

From Social Constraint to Social Capital: A Conceptual Exploration of Family Support in Women's Entrepreneurship in Iraq

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i12/27305>

Published Date: 19 December 2025

Abstract

In conservative and patriarchal societies, women entrepreneurs often operate within socio-cultural structures that simultaneously restrict and enable their economic participation. This study offers a conceptual exploration of family support as a mediating mechanism in women's entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on the post-conflict and institutionally fragile context of Iraq. While existing literature frequently portrays the family as a barrier to women's autonomy, this paper repositions the family as a dynamic source of social capital that can facilitate entrepreneurial resilience and legitimacy. Drawing upon Social Capital Theory, the Resource-Based View, and Gender Role Theory, the proposed framework conceptualizes emotional, financial, and practical support from spouses and extended kin as context-dependent resources that both reflect and reshape gendered expectations. The study highlights the duality of family influence, functioning as both a gatekeeper of traditional norms and a conduit for entrepreneurial empowerment. This reconceptualization contributes to a more nuanced understanding of women's entrepreneurship in conflict-affected settings and offers actionable insights for policy, training, and ecosystem development that engage with, rather than circumvent, familial institutions. The framework invites empirical validation and adaptation across diverse socio-cultural environments where women navigate entrepreneurship within familial constraints.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship, Family Support, Social Capital Theory, Entrepreneurial Success, Socio-Cultural Constraints

Introduction

Women's entrepreneurship has garnered increasing scholarly and policy interest as a transformative force for economic development, innovation, and social change, especially within conservative and conflict affected contexts (Metcalfe, Bastian, & Al-Dajani, 2022; Shamieh & Althalathini, 2021). Across the globe, women-led entrepreneurial ventures are increasingly recognized for their capacity to foster inclusive growth, build community

resilience, and contribute to post-conflict recovery (Eze et al., 2025; Peter et al., 2025). However, continues this growing acknowledgment, women entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) continue to face structural and cultural constraints that significantly curtail their ability to initiate and sustain businesses (Sattar, Hong, & Jouda, 2021).

These constraints include limited access to finance, gendered legal and institutional frameworks, mobility restrictions, and persistent patriarchal norms that limit women's public and economic participation (Al-Boinin, Vatanasakdakul, & Zaghouani, 2025; Shamieh & Althalathini, 2021). Studies have shown that even in urban centers, women entrepreneurs are often sidelined from mainstream economic systems, instead relying on informal mechanisms and social networks to mobilize resources and navigate regulatory barriers (Medina-Vidal et al., 2025). The result is an entrepreneurial landscape that demands high resilience, innovation, and negotiation, particularly for women operating in patriarchal and volatile settings like Iraq.

One of the most salient yet understudied elements in this ecosystem is the paradoxical role of the family. The family unit can function both as a gatekeeper of traditional norms and as a potential enabler of entrepreneurial activity. On the one hand, it imposes social expectations related to domestic responsibilities and honor-based obligations, often deterring women from pursuing entrepreneurial aspirations (Shamieh & Althalathini, 2021; Vilardo & Bittar, 2018). On the other hand, when family members (especially spouses and extended kin) offer emotional, financial, or logistical support, they can serve as powerful sources of social capital that offset institutional voids (Atshan et al., 2024; Al-Rubaye & Khalaf, 2023).

Informed by Iraq's unique post conflict socio-economic terrain, this model conceptualizes family support as a dynamic form of social capital, one embedded in gendered norms but capable of being restructured through entrepreneurial practice. By shifting the analytical lens from viewing the family solely as a socio-cultural constraint to recognizing its potential as a strategic support system, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of women's entrepreneurship in conservative, resource constrained, and transitional settings. This conceptual advancement responds to a broader scholarly call for context specific frameworks that address how institutional voids, cultural constraints, and informal networks interact in shaping women's entrepreneurial agency (Eze et al., 2025; Dembélé, 2025). Unlike studies that emphasize structural barriers alone, this research highlights how women creatively mobilize familial resources (such as emotional labor, reputational capital, and logistical aid) to access markets, manage risk, and gain legitimacy within constrained ecosystems (Al-Boinin et al., 2025). This paper aims to develop a conceptual framework to understand how family support in Iraq can transform from constraint to social capital, enabling women's entrepreneurship

Family as a Social Constraint

The role of family in shaping women's entrepreneurship in Iraq, and more broadly in the MENA region, extends beyond mere cultural backdrop. It constitutes an active institution that governs women's entrepreneurial pathways through both direct and indirect forms of control. As Kanchana et al. (2024) argue, women's motivation and entrepreneurial behavior are significantly shaped by family-imposed expectations, which often prioritize reputation

management over economic innovation. In conservative settings, family approval acts as a precondition for legitimacy, particularly in male dominated sectors or when business activities involve physical or digital public exposure. For example, Hossain et al. (2024) reveal that many South Asian women entrepreneurs are discouraged by family members from adopting online platforms for fear of reputational risks associated with online visibility.

Despite political and economic transitions, entrenched patriarchal norms continue to dictate the scope and structure of women's entrepreneurial endeavors. Sharifinejad & Rezapouraghdam (2024) show how even well-intentioned family support can become paternalistic, requiring women to remain within "respectable" domains of commerce such as food preparation or tailoring, ventures which rarely scale or disrupt gendered divisions of labor. Furthermore, the moral economy of honor and shame, as explored in Mwobobia (2024) and Nguyen et al. (2024), serves as a soft form of institutional power. It reinforces compliance not through legal sanctions, but through emotional pressure and social ostracism.

Cultural Norms in Iraq and the MENA Region

The cultural landscape of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is fundamentally shaped by collectivist values and patriarchal traditions, wherein women's identities are often framed around ideals of modesty, domesticity, and family honor. These socio-cultural expectations are particularly acute in Iraq, where post-conflict fragility has amplified the role of informal institutions, such as the family and religious authorities, in regulating women's public and economic participation (Eze et al., 2025). In contexts where formal institutions are weakened or inconsistent, families and religiously grounded cultural norms frequently assume the role of gatekeepers to entrepreneurial legitimacy. As Al-Boinin, Vatanasakdakul, and Zaghouani (2025) highlight, in many Arab societies, visible business activity (especially when it involves interaction with unrelated men or digital presence) can be perceived as challenging conservative gender roles. The moral regulation of women's participation in business is reinforced by community expectations regarding family reputation.

Gender Roles and Family Expectations

In Iraq, as in much of the MENA region, gender roles are deeply embedded in both familial and institutional frameworks. Men are typically positioned as the financial providers and public decision-makers, while women are expected to assume domestic and caregiving responsibilities. These roles are socially reinforced through family expectations that often limit women's autonomy in economic decision making and entrepreneurial activity. Within this patriarchal system, women are frequently expected to prioritize household duties over professional aspirations. Entrepreneurship is only deemed socially acceptable when it aligns with traditional female domains, such as food preparation, tailoring, or beauty services. Ventures that require public exposure, interaction with unrelated men, or mobility are often discouraged or outright restricted (Sattar et al., 2021).

Moreover, many Iraqi women must seek the approval of male relatives, whether for registering a business, accessing external financing, or traveling for work. These expectations reflect a broader system of moral gatekeeping, where women's entrepreneurial legitimacy is contingent upon adherence to family and community standards.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

Understanding women's entrepreneurship within conservative and post-conflict societies like Iraq necessitates a multi-theoretical framework that captures the nuanced interplay between structural constraints, cultural norms, and familial dynamics. To this end, this study integrates insights from five theoretical lenses: Social Capital Theory, the Resource-Based View (RBV), Gender Role Theory, Structuration Theory, and Feminist Institutionalism. Together, these perspectives allow us to conceptualize family support not merely as a contextual factor, but as a dynamic mediating mechanism that can evolve from a social constraint into a form of social capital, enabling entrepreneurial agency.

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory posits that social networks and the resources embedded within them can facilitate individual or collective action (Putnam, 1995; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In fragile and patriarchal contexts like Iraq, where formal institutional support for entrepreneurship is weak or inaccessible, the family often serves as the primary source of bonding social capital. Women entrepreneurs in conservative societies often rely heavily on these familial networks due to institutional and gender-based constraints. For instance, as noted by Metcalfe, Bastian, and Al-Dajani (2022), kin-based support structures may substitute for missing public services and formal entrepreneurial infrastructures. However, such support often comes with normative expectations (such as the prioritization of domestic responsibilities or limitations on business expansion) that can constrain women's autonomy and decision-making power (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013). This dual nature of family-based social capital (as both enabling and limiting) highlights the importance of context in determining whether familial ties function as assets or liabilities in the entrepreneurial process. The capacity of women to negotiate these norms determines whether social capital becomes a lever for empowerment or a mechanism of compliance (Koburtay, Syed, & Hughes, 2023).

Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm focuses on the strategic importance of internal resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). When applied to women's entrepreneurship in constrained environments, RBV sheds light on how family support can serve as an intangible yet strategic resource that enhances a woman's entrepreneurial viability. In Iraq, women often lack access to external finance, legal protections, and market networks. In such contexts, familial resources (such as spousal support, inherited capital, or permission to operate) are not merely compensatory but become critical enablers of entrepreneurial action. These resources are often deeply embedded in cultural and emotional ties, making them difficult to replicate or access by others. Thus, family support, when viewed through the RBV lens, constitutes a unique, context-dependent advantage that can enable women to initiate and sustain enterprises despite external constraints.

Gender Role Theory

Gender Role Theory, as conceptualized by Eagly (1987) and later expanded by Eagly and Wood (2012), offers a lens for understanding how societies assign behaviors, expectations, and roles based on gender. In patriarchal societies such as Iraq, these roles tend to place women within caregiving and domestic spheres, whereas men dominate public, political, and economic

domains. These gendered expectations often inform the limits and conditions under which women are allowed to engage in entrepreneurial activity.

In conservative Iraqi households, family support for entrepreneurship is frequently conditional and confined to culturally sanctioned sectors that align with traditional feminine roles, such as tailoring, cooking, or beauty services (Althalathini, Tlaiss, & Gherbal, 2020). When women pursue ventures that are highly visible, require public engagement, or involve travel, they often face pushback from family members, who may view such activities as transgressions of accepted social roles (Hutchings, Metcalfe, & Cooper, 2010). This phenomenon aligns with what scholars describe as "normative surveillance," in which family members act as informal enforcers of gender norms, encouraging entrepreneurial efforts that preserve social respectability while discouraging those that challenge it.

Structuration Theory

Structuration Theory, developed by Giddens (1984), explains how human agency and social structures exist in a mutually constitutive relationship. It emphasizes that individuals are not merely passive recipients of norms, but active agents capable of reproducing or transforming them. In the Iraqi context, women entrepreneurs navigate highly gendered structures yet often exhibit "incremental agency" by subtly renegotiating their roles within familial systems. Al-Dajani and Marlow (2010) provide compelling insights into how entrepreneurial activity can serve as a vehicle for reshaping women's social identities and family dynamics, even in conservative environments. For example, a woman who starts a home-based business might initially gain permission only for supplementary income, but over time, her economic contribution may lead to greater autonomy and recognition within the family. This illustrates how entrepreneurship is not only about economic engagement but also about reconfiguring gendered power relations through daily practices and negotiation (Metcalfe, Bastian, & Al-Dajani, 2022).

Feminist Institutionalism

Feminist Institutionalism argues that gendered power dynamics are embedded within institutions, both formal (e.g., legal systems) and informal (e.g., families, customs). As articulated by Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell (2010), institutions are not gender-neutral; they reproduce dominant norms unless disrupted by agency or reform. In Iraq, where state capacity is weak and institutional protections for women are limited.

Within such contexts, family support becomes a double-edged sword: it provides access to resources and legitimacy but also enforces patriarchal expectations. Sattar, Masood, and Zafar (2021) note that women are frequently dependent on male guardians to access credit, mobility, or even training programs. This dependency reinforces hierarchical gender relations unless actively contested. Feminist institutionalist perspectives highlight the importance of analyzing who controls access to support, how decisions are made, and under what conditions women gain or lose autonomy.

By integrating Social Capital Theory, RBV, Gender Role Theory, Structuration Theory, and Feminist Institutionalism, this study advances a holistic understanding of family support in women's entrepreneurship. Rather than treating the family as a monolithic constraint or enabler, it conceptualizes the family as a contested terrain, simultaneously a site of resource

mobilization, cultural reproduction, and potential transformation. Recognizing this duality is essential for both theory-building and the design of policy interventions aimed at fostering inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems in the Global South.

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual approach, synthesizing theoretical frameworks to propose a new lens on family support in women's entrepreneurship in Iraq.

Repositioning Family as Social Capital

Family support can transform from a passive cultural presence into an active agent of entrepreneurial empowerment, particularly in fragile and patriarchal contexts like Iraq. Drawing on Social Capital Theory (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) and enriched with insights from emotional support theory and intergenerational entrepreneurship frameworks, this section highlights how familial emotional, financial, and practical contributions from the bedrock of entrepreneurial resilience, agency, and legitimacy.

Emotional, Financial, and Practical Support as Catalysts

Social Capital Theory posits that access to key resources is embedded in networks of relationships characterized by trust, norms, and reciprocity (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In the Iraqi context, where institutional support for women entrepreneurs is often fragmented, inaccessible, or gender-biased, the family unit frequently substitutes as a primary source of emotional, material, and informational capital (Atshan & Zaid, 2024; Shamieh & Althalathini, 2021).

Emotional support from close family members, such as spouses, siblings, and parents, has been shown to play a crucial psychological role in buffering entrepreneurial women from societal stigma, fear of failure, and market uncertainty. Women with strong emotional support systems tend to exhibit higher self-confidence, stronger persistence, and more willingness to take entrepreneurial risks, traits essential for business creation and continuity (Metcalf, Bastian, & Al-Dajani, 2022). Financial support from family also plays a central role. Given the systemic obstacles women face in Iraq's male-dominated financial institutions, such as lack of collateral, high interest rates, and informal exclusions from credit, familial funding mechanisms like seed capital, rent-free premises, or interest-free loans provide the financial oxygen needed to initiate and sustain business activities (Sattar, Hong, & Jouda, 2021).

The Role of Extended Family, Spousal Support, and Generational Entrepreneurship

In Iraq's collectivist culture, the extended family frequently acts as an integrated economic unit where responsibilities, risks, and resources are shared across generational and gender lines. Spousal support, in particular, often takes the form of husbands assuming the public-facing or legal roles in the business. This arrangement provides women entrepreneurs with legitimacy and protection from potential social scrutiny in a context where public visibility for women can be stigmatized (Metcalf et al., 2022). Extended kin networks, such as brothers, sisters, and cousins, also contribute in less visible but equally crucial ways. For instance, the embroidery business of a female entrepreneur in Gaza succeeded in part due to her sister's managing production and her brother providing legal advice, thus forming a collaborative family enterprise built on trust and mutual aid (Metcalf et al., 2022).

Integrating Family Networks into Business Networks

Beyond offering internal emotional and material support, families in Iraq often play a bridging role, facilitating women's access to external networks that would otherwise remain inaccessible due to socio-cultural restrictions. Social capital theory, particularly the distinction between "bonding" and "bridging" social capital, helps conceptualize this role. While bonding capital is rooted in tight-knit familial support, bridging capital emerges when families connect women entrepreneurs to broader social and economic networks (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In conservative Iraqi society, women often rely on male family members, husbands, brothers, or fathers, to act as intermediaries in male-dominated marketplaces. These male relatives can negotiate contracts, manage customer relationships, or handle legal formalities, thereby enabling the woman to operate a business within the bounds of societal norms (Shamieh & Althalathini, 2021; Metcalfe, Bastian, & Al-Dajani, 2022). This protective intermediation extends the entrepreneur's reach into markets while maintaining her perceived respectability.

Discussion and Future Research Directions

This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of women's entrepreneurship in conservative and post-conflict contexts by repositioning family support as a double-edged mediating mechanism, one that can both enable and inhibit women's entrepreneurial activities. Drawing on Social Capital Theory (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), the Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991), and Gender Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), the findings foreground the paradoxical nature of family in patriarchal societies such as Iraq. Contrary to conventional literature that either romanticizes the family as a source of unconditional support or vilifies it as a patriarchal constraint, this study presents a dialectical model in which family simultaneously enforces socio-cultural norms while offering access to vital emotional, financial, and social capital. This insight challenges binary classifications prevalent in entrepreneurship discourse and adds complexity to the treatment of non-market institutions in female entrepreneurial ecosystems (Jamali, 2009).

Future Research Directions

Building upon the conceptual framework developed in this study (see figure 1), future research should aim to test, expand, and contextualize the role of family support in women's entrepreneurship across empirical and comparative dimensions. The following avenues are particularly critical for advancing both theoretical and practical insights in this domain.

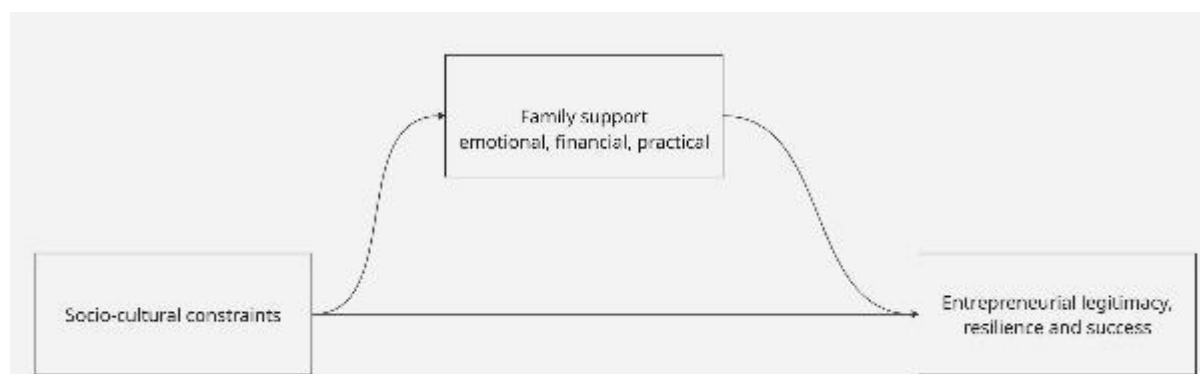


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Empirical Testing of the Mediating Model

While the dual role of the family, as both a constraint and a source of support, has been theoretically articulated, it requires empirical validation through robust quantitative methods. Future studies should apply Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), path analysis, or Partial Least Squares (PLS) to test how family support mediates the relationship between external constraints (e.g., gender norms, financial access) and entrepreneurial outcomes such as opportunity recognition, venture initiation, and sustainability. Eze et al. (2025) emphasize the evolving roles of family and societal institutions in shaping the entrepreneurial landscapes for African women, advocating for more systematic measurement of these dynamics using integrated modeling approaches. Their findings suggest that variations in emotional and financial support directly impact business resilience and innovation. Likewise, Al-Boinin, Vatanasakdakul, and Zaghouani (2025) highlight the complex interplay of gendered cultural expectations and social media engagement, suggesting that future research should quantitatively assess how virtual networks, often supported or constrained by family norms, mediate entrepreneurial participation. This aligns well with the need for refined measurement models that isolate the effects of family legitimacy and support systems.

Comparative Studies Across Post-Conflict Contexts

To examine the generalizability of the proposed framework, comparative studies are needed across other post-conflict or fragile contexts such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Afghanistan. These societies share characteristics with Iraq (entrenched patriarchy, economic volatility, and weakened institutional structures) but they differ in the scope and nature of family influence, cultural norms, and recovery trajectories.

Shamieh and Althalathini (2021) provide compelling evidence from Gaza, demonstrating how women entrepreneurs negotiate family boundaries amid conflict. Comparative research across countries like Iraq and Gaza could illuminate how variations in religious interpretation, state support, and socio-political recovery efforts influence entrepreneurial agency and family support mechanisms. In addition, Medina-Vidal et al. (2025) offer insights into how financial inclusion mechanisms and gender-based development models perform across Latin American contexts, highlighting the importance of macro-level comparative analysis.

Exploring the Role of Male Allies and Family Co-entrepreneurship

Current literature often emphasizes the barriers imposed by patriarchal family members; however, the positive roles played by male allies, including husbands, brothers, and fathers, remain significantly underexplored. Future research should examine co-entrepreneurial models where men and women collaborate within family-owned ventures. Peter, Elangovan, and Gupta (2025) discuss how digital engagement has altered household-level dynamics and encouraged male inclusion in business activities that were previously female-exclusive. Their findings open the door for exploring how male allies co-create value in family enterprises, particularly through resource sharing, division of labor, and legitimacy-building. Qualitative studies and social network analyses are also needed to assess how trust, decision-making power, and risk distribution are negotiated in joint ventures, especially in conservative or post-conflict settings. Such research would deepen our understanding of how to foster family-based entrepreneurship that is inclusive rather than restrictive.

Digital Platforms and Family-Mediated E-Commerce

The rise of digital entrepreneurship in Iraq, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has opened new pathways for women to participate in economic life while navigating socio-cultural boundaries. Digital platforms offer the potential for home-based business models where the presence or endorsement of male family members can enhance perceived legitimacy and operational safety. Al-Boinin et al. (2025) argue that social media platforms serve as both entrepreneurial tools and cultural negotiation spaces, where women actively construct acceptable public personas within the bounds of familial and societal expectations. Their research suggests that future studies could explore how digital tools empower women not only economically but also socially, redefining family roles in the process.

Conclusion

This study advances a reconceptualization of family support in women's entrepreneurship, particularly within the complex, patriarchal, and post-conflict landscape of Iraq. Rather than viewing the family solely as a socio-cultural constraint, the paper reframes familial influence as a dynamic and contextually embedded form of social capital, one that can be both restrictive and enabling depending on how gender norms, roles, and expectations are negotiated within the household. By drawing upon multiple theories, the proposed framework positions emotional, financial, and practical support from the family as potentially strategic assets that can mitigate institutional voids and socio-economic marginalisation. This dual nature of family support, functioning simultaneously as a gatekeeper and facilitator, challenges conventional binary understandings in entrepreneurship literature and introduces a more nuanced, relational, and culturally grounded model.

Framing family support as a mediating variable offers both theoretical and practical implications. It allows for a deeper understanding of how women entrepreneurs navigate structural barriers through informal networks and familial alliances. It also provides critical insight for policy and program development, suggesting that interventions aimed at empowering women must engage with, rather than bypass, the familial sphere. Entrepreneurial support systems that are attuned to cultural realities and capable of mobilizing family networks can significantly enhance the legitimacy, resilience, and scalability of women-led ventures in Iraq and similar contexts. Ultimately, this study contributes to a broader shift in the discourse on women's entrepreneurship, one that seeks to localize theory, recognize indigenous social dynamics, and elevate the voices and strategies of women operating at the intersection of tradition and transformation. By acknowledging the complexity of family influence and its potential to evolve into a source of entrepreneurial empowerment, the study offers a compelling foundation for future empirical research and gender-inclusive economic development initiatives.

This study contributes to the evolving discourse on women's entrepreneurship by reconceptualizing family support not as a static constraint, but as a dynamic and context-sensitive form of social capital. Situated within the highly patriarchal and post-conflict setting of Iraq, the study provides a novel theoretical framework that integrates Social Capital Theory, the Resource-Based View, and Gender Role Theory to explain how emotional, financial, and practical family support can mediate entrepreneurial success. Also, the study advances literature by challenging binary views that treat family either as a barrier or a support mechanism. Instead, it introduces a dialectical model where family support is fluid,

simultaneously enabling and constraining depending on how gender roles are socially constructed and negotiated. This conceptual nuance expands the analytical lens through which entrepreneurship is understood in conflict-affected, conservative, and collectivist societies. By grounding the analysis in the Iraqi context, the study fills a significant gap in entrepreneurship scholarship, which has often overlooked fragile and post-conflict settings. The framework developed herein is not only theoretically rich but also empirically relevant for countries where state institutions are weak, and family remains the dominant structure of support and regulation.

Furthermore, the findings offer meaningful guidance for policymakers, NGOs, and entrepreneurial support organizations. Programs designed to empower women entrepreneurs must engage with familial dynamics rather than work around them. Interventions should aim to transform families from gatekeepers into enablers by offering education, incentives, and inclusive training that incorporates spouses and kin. Additionally, financial and legal tools tailored to recognize informal support systems can bridge institutional gaps faced by women. The proposed model opens multiple avenues for empirical validation, especially through comparative studies across other post-conflict or culturally conservative regions. It also invites further inquiry into male allyship, intergenerational entrepreneurship, and the digital mediation of family roles in new business ventures. Ultimately, this study lays the foundation for a culturally grounded, relational approach to women's entrepreneurship. It advocates for a reimagining of the family, not as a relic of patriarchal constraint, but as a potential co-creator of entrepreneurial agency and resilience in fragile economic environments.

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