social protection. Fourth, the absence of formal mentorship, role models and institutional capacity-building compounds these challenges. Formal leadership development programs and entrepreneurial training remain largely inaccessible to women, forcing them to cultivate skills and knowledge through informal, often fragmented channels. One respondent’s testimony illustrates this improvisational learning environment: “*I had many colleagues and women I admired, but no one officially mentored me. They just led by example*.” This reliance on informal modeling rather than structured mentorship underscores the lack of institutional investment in women’s leadership and entrepreneurial trajectories. Similarly, one business-owner, who left her engineering job to start a small business, emphasized the knowledge gap she faced: “*I lack the required business knowledge. I wish there was a crash course or a workshop that could take*.” Another participant similarly admitted: “*I don’t have formal training in running a business, so I’m constantly learning on my own*.” Reflecting on her early entrepreneurial missteps, one woman shared: “*I did a lot of mistakes when I first started that I could have avoided if I had the necessary training*.” Even when some women managed to participate in training programs, these were often job-specific and did not contribute meaningfully to broader capacity-building, as one interviewee observed: “*That will be a personal effort*,” in reference to advancing her skills within her job at the ministry.

Amid these constraints, three key opportunities emerge that enable women’s entrepreneurial resilience and agency. First, peer learning and digital platforms facilitate

informal knowledge transmission, offering surrogate institutional support that is critical yet inherently fragile. Additionally, alternative models of mentorship are cultivated through “social apprenticeship,” wherein women learn entrepreneurial skills via observation and relational immersion in informal contexts. As one respondent put it: “*We just did our best and tried to support each other informally,*” while another stated: “*Most of what I’ve learned, I’ve figured out on my own or through friends and colleagues,*” reflecting the improvisational nature of their learning experience. One business-owner shared that she improved her business by: “*Watching tutorials, following trends, and trying new things with my products,*” while another admitted: “*I have to spend long hours researching, reading, and teaching myself,*” highlighting how digital tools have become critical for self-education in the absence of institutional support.

Second, many interviewees also pointed to the critical role of managers and organizational leaders in shaping more immediate and tangible forms of support. These leaders, they noted, were embedded in the same reality, sharing the constraints and witnessing the toll of the crisis firsthand. Unlike distant policymakers, these managers were seen as having the proximity and authority to enact meaningful change—whether through flexible policies, empathetic leadership, or institutional culture shifts. In the absence of regulatory enforcement or macro-level accountability, leadership at the meso-level emerged as a key site where supportive interventions could and, in some cases, did occur. Several women shared stories of leaders who inspired them and helped shape their entrepreneurial mindset. “*My manager trusted me to make decisions and gave me space to grow. I learned how to lead by watching how she dealt with pressure with calm and clarity,*” one woman recalled. Another said: “*I didn’t study business, but my former boss used to include me in strategy meetings. He said, ‘You’re sharp, don’t wait for permission to lead.’ That changed how I saw myself.*” One participant also described how her husband, also a team leader, became a source of inspiration: “*Watching him lead with patience and consistency taught me more than any workshop ever could.*” Crucially, in many cases, these leaders stepped in where formal structures failed. “*There was no decent maternity policy and no flexibility, but my supervisor let me work from home and adjust my hours. Without her, I would’ve had to quit,*” said one mother of two. Another entrepreneur shared: “*My old boss taught me how to pitch and handle clients, skills I never learned in school. He compensated for everything the system didn’t provide.*” These leaders didn’t simply fill gaps, they enabled growth in the absence of formal support systems. Their role was particularly vital: for some, they nurtured the emergence of entrepreneurial traits; for others, especially working women already engaged in entrepreneurship, they provided not just encouragement but tangible support in sustaining and expanding their ventures.

And third, family support and community networks constitute crucial informal infrastructures that provide both material and emotional sustenance. Women are increasingly reliant on informal financial resources to mitigate some of the systemic deficiencies and the absence of institutional backing—such as family savings, community support and informal credit—which, while crucial, remain precarious and insufficient for long-term stability and sustainability. When asked whether she relied on any support from family, one woman answered as follow: “*Yes, especially from my in-laws. They gave us the store space, and that was a game-changer.*” Several others emphasized how crucial their parents’ financial support had been in helping them start their businesses. One participant explained: “*Without my parents, this business would not have been possible. We live in a building that belongs to my parents where each apartment belongs to one of my siblings. I live with my parents and my apartment is where my business is operating. Without this, I would not be able to afford rent or have the logistic support I need from my parents.*” Her experience illustrates how family resources function as a vital buffer against economic precarity. Another woman noted: “*My mother helps daily with sales or by being with the baby. We take shifts. My husband is also very involved too. Without his background in business, the finance and management part of the business would not have been possible. Friends help spread the word online too.*” One participant also explained: “*Thankfully my family is very supportive. My husband helps as*

much as he can, and my parents and in-laws assist with watching the children when I am busy. Emotionally, they keep me going through this difficult time. Beyond family, there is support from neighbors who help as much as they can."

Most women pointed to the enduring importance of family support—a reflection of Lebanon's deeply rooted familial norms and family-centric social fabric. Several women noted the emotional and practical support of spouses, parents, siblings and close kin as essential to their ability to start or sustain a business. However, the difficult circumstances of the crisis had affected everyone. Many parents had lost their life savings or jobs and now relied on their children for financial support. *"It devastated us. My parents lost their life savings, and all financial responsibilities shifted to me. Household expenses, my parents' medical insurance fees, everything,"* shared one woman referring to the crisis and currency devaluation. Unlike in previous times, women were not only supporting their nuclear families, but also aging parents who often lived far away, were too old to assist, or simply unable to help. This reversal of generational support further intensified women's burdens. Still, despite these pressures, family remained a vital source of support and resilience, even if just emotional. Yet women also emphasized that familial support alone was not enough. As one business-owner explained: *"It's a constant juggling act. I work during nap times, late at night, or whenever I can fit it in. My husband and parents help, but it's still overwhelming."*

The meso-level landscape of women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon—characterized by institutional gaps, constrained access to finance and inflexible organizational environments, alongside adaptive learning through peers, family and community support and responsive managerial practices—defines strategic domains where interventions in skills development, financial inclusion, simplified business registration procedures, supportive organizational leadership and HR policies and community-based initiatives can enhance women's agency and capacity (see Table 7).

Table 7. Meso-level domains and strategies for women's entrepreneurial support

Focus area	Intervention strategy
Mentorship and Capacity-Building	Provide structured mentorship and access to leadership training and role models to strengthen women's skills and expand their opportunities
HR Policies and Labor Rights	Advocate for flexible hours, parental leave and childcare support across public and private sectors. Strengthen the enforcement of workplace equality mandates
Financial Access and Inclusion	Implement tax incentives, procurement quotas and grant programs for women-led businesses. Remove collateral biases, streamline lending and financing processes and support informal business registration. Develop gender-responsive financial policies that support women-led enterprises
Business Registration and Regulatory Procedures	Simplify and clarify business registration and licensing procedures and reduce associated costs. Provide accessible guidance to support the gradual formalization of women-led and home-based enterprises
Peer-Led Learning and Networking	Support community workshops, digital resource hubs and peer-to-peer networks to facilitate knowledge exchange and professional connections
Source(s): Author's own work	

5. Discussion and policy implications

This study offers a multi-level understanding of women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon, grounded in institutional theory. It reveals how women navigate intersecting regulative, normative and cognitive dimensions amid state collapse and entrenched gender norms. At the micro-level, entrepreneurial activity is largely necessity-driven and rooted in caregiving

obligations, challenging individualistic, trait-based models. At the meso-level, family and community support, access to resources, organizational practices and informal networks shape women's agency in the absence of institutional scaffolding. At the macro-level, entrenched socio-cultural norms, legal stagnation, political instability, economic crisis and policy neglect constrain opportunity, reinforcing women's marginalization in public and economic life.

Beyond navigating constraints, women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon also generates crucial socio-economic value, often compensating for institutional deficiencies. These ventures, though modest in scale, frequently sustain entire households, substitute for lost salaries and provide employment for others (Belitski and Desai, 2021; Pathak, 2021; Laguia *et al.*, 2022; Lewellyn, 2018)—particularly during times of national economic collapse. Women's businesses function not only as sources of income but as informal safety nets and community anchors, redistributing support, resources and knowledge in the absence of formal mechanisms (Deng *et al.*, 2023; Kabeer, 2014). These contributions are rarely acknowledged in policy or discourse, yet they are vital to Lebanon's socio-economic resilience.

The study further illuminates how women enact forms of entrepreneurial leadership that are relational, collaborative and defiant. Many participants assumed leadership roles out of necessity—mobilizing others, cultivating trust and building supportive networks—grounded in empathy, shared struggle and care. In this way, women's entrepreneurial leadership becomes a site of identity expression, challenging prevailing gender norms while creating enabling spaces for others (Bianco *et al.*, 2017; Stead, 2017).

The study finds that women's primary motivation for entrepreneurship is not personal ambition, but relational responsibility, driven by the urgent need to support their families in a context of economic necessity, echoing the findings of Khabbaz and Kuran (2024) and Deng *et al.* (2025). Consistent with prior research, the study also finds that women entrepreneurs in Lebanon face significant constraints, including underdeveloped institutions, limited access to capital, insufficient mentorship and networking opportunities, outdated regulatory frameworks and entrenched socio-cultural norms that prioritize family obligations (Bastian *et al.*, 2018; Khabbaz and Kuran, 2024; Jamali, 2009). Building on prior work on the institutional embeddedness of women entrepreneurs (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019; Tlaiss, 2014; Yousafzai *et al.*, 2015), this study extends that scholarship by highlighting how regulative, normative and cognitive institutional dimensions interact to shape both the opportunities and constraints faced by women entrepreneurs in Lebanon. It moves beyond static or individualistic accounts of entrepreneurship, revealing how actors respond and adapt within profoundly unstable institutional contexts and how agency manifests amid institutional collapse. These findings demonstrate how women's motivations and constraints—across micro-, meso- and macro-levels—reflect the embedded and situated nature of agency (Barbar, 2025b; Naguib, 2024). The study thus addresses the critical need for multi-level analyses that capture the complexity of entrepreneurship (Naguib and Barbar, 2025; Naguib and Jamali, 2015; Deng *et al.*, 2020) and provides one of the few qualitative, multi-level examinations of women's entrepreneurship in a protracted crisis.

Moreover, the findings illustrate that entrepreneurial activity not only reflects individual necessity or ambition but also constitutes a critical site of socio-economic contribution, where women respond to systemic failure as providers, employers and leaders. By foregrounding the experiences of women entrepreneurs, this study advances the literature that recognizes their dual role in driving both economic development and social transformation (Sajjad *et al.*, 2020; Sarfaraz *et al.*, 2014), highlighting how entrepreneurial activity simultaneously addresses market demands and community well-being (Chikh-Amnache and Mekhzoumi, 2024).

These socio-economic contributions are enacted through relational and inclusive leadership that deliberately resists dominant masculine norms, emphasizing care, solidarity and survival over competition and individualism. The study also enriches leadership scholarship by showing how women's entrepreneurial activities challenge norms, support others, foster alternative leadership forms, generate income and sustain livelihoods in crisis contexts (Bianco *et al.*, 2017; Dabić *et al.*,

2022; Stead, 2017), while highlighting adaptive, relational leadership that integrates economic decision-making with social responsibility (Gupta *et al.*, 2024; Martins *et al.*, 2024).

This study, therefore, extends the scholarship on female entrepreneurship (Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Deng *et al.*, 2021; Ojong *et al.*, 2021) by highlighting the interplay between institutional contexts and the challenges and opportunities of women entrepreneurs. It hence contributes to debates that question dominant Western and male-gendered entrepreneurship frameworks (Naguib and Barbar, 2025; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). By centering women's lived experiences in a context of institutional fragility and socio-cultural constraints, it exposes the limitations of traditional, universalist models and calls for a more context-sensitive approach (de Bruin *et al.*, 2007; Welter, 2011; Zahra and Wright, 2011). This perspective broadens the conceptualization of entrepreneurship, highlighting how gendered agency, expressed through adaptive and transformational leadership, can reshape economic and social landscapes amid crisis. The multi-level perspective adopted foregrounds the contextual embeddedness of women's entrepreneurship and its potential to reconfigure institutional spaces from within, answering calls for integrated, context-sensitive frameworks in entrepreneurship research (Deng *et al.*, 2020)

The findings accordingly point to the need for coordinated, multi-level reforms and policy directions (see Table 8):

Table 8. Multi-level policy framework for women's entrepreneurship

Level of analysis	Contextual challenges	Women's response	Policy direction
Micro	Psychological strain, caregiving burden and lack of skills	Crisis-led and kin-focused entrepreneurship, self-learning and emotional resilience	Provide targeted emotional and psychological support programs (Emami <i>et al.</i> , 2023); expand accessible skills development and entrepreneurship training tailored to women's needs (Sullivan and Meek, 2012)
Meso	Institutional failure, rigid systems and absence of support	Learning through others, informal adaptation and support and reliance on informal networks (families and communities)	Implement inclusive HR policies (flexible hours, maternity leave); improve access to gender-responsive finance (Carter <i>et al.</i> , 2007); establish peer mentoring, training programs and professional networks (Byrne <i>et al.</i> , 2014; McGowan <i>et al.</i> , 2012; Sidani and Thornberry, 2010); streamline business registration (Thapa Karki <i>et al.</i> , 2021); empower women leaders (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019); strengthen family and community support initiatives (Naguib and Barbar, 2025; Naguib and Jamali, 2015)
Macro	Financial collapse and political upheavals, policy neglect, legal inequities and patriarchal norms	Withdrawal from formal systems, reliance on informal economy	Enforce gender-equitable laws and regulations (Terjesen <i>et al.</i> , 2016); invest in public infrastructure supporting women entrepreneurs (Khabbaz and Kuran, 2024); promote gender-sensitive governance and institutional reforms to dismantle patriarchal barriers (Naguib, 2024; Barbar <i>et al.</i> , 2023, 2021)

Source(s): Author's own work

5.1 Limitations and future research

The study's qualitative approach and relatively small, Lebanon-specific sample inherently limit the generalizability of its findings to broader populations. To deepen understanding, future research should incorporate comparative designs across different cultural and institutional contexts, as well as longitudinal studies to capture how women's entrepreneurial experiences and strategies evolve over time. Additionally, quantitative research could complement these insights by systematically measuring the wider socio-economic impact of women's entrepreneurship in fragile and crisis-affected settings, thereby informing more evidence-based policy interventions.

6. Conclusion

Women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon is forged not in freedom, but in friction. It emerges from the cracks of institutional collapse, gendered exclusion and economic despair—less as a choice than as a necessity. Yet within this constrained space, women act with remarkable resilience, drawing on family and community ties, supportive leadership and adaptive resourcefulness. Their ventures are not just economic projects but social infrastructures, sustaining households and rebuilding fragmented communities. To support this form of entrepreneurship, reforms must move beyond rhetoric and address the personal, organizational, social and structural systems that shape women's possibilities. Until then, women will continue to innovate not because the system empowers them, but because it leaves them no other option.

Note

1. Risk-taking, self-efficacy, need for achievement, need for autonomy and locus of control.

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