



## Article

# Leadership and Entrepreneurial Choices: Understanding the Motivational Dynamics of Women Entrepreneurs in Iran

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**Abstract:** This study explores the motivations and constraints of Iranian women entrepreneurs within a restrictive socioeconomic and cultural landscape. It adopts a qualitative approach and utilizes semi-structured interviews to investigate the complex interplay between financial limitations, gender biases, and regulatory challenges entrepreneurs face. These findings underscore the importance of resilience, adaptability, and creativity for entrepreneurial success. Women entrepreneurs in Iran adopt incremental growth strategies, utilize digital platforms for market access, and cultivate informal networks to manage risks and scale their ventures. They also creatively integrate family responsibilities into their business models, highlighting the cultural shaping of their entrepreneurial activities. The concept of regulatory adaptation was introduced to illustrate how entrepreneurs restructure their operations to comply with stringent government regulations while sustaining growth. The emotional burden of navigating these hurdles is also evident, emphasizing the need for support mechanisms that address mental health and well-being. Policy implications are discussed, and enhancements in financial access, gender equality, digital entrepreneurship, and mental health support for women entrepreneurs are recommended. This study contributes to the entrepreneurship theory by understanding how sociocultural contexts influence women's entrepreneurial activities and resilience strategies.



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**Keywords:** women's entrepreneurship; gender equality; resilience; adaptability; social capital and informal networks; regulatory adaptation; SDG 5: gender equality; push and pull motivational factors; Iran; international entrepreneurship

## 1. Introduction

Studying women's entrepreneurship in any nation is crucial, given its profound impact on economic development, social progress, and gender equality. Women's entrepreneurship contributes significantly to economic growth, innovation, job creation, and wealth generation. Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), often the backbone of many economies, benefit significantly from women entrepreneurs' critical role [1–5]. Researchers can gain valuable insights into how these enterprises contribute to national economic development and social welfare by investigating the drivers, challenges, and outcomes of women's entrepreneurial activity.

From a gender perspective, the study of women's entrepreneurship helps address longstanding inequality issues [6,7]. Women often face unique barriers to starting and scaling businesses, such as limited access to financing, insufficient mentorship opportunities, and sociocultural constraints [8]. Research in this field can illuminate these challenges and

enable policymakers to create targeted interventions that promote equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems. As gender equality remains a global priority, understanding how to foster an environment that supports women entrepreneurs is essential for creating more inclusive economies. This has been highlighted in numerous international frameworks, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize the importance of gender equality and economic empowerment [9,10].

From a global perspective, studying women's entrepreneurship offers valuable comparative data to help shape cross-national policies and strategies. Different countries have unique socioeconomic, legal, and cultural frameworks that influence opportunities available to women entrepreneurs. Comparative research can help to identify the best practices that enable countries to adopt policies and programs that effectively support women-led businesses. Understanding how women entrepreneurs compete and thrive is crucial in an increasingly interconnected world. Research that spans different contexts can provide insights into how women entrepreneurs navigate global challenges, such as market access, supply chain integration, and international competition [11,12].

Women's entrepreneurship is critical in emerging and developing nations. In many countries, women entrepreneurs are business owners and essential players in poverty alleviation, contributing to community development and social cohesion. Their businesses often address the unmet needs of underserved populations, thus contributing to social innovation. Studying women's entrepreneurship in this context offers essential lessons on how it drives sustainable development, particularly in regions with limited traditional economic opportunities. Understanding and supporting these women entrepreneurs is not just a matter of economic growth but also a show of empathy and support for their crucial societal role [13,14].

Research on women's entrepreneurship addresses the issue of empowerment in addition to economic benefits. Identifying the key drivers behind women's entrepreneurial endeavors can illuminate women's challenges and the resources required for success. By focusing on these factors, targeted support programs can be developed to help women overcome financial, legal, or social barriers, thereby promoting their economic independence and enhancing their societal standing [15–17].

Iran's unique cultural, religious, and social norms shape the opportunities available to women entrepreneurs, making it essential to explore how these factors influence business decisions [18,19]. Research on the drivers of entrepreneurship offers valuable cultural insights that can help craft culturally sensitive, effective policies and initiatives. Understanding how these norms impact women in business is crucial for designing support systems aligned with the local context.

This study also plays a vital role in addressing gender inequality. Many women in Iran face systemic obstacles, such as limited access to financing, education, and professional networks, which hinder their entrepreneurial potential [19–21]. By studying these challenges, their underlying causes, and the motivational dynamics of Iranian women entrepreneurs, strategies can be devised to bridge this gender gap in the business sector. Ultimately, this can lead to greater gender equality in the entrepreneurial landscape and inspire a more equitable future.

The term motivational dynamics, in this study, refers to "the complex interplay of forces, both internal and external, that drive and influence a person's motivation over time, encompassing how these forces fluctuate, interact, and can lead to changes in behavior and goal pursuit changing levels of motivation that are influenced by internal and external factors" (Oxford Dictionary), or "a dynamic, motivational force that enables the individual to look ahead and take proactive action" (ScienceDirect.com).

The aim of this study, the drivers of women's entrepreneurship in Iran, is essential for understanding and fostering economic growth, promoting gender equality, and supporting social development both within Iran and globally. Aiming to fill a gap in the current body of knowledge, this study specifically explored the motivations and constraints faced by Iranian women entrepreneurs, guided by the following research question (RQ):

RQ 1: What motivations and constraints influence women entrepreneurs in Iran's restrictive socioeconomic and cultural landscape? This question explores the complex factors that drive and hinder women's entrepreneurial activities in Iran. It focuses on their motivations, the barriers they face due to gender biases, financial limitations, and regulatory challenges, and how these factors interact within the country's cultural and economic framework.

RQ 2: How do Iranian women entrepreneurs navigate these challenges to foster entrepreneurial success despite the significant obstacles? This question aims to understand the strategies and adaptations women entrepreneurs in Iran employ to overcome their many challenges. It explores their use of resilience, adaptability, and creativity, including how they leverage digital platforms and informal networks and integrate family responsibilities to achieve business success and growth.

Investigating the factors that drive women entrepreneurs in Iran is essential for understanding the broader socioeconomic and cultural implications of their participation in the business world. This research has the potential to inform policies, promote gender equality, and foster economic development both within Iran and internationally. Studying the drivers for women entrepreneurs in Iran is crucial for several reasons, encompassing socio-economic and cultural dimensions. One of the most compelling arguments for such research is its contribution to economic development. Women's entrepreneurship plays a significant role in fostering innovation, job creation, and economic growth. By understanding what motivates women to start and sustain businesses in Iran, policymakers and organizations can create environments more conducive to women-led enterprises, ultimately strengthening the national economy and fostering a sense of optimism and hope for the future.

This research is aimed at a detailed exploration of the intricate motivations, challenges, and leadership dynamics faced by women entrepreneurs in Iran. Employing qualitative methodologies through semi-structured interviews, this study seeks to reveal the distinctive ways in which personal aspirations, socio-cultural norms, and economic environments shape the entrepreneurial paths of these women, contrasting these elements with those from more developed economies. The primary goals are to identify the drivers of entrepreneurship for Iranian women, understand the obstacles they encounter within their socio-economic context, and determine how these elements affect their leadership approaches and business tactics. By delving into these areas, the study seeks to enrich the global debate on entrepreneurship and gender, providing insights that could lead to policy enhancements and supportive measures to bolster the environment for women entrepreneurs in Iran and comparable settings.

Adopting a discovery-driven methodology, this investigation is designed to navigate the complex phenomenon of women's entrepreneurship in Iran unconstrained by pre-established hypotheses. The research employs an exploratory framework to recognize the existing literature's insufficient exploration and potential inadequacies to capture these entrepreneurs' unique challenges and motivations fully. This strategy aims to develop a nuanced understanding of the interrelations between personal ambitions, socio-cultural impacts, and economic variables, thereby fostering the emergence of new insights and patterns. This method is particularly well-suited to the study's objectives of informing

effective policy by revealing subtle realities and providing a robust empirical foundation for crafting targeted interventions.

The findings from this research are relevant to Iran and hold significance on a global scale, including the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG5, gender equality. Insights into the drivers of women's entrepreneurship in Iran can contribute to broader international conversations on gender and entrepreneurship. Other countries with similar sociocultural frameworks can learn from Iran's experiences and apply these lessons to support women entrepreneurs within their borders. The potential impact of this study's findings, derived from a combination of national and comparative research, is significant. These findings will aid policymakers in creating effective strategies to support women entrepreneurs by offering hope and optimism for a more inclusive and sustainable global economy. This research, therefore, is not just about Iran but about contributing to a global movement for gender equality in entrepreneurship, making the audience feel part of a larger, international movement.

## 2. Literature Review

Building on the existing literature, this study delves into women's entrepreneurship, recognized for its crucial role in economic development. It is a critical driver of economic development, contributing to job creation, innovation, and overall economic growth. Numerous studies have highlighted women entrepreneurs' significant role, particularly in the small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector, which forms the cornerstone of many economies [2,4,22]. The role of SMEs in fostering national economic growth is well-documented, and the participation of women in these enterprises adds another layer of economic resilience and diversification [23,24]. Research on women entrepreneurs reveals that despite the global rise in women's entrepreneurial activity, women face unique challenges that can hinder the full potential of their contributions to national economies.

A growing body of literature has explored the drivers of women's entrepreneurship, particularly in emerging markets. Anggadwita et al. [16] state that women entrepreneurs in emerging economies such as Iran contribute to economic expansion, poverty reduction, and community development. Women often start businesses to meet local community needs in these contexts, driving economic and social innovations. However, the specific sociocultural barriers and systemic challenges they encounter, such as restrictive legal frameworks or limited access to finance, are crucial factors that influence entrepreneurial success [17].

### 2.1. Gender Inequality and Systemic Barriers

Gender inequality remains a central issue in the discourse on women's entrepreneurship. Women often face systemic barriers that men do not face, including limited access to financial resources, weaker professional networks, and sociocultural constraints that limit their entrepreneurial activities [6,7]. Bhakuni et al. [8] emphasize that access to financing remains a persistent challenge for women entrepreneurs globally. Ojediran and Anderson [15] argued that financial inclusion is critical for women's entrepreneurial success.

In developing countries, these inequalities are often exacerbated by cultural and legal norms that restrict women's mobility and decision-making power, thus limiting their ability to run successful businesses [18]. The literature shows that addressing these systemic barriers requires targeted interventions, such as mentorship programs, legal reforms, and improved access to financial services tailored to women's needs [19,25]. For example, Goncalves et al. [5] suggested that policies aimed at closing the gender gap in entrepreneurial ecosystems must account for the unique challenges faced by women, such as balancing familial responsibilities with business activities and overcoming deeply entrenched gender norms.

Therefore, the significance of cross-national research on women's entrepreneurship should not be overlooked. Different countries have unique socioeconomic and legal environments that shape the opportunities available to women entrepreneurs. Comparative studies can help to identify best practices that can be adapted across various contexts to support women entrepreneurs more effectively [11]. For example, research by Henry et al. [12] suggests that countries with more inclusive legal frameworks and social support systems tend to have higher rates of female entrepreneurship. These findings are crucial for shaping policy recommendations encouraging women to participate in entrepreneurial activities.

Furthermore, international frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize gender equality as a crucial component of global economic development [9]. SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality, highlights the need for policies and programs that promote women's economic empowerment, including in the entrepreneurial sector [26]. Cross-national studies aligned with these global goals provide insight into how countries can foster inclusive economies by promoting women's entrepreneurship.

### *2.2. Women's Entrepreneurship in Emerging Markets and Developing Nations*

Women's entrepreneurship is particularly significant in emerging markets and developing nations where traditional economic opportunities are often limited. Women entrepreneurs frequently serve as agents of social change by addressing unmet needs in their communities through innovative business models [13,14]. Research has shown that women-led businesses in these regions often focus on industries such as health-care, education, and agriculture, which directly contribute to social welfare and poverty alleviation [27]. These entrepreneurial activities are essential for economic growth, community development, and social cohesion [16].

Studies such as those by Jayachandran [14] and Rajagopal [27] emphasize women entrepreneurs' dual roles in economic and social realms. In many developing countries, women's businesses are crucial in providing services to underserved populations. For instance, women entrepreneurs often build products or services tailored to the needs of marginalized groups, contributing to broader social innovation [13,27]. These studies argue that supporting women entrepreneurs in emerging markets requires financial investment and a deeper understanding of the local cultural, legal, and socioeconomic conditions that shape their entrepreneurial experience.

### *2.3. Empowerment and the Societal Impact of Women's Entrepreneurship*

Empowerment is a central theme in the literature on women's entrepreneurship. By identifying the key drivers of women's entrepreneurial endeavors, researchers can develop strategies to empower women through entrepreneurship [16]. Empowerment through entrepreneurship enhances women's financial independence and improves their social standing, allowing them to assume leadership roles in their communities [15]. This is particularly important in patriarchal societies, where women's participation in the labor market and their ability to own and operate businesses can challenge traditional gender roles.

Research by Andriamahery and Qamruzzaman [28] shows that empowerment through entrepreneurship leads to positive social outcomes, such as improved educational opportunities for children and increased health and well-being for families. This empowerment extends beyond the individual to influence broader societal norms and expectations of women's economic roles. Therefore, supporting women entrepreneurs is not merely an economic imperative but also a matter of social justice and equity.

#### 2.4. Women's Entrepreneurship in Iran: A Unique Case

Given its distinct cultural, religious, and social norms, Iran presents a unique case study of women's entrepreneurship. Women entrepreneurs in Iran face systemic challenges, including restrictive legal frameworks, limited access to financing, and sociocultural constraints that hinder their ability to start and grow businesses [18,21]. Despite these barriers, women in Iran increasingly turn to entrepreneurship to achieve financial independence and contribute to economic growth.

Ahadi and Kasraie [20,25] and Nakhaei et al. [19] highlight how Iran's unique cultural context influences women's entrepreneurial activity. For example, religious norms often dictate the types of businesses women can pursue, whereas legal restrictions limit their access to specific resources. However, despite these constraints, Iranian women have demonstrated resilience and adaptability and have found innovative ways to navigate these challenges and achieve business success [29].

The literature on women's entrepreneurship highlights its importance in economic growth, social progress, and gender equality. While women entrepreneurs face unique challenges, they contribute significantly to the national and global economies. Comparative research and studies in emerging markets, including Iran, provide valuable insights into the drivers of and barriers to women's entrepreneurship, informing policies and practices on how best to support these vital economic actors. The growing body of research on this topic underscores the need for continued focus on empowering women through entrepreneurship as a matter of economic development and social equity.

#### 2.5. Opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs in Iran

Despite the intricate landscape filled with opportunities and significant challenges, women entrepreneurs in Iran exhibit inspiring resilience, a testament to their determination and strength [30,31]. The emergence of digital platforms, niche market opportunities, and increased educational attainment have paved promising paths [32,33]. However, restrictive legal frameworks, cultural barriers, and economic instability are ongoing hurdles [19,29]. Overcoming these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes legal reforms, better access to financing, and more robust support networks tailored to the unique needs of women in the Iranian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

One of the most significant opportunities for women entrepreneurs in Iran lies in the increasing demand for women-led businesses in sectors that cater to women consumers [34–36]. Iran's consumer market is segmented mainly by gender because of cultural and religious practices, creating specific spaces where women entrepreneurs can thrive [37,38]. For instance, industries such as fashion, beauty, healthcare, and education provide opportunities for women to create businesses tailored to the needs and preferences of other women, which has been growing in recent years. This niche market positioning not only allows women to carve out successful ventures but also promises significant growth and success without competing directly in male-dominated sectors, fostering a sense of optimism and potential for growth.

The rapid growth of digital platforms and e-commerce in Iran has opened new avenues for female entrepreneurs, empowering them to start businesses with lower overhead costs and often work from home. The rise of internet access and social media platforms aligns with cultural norms that sometimes restrict women's mobility. Social media marketing positively affects brand experience, social media benefits, and brand equity, making it a powerful tool for Iranian women entrepreneurs seeking to enhance customer engagement and build a competitive advantage through digital platforms [39]. E-commerce offers a more flexible environment where women can engage in entrepreneurial activities without requiring physical storefronts, bypassing traditional barriers posed by the broader eco-

conomic environment. This digital revolution is a powerful tool for female entrepreneurs, empowering them to overcome societal and economic challenges and fostering a sense of encouragement and empowerment [40,41].

Educational opportunities have expanded for women in Iran, providing a foundation for entrepreneurial activities. Many women are gaining higher education degrees, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) [42,43]. This trend helps fuel innovation and entrepreneurship among women, as many educated women are now leveraging their skills to enter emerging sectors such as technology and digital services, further diversifying the entrepreneurial landscape.

### *2.6. Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs in Iran*

Iranian women entrepreneurs encounter significant challenges despite these opportunities, many of which stem from sociocultural, legal, and economic barriers. The primary obstacle is the restrictive legal environment in which women operate. Although women have made considerable strides in education and business, Iran's legal framework still limits their rights, including ownership laws and access to capital [44,45]. For instance, women often face difficulties securing loans and financial support from traditional banking systems because of discriminatory lending practices and legal constraints on property ownership, commonly required as collateral. Policy reforms that promote gender equality and give women equal access to financial resources are needed [18,46].

Cultural norms and societal expectations also face substantial challenges. In Iran, traditional gender roles often expect women to prioritize family and household responsibilities over their career ambitions. This expectation can limit women's time and resources for growing their businesses. However, it is essential to note that many men actively support women in their entrepreneurial endeavors, challenge these norms, and foster a more inclusive business environment. Furthermore, these norms can reduce access to professional networks, which is essential for business scaling. Male-dominated industries and business networks can exclude women, making it difficult for female entrepreneurs to find mentors, partners, or investors to help them advance their ventures [47,48]. Although economic sanctions are among the most prevalent and wide-ranging tools of economic status, more research is needed on how they impact women's empowerment, particularly in tourism. This oversight is striking, as women often bear the brunt of sanctions because of their disadvantaged socioeconomic and political positions in affected countries. Sanctions have had detrimental effects on various dimensions of women's empowerment, including economic, psychological, social, and political, underscoring the fragility of empowerment in Iran's religiopatriarchal context. Economic empowerment, a critical factor in the broader empowerment of Iranian women, is particularly affected by sanctions, leading to significant setbacks.

Another significant challenge is the sociopolitical environment, which can be unpredictable or restrictive. Economic sanctions and political instability in Iran have made it difficult for entrepreneurs, especially women, to access international markets, export products, or form international partnerships. However, it is essential to note that despite these challenges, many women entrepreneurs successfully create international partnerships and leverage global opportunities. This instability has also led to inflation, currency devaluation, and fluctuating consumer demand, disproportionately affecting women-owned businesses, notably smaller enterprises with fewer resources available to absorb economic shocks [49–51].

Furthermore, women in Iran have limited access to entrepreneurial training and support. While educational attainment is high, many women need access to specialized business training, mentorship, and incubation programs crucial for starting and scaling a

business. Although some initiatives aim to foster female entrepreneurship, they are often insufficient or difficult to access, especially for women outside major urban centers [40,52,53].

### *2.7. Support Programs for Women Entrepreneurs in Iran*

Support programs for women entrepreneurs in Iran are critical in addressing their numerous challenges, particularly in gaining access to finance, training, and mentorship. Historically, training programs, especially those aimed at empowering rural women, have not yet met their goals. Hence, various actors, including government bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international agencies, develop and implement these programs. Although they vary in scope and accessibility, these initiatives have significantly impacted women's entrepreneurial participation, particularly in rural and underserved areas [52,54].

Microfinance and small loans are among the most essential forms of support. The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation is a primary microfinance provider for women in Iran, particularly in rural communities. This foundation offers small loans (micro-credits) designed to help women establish or grow their businesses, often under favorable terms and without the need for traditional collateral. These microcredits had the most significant impact on the social empowerment of women-headed households. A positive relationship exists between allocated credit and economic empowerment in female-headed households, although the coefficient indicates a weak correlation between the two variables. In addition, these micro-credits contribute to the economic empowerment of the women heads of rural households by improving employment opportunities and income. This model is crucial to empower women who lack access to conventional banking. Similarly, Bank Keshavarzi, Iran's agricultural bank, offers specialized loan products to women entrepreneurs involved in agriculture. By focusing on agribusiness and small-scale farming, the bank encourages rural women to participate more fully in the agricultural economy, an essential sector for national and local economic stability [55].

Entrepreneurship and business development training are central to fostering women's economic empowerment. Various Iranian women's NGOs have played pivotal roles in offering educational programs tailored to the needs of women entrepreneurs. For instance, the Women's Society Against Environmental Pollution provides targeted training in environmentally sustainable business practices, particularly in areas such as tourism and handicrafts, which are growing sectors of women-led business. Furthermore, international organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have facilitated entrepreneurship workshops to equip women with essential business skills. These programs focus on innovation and sustainability and promote gender equality by ensuring women gain the knowledge necessary to thrive in competitive industries.

In addition to training, incubators and accelerators provide essential support for women entrepreneurs in Iran. The Iranian National Innovation Fund (INIF), a government-backed initiative, offers funding, mentorship, and technical support to innovative startups, including women. By focusing on technology-driven and knowledge-based industries, INIF encourages women to enter sectors traditionally dominated by men, broadening the scope of female entrepreneurship in the country [56]. Similarly, the Sharif Accelerator is a private sector initiative, a Sharif University of Technology Science and Technology Park subsidiary providing seed money, mentorship, education, workspace, and access to an organized community of entrepreneurs dedicated exclusively to supporting female entrepreneurs who offer mentorship, networking opportunities, and seed funding for early-stage startups. It also fosters international partnerships, helping women scale their businesses and access global markets [57].

Networking and mentorship are vital components of entrepreneurial success, and various programs exist to provide these resources to women. Women's Entrepreneurship



Centers, often affiliated with universities and NGOs, offer valuable mentorship opportunities by connecting women with experienced business leaders who can guide them through the challenges of growing a business. Global Entrepreneurship Network (GEN) Iran also organizes events and workshops to facilitate networking among women entrepreneurs. These platforms allow women to share experiences, gain access to mentorship, and connect with potential investors, all of which are crucial for scaling their businesses and overcoming the barriers they face in the male-dominated entrepreneurial landscape [52,53].

International support and collaboration further enhance the resources available to Iranian women entrepreneurs. Although the UN Women's Empower Women Initiative is not specific to Iran, it provides educational resources, grants, and mentorship opportunities for women in developing countries. This initiative has worked with Iranian NGOs to promote economic empowerment and gender equality through entrepreneurship, thereby expanding the reach of support available to women [58,59]. Moreover, the European Union (EU) has launched several initiatives to foster cross-border business partnerships and knowledge exchange, which is crucial for promoting gender-inclusive growth in Iran [60]. These programs offer funding and expertise to women entrepreneurs, helping them overcome some of the financial and logistical challenges of operating in a politically and economically constrained environment.

Support programs for women entrepreneurs in Iran are crucial for addressing their financial, educational, and societal challenges. By offering microfinance, specialized training, mentorship, and access to international networks, these programs help women navigate the complexities of entrepreneurship in a socio-political context that often restricts their opportunities. However, expanding the accessibility of these initiatives, particularly for women in rural and underserved regions, remains a critical step toward achieving more comprehensive economic empowerment for women in Iran.

### *2.8. The Role of Leadership in Women Entrepreneurship*

Leadership plays a critical role in entrepreneurship by integrating entrepreneurial behaviors with effective leadership techniques to influence others to pursue opportunities and manage resources strategically [61]. Leadership plays a pivotal role in the success and growth of women's entrepreneurship by influencing individual businesses' trajectories and broader social and economic outcomes. Strong leadership allows female entrepreneurs to navigate unique challenges, foster innovation, and create organizational cultures that contribute to long-term success. In entrepreneurship, leadership is essential for providing a vision, building resilient teams, empowering others, and enhancing networking opportunities, which are critical for overcoming women's gender-specific barriers in the business world [62,63].

One of the primary roles of leadership in women's entrepreneurship is to articulate a clear vision and a strategic direction. Influential leaders can define and communicate their business goals, creating a roadmap for the future that guides decision-making and helps attract necessary resources, including investment. Studies have shown that women entrepreneurs who exhibit strong leadership qualities are more successful in setting long-term strategic goals that are vital for ensuring the sustainability and scalability of their ventures [64]. A clear vision allows women entrepreneurs to stay focused, particularly in industries where they may face gender bias or limited access to funding and professional networks [65]. The ability to provide strategic direction ensures that women-led businesses can not only survive in competitive markets but also thrive.

Resilience and adaptability are critical components of entrepreneurial leadership, particularly in women. Women entrepreneurs often face distinct socioeconomic and cultural barriers that can affect their ability to succeed in business. These barriers include limited

access to financing, societal expectations, and discriminatory practices in specific industries. Leadership is critical in helping women entrepreneurs develop resilience, enabling them to adapt to challenges and pivot in response to market changes or business setbacks. Henry et al. [66] emphasize that women who exhibit strong leadership qualities are better equipped to guide their businesses through crises, such as economic downturns or market disruptions. Adaptability is essential for women entrepreneurs operating in uncertain environments, where resilience determines business sustainability.

Furthermore, leadership in women's entrepreneurship is intrinsically linked to empowerment and team-building. Influential leaders manage their businesses and empower their teams, creating inclusive, collaborative work environments. Women entrepreneurs who adopt participative leadership styles and encourage employee input and collaboration tend to foster more innovative and motivated teams [67]. This approach boosts employee morale and enhances business performance, as it promotes the shared ownership of business goals and a more substantial commitment to the enterprise's success. The empowerment aspect of leadership is particularly inspiring, as it creates a positive organizational culture that can lead to higher productivity and innovation, particularly in female-led businesses where collaboration and mutual support are often key drivers of success.

Leadership among women entrepreneurs extends beyond managing their businesses to include mentorship and role modeling. Women entrepreneurs frequently mentor other aspiring businesswomen, helping break down barriers and inspire confidence in the next generation of female entrepreneurs. In this context, leadership involves guiding and supporting other women, fostering a ripple effect that encourages more women to pursue entrepreneurship [68]. By acting as mentors and role models, successful women entrepreneurs contribute to breaking gender barriers in industries where women are traditionally underrepresented. The role of mentorship in breaking down barriers is particularly significant. It helps build a pipeline of women leaders who can continue to challenge gender norms and expand women's participation in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, fostering a sense of hope and optimism.

Networking and influence are essential leadership elements for women entrepreneurs. Strong leadership allows women to build and leverage networks critical for accessing resources, forming partnerships, and securing funding. Networking is not just important; it empowers female entrepreneurs by providing opportunities to collaborate with others, gain market insights, and expand business operations. Research shows that women entrepreneurs who demonstrate strong leadership and networking capabilities successfully overcome gender-specific barriers such as limited access to venture capital and exclusion from male-dominated professional networks [23,69]. The ability to influence and build relationships within these networks enhances women's opportunities for growth. It helps to position businesses competitively in the marketplace, fostering a sense of empowerment and connection.

#### Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership Context in Iran

Women in Iran have primary hope for family advancement [70]. Attention to women's entrepreneurial activities can significantly impact a country's economic growth and development [56]. In Iran, women view entrepreneurship as a means to overcome job segregation and participate in economic development. This is reflected in the young population's inclination toward higher education and the traditional nature of society [37]. In Iran's Fourth Development Plan, the need to focus on entrepreneurial activities holds a high position [71]. According to the 2023 report by the Iranian Statistics Organization [72], Iran has a population of 85.9 million, with 42.6 million women. In 2023, the economic participation rate was 14.3% for women and 68.3% for men, with a 1% increase in women's participation

compared with 202 [72]. The World Bank reported that Iran's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita was USD 13,100 in 2020. Women's employment in Iran is less favorable than in other developing countries, with fewer job opportunities and a higher prevalence in the informal sector with low wages [73].

The 2023 report from the Iranian Statistics Center indicates that 40.9% of the population aged 15 years and older are economically active, with an overall unemployment rate of 7.7%. The unemployment rate is 6.2% for men and 15% for women [72]. The disparity in labor market dynamics indicates that cultural and structural barriers significantly affect Iranian women's business and investment activities. Despite their high literacy and educational levels, the public sector's low absorption capacity highlights the need to focus on women's entrepreneurship [74].

According to the 2021–2022 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), Iran ranked 32nd out of 47 countries in the fledgling entrepreneurship index [75]. The entrepreneurial intention index, which measures the willingness to start a new business within three years, was 26.4% (22.4% for women and 31.1% for men), placing Iran 16th among the 47 member countries, which is lower than the number in 2020. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor noted that COVID-19 and high inflation, which exceeded 40% in most months of 2021, negatively impacted Iran's entrepreneurial sector. This led to a decline in Established Business Ownership (EBO) from 14.5% in 2020 to 8.8% in 2021, 13.7% in men, and 3.8% in women in 2021. However, the total early-stage entrepreneurial activity (TEA) rate increased slightly from 8.0% to 8.8%. In 2021, the TEA rate was 10.4% in men and 7.1% in women. Iranian entrepreneurs face significant challenges in 2021, as reflected in the lower scores from experts in the NES survey. Government policy support and relevance dropped to 2.3, and entrepreneurial programs fell to 2.5, among the lowest in GEM Level C economies. Education-related conditions also declined, with entrepreneurial education at school scoring only 0.9. The nascent activities of women and men were 6.7% and 9.7%, respectively [75].

Covid 19 had extensive effects on Iran's entrepreneurial context. Early women entrepreneurs in Iran were four times more likely than men to see new opportunities during the pandemic (34.8% vs. 8.8%) but also more likely to close their businesses (23.2% vs. 11.3%). Moreover, women-established business owners felt the government's response was less effective. Women were less active in running new firms (2.7%) than men (5.8%) [75]. However, there were some positive signs in the market-related conditions. Entrepreneurial finance scored 4.2, and ease of entry: market dynamics improved to 5.3. Support came from various sources, including entrepreneurship festivals, the Omid Entrepreneurship Fund, and startup accelerators like the Azadi Innovation Factory [75]. Despite market support, better government policies are required to encourage new entrepreneurs. Iran faces significant challenges in its governmental policies, operational plans, and underdeveloped commercial and legal infrastructure.

Additionally, financing, innovation, and technological readiness are insufficient [76]. Iran should implement regional strategies to enhance its national entrepreneurial ecosystem by creating interconnected regional ecosystems. By formulating fundamental strategies and long-term targeted intersectoral policies, a country can better leverage its potential and improve its entrepreneurial environment [77].

### *2.9. Stewart's Framework of Role Demands, Constraints, and Choices*

Rosemary Stewart's [78] framework of Role Demands, Constraints, and Choices (DCC) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding managerial behavior by examining the factors that shape a manager's ability to perform their duties. Stewart's model highlights that managerial work is influenced by three core elements: demands,

constraints, and choices. Each component defines the scope within which managers operate, affecting how they respond to the complex environments of organizational life.

Demand refers to the specific activities and responsibilities that managers must perform. These are non-negotiable tasks dictated by the organization, the nature of the job, or external factors. Such demands often include meeting deadlines, achieving performance targets, complying with regulations, and adhering to protocols. The nature and scope of these demands are determined mainly by the position held and the expectations of senior management, making them essential components of any managerial role.

Constraints, the second component of Stewart's model, are external and internal limitations that affect a manager's capacity to act. They can come from various sources, including organizational policies, limited resources, legal requirements, and cultural norms. By narrowing their options, constraints shape what managers can realistically achieve. For instance, a lack of financial resources or restrictive company policies may limit a manager's decisions or actions to meet organizational objectives.

Despite these demands and constraints, Stewart's model also recognizes that managers retain a significant degree of autonomy in their roles through the third element: choice. Choices give managers the power to decide how to perform their tasks, prioritize responsibilities, and allocate resources. This autonomy empowers managers to make strategic decisions on how best to achieve their goals within the framework of the demands and constraints they face. The ability to exercise choice highlights managerial work's flexible and adaptive nature, as managers can select approaches that align with their personal styles or the unique challenges of their specific roles. This model emphasizes the dynamic and adaptable nature of managerial work. This suggests that although managers operate in structured environments shaped by external demands and constraints, they can also make critical strategic choices. This framework helps explain the variability in managerial behavior, showing how different managers may respond to similar roles in diverse ways based on their interpretation of demands, constraints, and available choices. This adaptability should ensure managers have the tools to navigate their roles effectively.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study employs a research methodology grounded in a social constructionist perspective and interpretive epistemology, following the approach by Burns et al. [79]. The primary aim was to explore the drivers motivating Iranian women to pursue entrepreneurship. Specifically, this study examines how these women navigate the various challenges posed by the entrepreneurial environment in Iran using Stewart's [78] demand–constraint–choice (DCC) framework as a guiding lens. Employing the DCC framework within entrepreneurship to scrutinize the complexities of women's entrepreneurial leadership provides a thorough methodology for dissecting the nuanced interaction between personal agency and structural determinants within this context. Initially developed for analyzing managerial roles, the versatility of the DCC framework stems from its core assertion that professional roles are shaped by external demands, internal constraints, and the strategic decisions available to individuals occupying these roles. These components are especially salient in entrepreneurship as entrepreneurs navigate unpredictable markets and scarce resources, making pivotal decisions that significantly impact business viability and growth. Adapting the DCC framework to examine Iranian women's entrepreneurial leadership highlights the distinctive decision-making required in entrepreneurial settings, often less regimented and more dynamic than traditional management environments. This approach offers enriched insights into how gender dynamics influence entrepreneurial activities, advancing the dialogue around gendered entrepreneurship and elucidating the specific challenges and opportunities women entrepreneurs encounter. The adaptability of

the framework to incorporate these entrepreneurial nuances not only broadens its utility but also reinforces its value as a comprehensive analytical instrument for exploring the complex nature of entrepreneurial leadership. This theoretical framework helps understand entrepreneurial leadership as a gendered construct, suggesting that the experiences and perceptions of women entrepreneurial leaders are shaped by socially constructed choices and constraints unique to their context [80].

A purposive snowball sampling method was employed to gather data effectively. An in-country search was conducted to identify women entrepreneurs. Participants were then asked to refer to other women entrepreneurs, creating a network-based sampling approach. A sample of 30 women entrepreneurs from micro, meso, and small enterprises was selected for the study. This sample size was designed to capture a wide range of insights into the experiences and perceptions of women entrepreneurs within Iran's entrepreneurial landscape. One of the researchers involved in this study, an Iranian familiar with the language and local culture, conducted semi-structured interviews with selected women entrepreneurs. The criteria for participation included the ownership of an entrepreneurial venture and setting it apart from other business activities. Participants needed to hold leadership roles, demonstrate active involvement in their ventures, and self-identify as entrepreneurs. These include individuals leading startups, operating as sole proprietors, and serving in leadership teams focused on business improvement and innovation.

Additionally, participants were required to have at least one year of experience in senior management positions. Only women actively leading entrepreneurial endeavors were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Table 1 provides a profile list of all interviewees.

**Table 1.** Profile of Iranian women interviewees.

Interviewee	Marital Status	Age	Children	Education	Role	Years of Exp.	No. Employees	Industry
Interviewee 1	Married	45	2	Bachelor's degree in fashion design	Manager	27	3	Clothing
Interviewee 2	Single	33	0	Master of medical engineering	Cofounder	4	10	Social innovation/autism children
Interviewee 3	Married	42	1	Ph.D. of entrepreneurship	Cofounder	14	35	Technical inspection of products
Interviewee 4	Married	34	0	Doctor of medicine	Co-founder and manager	5	2	Laboratory
Interviewee 5	Married	58	3	Junior high school	Co-founder and manager	33	4	Clothing
Interviewee 6	Married	40	0	Master of management	Manager and founder	3	4	Clothing
Interviewee 7	Married	43	3	Architectural associate	Manager and founder	15	4	Clothing
Interviewee 8	Single	38	2	Master of language translation	Manager and founder	7	4	English language institute
Interviewee 9	Married	60	2	Bachelor of industrial engineering and cooking	Manager and founder	13	2	Cooking school
Interviewee 10	Married	36	2	Ph.D. of medical engineering	Executive director	2	1	Production of medical instruments
Interviewee 11	Married	38	1	Ph.D. of entrepreneurship	Manager and founder	14	4	Online fitness club
Interviewee 12	Single	33	0	Master of management	Manager	10	6	Distribution of automobile equipment
Interviewee 13	Married	36	2	Diploma	Co-founder and manager	20	15	Beauty salon

Table 1. Cont.

Interviewee	Marital Status	Age	Children	Education	Role	Years of Exp.	No. Employees	Industry
Interviewee 14	Married	38	0	Bachelor of elementary Education	Executive director	15	10	Production of felt products
Interviewee 15	Single	33	0	Bachelor of IT	Manager	8	7	Digital marketing
Interviewee 16	Married	47	2	MBA	Executive director	18	49	Travel agency
Interviewee 17	Married	46	1	Bachelor of management	Manager and founder	15	6	Interior design products
Interviewee 18	Single	38	0	Doctor of medicine	Manager and founder	6	20	Online pharmacy
Interviewee 19	Married	61	2	Ph.D. in health psychology	Manager and founder	30	14	Pregnancy and midwifery counseling center
Interviewee 20	Married	39	2	Ph.D. in management	Executive director	17	2	Consulting center and providing management services
Interviewee 21	Single	43	0	DBA	Executive director	23	12	Starch factory (food industry)
Interviewee 22	Single	39	0	Master of management	Manager and founder	13	6	Restaurant
Interviewee 23	Married	34	0	Bachelor of language translation	Manager and founder	9	9	Clothing
Interviewee 24	Single	43	0	Master of language teaching	Executive director	10	9	English language institute
Interviewee 25	Married	50	2	MBA	Manager and founder	25	10	Beauty school
Interviewee 26	Married	51	2	Ph.D. in educational management	Manager and founder	3	8	Entrepreneurship and business skills training institute
Interviewee 27	Married	45	2	Bachelor of food industry	Manager and founder	14	8	Production of date products
Interviewee 28	Married	43	0	Doctor of medicine	Executive director	1	7	Stone factory
Interviewee 29	Married	39	0	Master of medical engineering	Executive director	7	6	Importation of medical instruments
Interviewee 30	Single	47	1	Bachelor of physical education	Manager and founder	32	42	sport club

Source: compiled by the authors.

### 3.1. Interview Protocol and Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because they provide rich and detailed narratives [81]. These narratives, grounded in the social constructionist tradition, are well-suited for exploring the complexities inherent in high-level positions [82]. The interviews were conducted during the spring and summer of 2024, each lasting approximately 60–90 min. The interview protocol was developed based on an extensive literature review and researchers' prior experience with similar studies in emerging economies. This was tested through previous research and feedback from two professional Iranian women entrepreneurs in leadership roles. The questions in Appendix A were refined to concentrate on the participants' experiences as entrepreneurs in Iran and their related activities. The study was guided by Stewart's DCC model, a theoretical framework explained to the participants before the interviews. However, rather than directly inquiring about specific job demands and responsibilities, participants were encouraged to reflect on the nature of their duties and the extent of their accountability. Similarly, when addressing job constraints, respondents were asked to reflect on any obstacles that impeded their daily work. Furthermore, participants discussed their choices in light of their demands and constraints, explaining why they prioritized certain activities and how they executed them.

One of the researchers, an Iranian native fluent in the language and familiar with the cultural context of the interviewees, accurately captured the nuances of the participants' leadership roles. This cultural and linguistic proficiency allowed effective probing, clarification, and feedback throughout the interviews. Most interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed using Zoom. After the transcription, the responses were coded and analyzed using NVivo, with the most frequently occurring themes and responses highlighted and categorized accordingly. The data preparation process involved verifying the questions, editing, coding, transcribing, cleaning, and refining the data, followed by a selection of an appropriate data analysis strategy. The purpose of data preparation was to transform the raw data into a format allowing meaningful analysis using various data-mining tools. The bilingual researcher played a crucial role in translating the interview notes into English, ensuring that the original meanings expressed by the participants were preserved. This translation process was pivotal during the coding and categorization phases of the study, as it provided reassurance regarding the accuracy of the study.

Written informed consent and respective consent signatures from the lead researcher and all participants were obtained before the semi-structured interviews began. The consent form, available in a double-column format in English and Farsi, clearly outlined that the interviews were non-invasive and posed no risk to the participants. It also stated that participants were free to withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequences. The confidentiality and anonymity of each participant were rigorously maintained to ensure that personal identifiers were removed entirely from the transcripts and analyses. This study did not require approval from an institutional review board as the interview questions strictly pertained to business practices and decision-making processes, avoiding personal or sensitive topics.

### 3.2. Data Analysis Process

The research process was structured through several key stages: data collection, cleaning, preparation, coding, categorization, visualization of representative data, verification, interpretation, and conclusions. Semi-structured interview data were analyzed thematically by employing Stewart's DCC framework to extract dominant or significant themes from the raw data. The objective was to identify recurring patterns and consistencies in demands, constraints, and choices across the interview participants' diverse professional experiences. To maintain confidentiality, codenames were assigned to all interviewees.

The data coding process was implemented in three distinct phases. Initially, the data were organized thematically, with the transcripts meticulously reviewed to identify and code recurring themes, allowing categories to emerge organically from the data [83]. In the second stage, axial coding was employed to analyze the relationships between the identified themes and develop broader categories [84]. Finally, these broader categories were examined within the context of Stewart's DCC framework, focusing on lower-level codes that provide rich insights or theoretical relevance. The final core categories—demands, constraints, and choices—were organized within Stewart's model to guide the identification of these nuanced, lower-level codes, offering a structured interpretation of the data.

## 4. Research Analysis and Findings

Across the interviews, Iranian women entrepreneurs shared similar experiences related to financial independence, societal expectations, gender biases, balancing family and work, and the importance of networks and continuous learning. Resilience and customer-focused approaches are vital to overcoming these challenges. However, societal norms and familial expectations remain significant obstacles that often require compromise and personal sacrifice. This analysis provides insights into these women's complex dynamics and

highlights the importance of personal autonomy, societal change, and support networks in fostering female entrepreneurship in Iran. Table 2 summarizes these findings.

**Table 2.** Summary of findings.

Theme	Description
Financial Independence and Security	Many interviewees expressed the importance of financial autonomy, seeking alternative sources of income through loans, collaborations, or secondary businesses to sustain their ventures.
Work–Life Balance and Family Pressures	Managing family expectations and business commitments is a central challenge, and entrepreneurs often make personal sacrifices to balance work and family.
Gender and Societal Constraints	Gender bias and societal expectations limit entrepreneurial efforts. Women must prove themselves and face unequal treatment compared to male colleagues or spouses.
Customer-Centered Approach and Innovation	Entrepreneurs emphasize understanding customer needs and market trends. They adjust offerings based on feedback and adopt online channels to stay relevant.
Building and Maintaining Networks	Networking within entrepreneurial ecosystems or with partners is essential for business growth. Collaborations and mentorships help overcome challenges.
Resilience in Adversity	Entrepreneurs demonstrate resilience despite economic, social, or personal challenges, persisting with a positive mindset.
Challenges with Regulations and Resources	Financial constraints, lack of government support, and difficulties sourcing raw materials are common. Regulatory hurdles create additional pressure.
Employee and Resource Management	Hiring and retaining skilled employees is difficult, with high turnover rates. Entrepreneurs use commissions, flexibility, and a team atmosphere to retain staff.
Personal Sacrifice and Entrepreneurial Passion	Many entrepreneurs are driven by a passion for their work, motivating them to overcome obstacles despite opposition from family or societal challenges.

Source: compiled by the authors.

#### 4.1. Analysis of Stewart's DCC Framework

The interviews collectively revealed that Iranian women entrepreneurs navigate complex landscapes involving family pressure, financial challenges, societal biases, and regulatory hurdles. The key drivers of these women include financial independence, personal fulfillment, and the desire to contribute to society through innovative products and services. Their resilience, ability to adapt to changing conditions, and strong network-building efforts are essential for their success. At the same time, gender bias and lack of external support are significant obstacles that require women to develop creative strategies to overcome these limitations.

This study utilized Stewart's DCC model as a conceptual framework to investigate the expression of leadership in women entrepreneurs in Iran and assess how role demands, constraints, and choices influence their leadership experiences. The aim was to comprehend how these women leaders perceived their roles and measured their effectiveness in managing their demands, constraints, and choices.

##### 4.1.1. Role Demands Analysis

Semi-structured interviews revealed that Iranian women entrepreneurs must respond to complex, multifaceted demands, supported by the extant literature [85,86]. These demands encompass a range of internal, external, and time-sensitive pressures that require careful management and adaptability. Internal demands primarily focus on entrepreneurs' business-related challenges, such as maintaining financial sustainability, managing employees effectively, and meeting customers' needs and expectations. These aspects are essential for ensuring their ventures' operational success and growth. Financial concerns often involve finding ways to manage cash flows and secure funding, whereas employee management entails retaining staff despite turnover challenges. Moreover, entrepreneurs



must meet evolving customer demands, which require staying informed about market trends and maintaining high service levels.

External demand, which stems from societal expectations, regulatory frameworks, and gender-based biases, was significant. Many interviewees reported experiencing cultural pressures related to family responsibilities, as they were expected to fulfill traditional domestic roles while running their businesses. Additionally, regulatory hurdles such as securing licenses or complying with labor laws further complicate their entrepreneurial efforts. Gender-based challenges have also emerged as significant obstacles, with some entrepreneurs reporting that they are not taken seriously by investors or partners unless supported by their male colleagues. These external demands burden women entrepreneurs, requiring them to navigate societal norms and institutional constraints to achieve legitimacy.

Time-sensitive demands force these women entrepreneurs to balance their personal, family, and business priorities. Managing these overlapping responsibilities often requires creative time management strategies and personal sacrifice. Many interviewed women expressed the challenge of meeting deadlines and attending to customer needs while fulfilling family obligations. The ongoing negotiation of these demands underscores the importance of resilience and adaptability in their roles, demonstrating their strength and determination to face challenges.

The interviews highlighted multiple demands of Iranian women entrepreneurs, including customer expectations, financial challenges, social obligations, and regulatory constraints. The need to juggle these competing pressures aligns with Stewart's [78] DCC framework, which emphasizes effectively managing demands. Entrepreneurs must continuously adapt to changing circumstances while maintaining their business operations and personal well-being. The interviewees revealed several layers of demand they had to navigate. These demands include balancing customer needs with market trends, managing social and family expectations, overcoming economic and financial pressure, navigating gender biases, managing employees, complying with institutional regulations, and managing time under competing responsibilities. Each demand category presents distinct challenges that affect women's entrepreneurial efforts.

Balancing customer and market demands is challenging because meeting customer expectations and staying updated with market trends are crucial aspects of business management. Entrepreneurs must respond promptly to customer needs while keeping up with seasonal and industrial changes. Interviewee 18 used Customer Relationship Management (CRM) reports to monitor customer needs, while Interviewee 24 shifted production online and adopted flexible working hours based on demand changes to reduce financial pressure. Adaptation also presented challenges due to the need for flexibility, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Interviewee 25 pivoted to produce masks to meet new demands.

*In terms of customers, I also get a report from CRM, and we check the customers' requests and needs in a not-so-short period. I scrutinized the surveys. We investigate customer requests and needs, and based on this, we pre-register on the site. If the number of pre-registrations was sufficient, an educational course was held. Sometimes, we see a performance report; if we have a weakness in a part, we strengthen that part. (Interviewee 18)*

*Due to the economic conditions, I closed the workshop and continued the business online with the help of women who sew from their homes. I attempt to manage these limitations by offering promotions, discounts, and prizes. In the execution process, I have trouble displaying my work, which forces me to spend [time] on new photoshoots. Given the fluctuating dollar prices, my final costs are unstable, and I need to find cheap labor. For example, with my previous staff, I spent a lot of time, energy, and money helping them understand my work and needs. (Interviewee 24)*

*... during the Coronavirus pandemic, I produced masks considering my condition (I have MS). At first, I told the children to buy necessary things and equipment, but they did not bring anything, and when I followed up, I realized that they did not have the money to buy them, so I taught them something very simple to sew and make money, like kitchen handles, and I assured the families that they would spend little money on these basic things. (Interviewee 25)*

Family and social expectations [are] added to the demands of these entrepreneurs as they often face dual roles, balancing business operations with family obligations and societal expectations. These social demands can add pressure, forcing women to prioritize their family over work. Interviewee 29 mentioned that her family expected her to participate in social gatherings despite her business obligations. Similarly, Interviewee 7 described how family responsibilities significantly affected her work–life balance. Lack of familial or spousal support is a recurring challenge. Several respondents, such as Interviewees 8 and 18, describe how the absence of early family support adds to their entrepreneurial burdens, which is supported by scholars [46,57]:

*The quality of Iranian raw materials is very low and foreign materials are expensive. I had a shortage of financial resources and needed to build trust. My work required a lot of physical energy, knowledge, and experience, so I had to spend a lot of time learning these things. My family and husband didn't understand and expected our social and family gatherings and events to continue as usual. The government also offered loans with high interest rates or didn't provide loans at all. (Interviewee 29)*

*My family supported me a lot in taking care of my children so that I could focus on my business. The tough working conditions have made me anxious and led to stress-eating. I wake up early to get some work done. I am trying to get more help from others with my work. Last year, when the segregation of boys and girls was mandated, it made me even more anxious, and I gained weight again. (Interviewee 16)*

*I didn't have support from my family; my father still says that my daughter is doing something in the field of autism. (Interviewee 8)*

*Initially, the pressure from my family was the hardest because when I was exhausted, they would say that this work wasn't suitable for me and that I was too old. (Interviewee 18)*

Ensuring financial sustainability is one of the most significant demands of these women. Limited access to loans, lack of government support, and unpredictable market conditions compounded the financial pressure of entrepreneurship [85]. Interviewee 24 discussed issues with fluctuating supplier costs, requiring her to recalibrate operations frequently. Entrepreneurs such as Interviewee 29 described managing payments, staff salaries, and financial losses as ongoing challenges in an attempt to maintain financial liquidity demands:

*I didn't have high experience or enough financial resources to buy in large quantities, and suppliers were reluctant to sell me large quantities on credit. Sourcing raw materials was very difficult. I had a mix of hope and fear, and many of my friends mocked me, saying [that] this business wouldn't succeed. But once I started [working], I became very successful. The government called me and threatened to shut down my page because of the unveiled photos. The cost of my raw materials is linked to the dollar, and because of the economic conditions, my customer base has decreased. (Interviewee 24)*

*I had financial supply issues and lived around Isfahan, which is a small city with not many customers, and I needed inner strength. China was a very big competitor, and it was very hard to source raw materials like buttons. We wanted to compete with Turkey, not [with] Chinese clothing, so our production costs were very high. I wasn't encouraged*

*or supported much by my husband, family, or even friends; they were obstacles and would give [me] negative energy and say discouraging things. (Interviewee 29)*

These findings align with Stewart's [78] DCC framework, which emphasizes the multiple layers of pressure individuals face in professional and personal contexts. The interviews illustrated how Iranian women entrepreneurs must juggle these internal, external, and time-sensitive demands while maintaining customer satisfaction and personal well-being. Their ability to manage these competing pressures is a core capability that enables them to sustain their businesses and succeed in challenging environments.

#### 4.1.2. Role Constraints Analysis

The DCC framework emphasizes that constraints—limits imposed on decisions and actions—play a significant role in shaping managerial behavior. For Iranian women entrepreneurs, the interviews revealed several constraints that affect their business operations and personal lives. These constraints arise from external, internal, and situational factors influencing how women navigate entrepreneurial journeys. Entrepreneurs face regulatory hurdles that limit their abilities to operate freely. These constraints are often in the form of permits, licenses, or government-imposed rules.

For instance, Interviewee 8 mentioned waiting over a year to obtain a license for medical equipment, which delayed business operations. Gender-based constraints were also prevalent. Several respondents, such as Interviewee 16, described how gender segregation policies disrupted their education business, requiring them to reconfigure operations to comply with the rules, which is supported by scholars [30,87]. These constraints force entrepreneurs to adjust their strategies, often causing delays or financial setbacks.

*Starting work is always accompanied by uncertainty. We were not sure about the market. We had financial constraints, and since our product is medical equipment requiring a license, we have been waiting for over a year for the license. We also need to find customers, which is [a] very difficult [task]. (Interviewee 8)*

*My family supported me a lot in taking care of my children so that I could focus on my business. The tough working conditions have made me anxious and led to stress-eating. I wake up early to get some work done. I am trying to get more help from others with my work. Last year, when the segregation of boys and girls was mandated, it made me even more anxious, and I gained weight again. (Interviewee 16)*

Financial constraints are pervasive, restricting access to loans, increasing operating costs, and limiting growth opportunities [85]. Interviewee 22 struggled with the fluctuating material costs linked to the rising dollar exchange rate, continually forcing her to recalibrate her business model. Lack of government support is also a significant constraint for Iranian women entrepreneurs, as noted by Interviewee 1, who could not secure financial support from government programs, limiting their ability to expand their business. Such realities significantly constrain their ability to foster business operations. They must manage resources carefully and often rely on personal savings or family support to sustain their operations.

*Given the fluctuating dollar prices, my final costs are not stable, and I need to find cheap labor. For example, with my previous staff, I spent a lot of time, energy, and money helping them understand my work and needs. (Interviewee 22)*

*I really needed a loan or cooperation from the government and banks, but I haven't received any support. (Interviewee 1)*

Social and cultural constraints are significant in the Iranian women entrepreneur environment [18,46]. The interviews highlighted cultural expectations and societal norms as the

significant constraints. These norms dictate that women prioritize family responsibilities, making it challenging to focus solely on their businesses. Interviewee 5 shared that her family expected her to participate in social gatherings despite her business obligations, creating a conflict between personal and professional responsibilities. Gender stereotypes are another constraint, with Interviewee 7, among others, discussing how investors took her less seriously as a female entrepreneur, placing additional constraints on her ability to secure funding. Such constraints limit women entrepreneurs' time and energy devoted to their businesses and require them to constantly prove their competence.

*My work required a lot of physical energy, knowledge, and experience, so I had to spend a lot of time learning these things. My family and husband didn't understand and expected our social and family gatherings and events to continue as usual. (Interviewee 5)*

*I want to say very honestly: They don't take me seriously. I'm the CEO, and the other two co-inventors are gentlemen, but the investors don't take me seriously at all, and many people see me after a few years and say, wow, you're not the same shy and simple girl they've seen before. How much have you changed?! . . . . Regarding the investor, it was difficult when my audience was a gentleman, even though I knew more and had more control over the work, but when my colleague, who was a gentleman, spoke, the investor's opinion was more positive than when I talked. (Interviewee 7)*

Resource constraints constitute another significant challenge. Lack of access to skilled labor, raw materials, and other resources poses operational challenges. These constraints force women entrepreneurs to be creative and adaptable when sourcing business inputs. Interviewee 12 noted the difficulty of finding skilled specialists in smaller cities, which limited her ability to expand her business. Interviewee 15 highlighted supply chain issues, noting that her business was constrained by limited access to technical employees and specialized equipment. Such restricted access to resources impacts these entrepreneurs, and to manage these constraints, they must make compromises such as hiring less-qualified staff or reducing production quality.

*Today, I cannot find many specialists because hiring new staff is challenging, especially since the entry of Afghans has become a problem; they have flooded our market and complicated things. I was looking to hire women in difficult situations or single women with financial problems. (Interviewee 12)*

*Our limitations are financial, and the laws and orders imposed by the authorities above us are also limitations. For example, our technical manager must be a mechanical engineer or the relevant employee must be an industrial engineer for quality control, which is hard to find, as well as specialized equipment. On the other hand, according to our assets and capital, we can see how many employees we need besides the technical manager. (Interviewee 15)*

Many entrepreneurs interviewed faced time constraints as they managed multiple roles, including their businesses, households, and family responsibilities. Interviewee 24 explained that 50% of her time was dedicated to household management, leaving a limited time for business operations. Similarly, Interviewee 5 expressed frustration and constraints due to the lack of time dedicated to her business and reconciling family needs. Entrepreneurs often need to help find the time required for business growth, which leads to stress and inefficiency.

*Fifty percent of my responsibility is to take care of the family, so I reduce the number of classes to manage everything and seek help from people I have trained in the past. I could hire more employees, but due to financial constraints, I can't. (Interviewee 24)*

*Sometimes, due to the distance, I had to get up earlier than my husband and come home later, which put psychological pressure on me, leading me to quit my job and experience a new gym because the mental strain was too much. Furthermore, when I got home, I still had to cook. (Interviewee 5)*

Psychological and emotional constraints are another challenge for entrepreneurs in Iran [88]. The emotional toll of managing a business, particularly in challenging environments, creates additional constraints. Entrepreneurs experience stress, anxiety, and self-doubt, which can limit their effectiveness [89]. Interviewee 13 described how the pressure of being a single mother and head of a household caused her significant emotional strain. Interviewee 17 experienced emotional challenges related to family conflicts and a lack of understanding from her husband. She noted that after separating from her husband, her personal growth improved, but she acknowledged the emotional toll it took on her. Interviewee 27 faced stress in balancing customer satisfaction with family responsibilities, resulting in her inability to meet societal expectations and business demands and contributing to feelings of inadequacy. Interviewee 3 expressed the psychological burden of managing customer trust and navigating male-dominated markets, citing the fear of failure and economic instability as contributors to her emotional strain. These constraints affect decision-making and may result in burnout, requiring entrepreneurs to find coping mechanisms to continue operating their businesses.

*Being alone and the head of the household were the hardest because I had to take my child to school and had no financial support. This slowed down my work significantly, and I couldn't do many things at all. I tried to stay strong. I offered a lot of free services to build trust, especially during the pandemic. Since I don't have any other source of income and face many restrictions, I try my best to keep my job going. (Interviewee 13)*

*The most challenging part was not being understood by my family and husband. (Interviewee 17)*

*The hardest thing is customer dissatisfaction. Balancing the demands of my children and creating customer satisfaction is very challenging because both significantly increase my stress. . . . . I try to distance myself from work a bit to avoid passing the stress onto my children. (Interviewee 27)*

*Gaining customer trust was very difficult, especially because we were operating online, and building trust was challenging. Interacting with the market and sourcing raw materials, which were all male-dominated, was very difficult because I wanted to start with a small investment. (Interviewee 3)*

The interviews demonstrated that Iranian women entrepreneurs encounter a range of constraints: regulatory, financial, social, resource-based, time-related, and emotional. These constraints shape decision-making and limit the ability to fully pursue opportunities. In line with Stewart's [78] DCC framework, these women must continuously navigate these limitations, often relying on creativity, resilience, and social networks to manage their business. Their ability to cope with these constraints reflects their adaptability and determination, essential for sustaining entrepreneurial effort in a complex environment. While the psychological and emotional constraints experienced by these women entrepreneurs provide valuable insights into their challenges, many more can be explored. Factors such as coping mechanisms, the impact of these constraints on decision-making, and the intersection of personal and professional stress offer deeper layers of analysis. However, delving further into these aspects would make the research excessively long and dense, potentially detracting it from the focus of the current study.

#### 4.1.3. Role Choices Analysis

In the DCC framework, choices refer to individuals' decisions within the constraints and demands they face. The choices available to women entrepreneurs in the 30 semi-structured interviews were shaped by their circumstances, resources, and priorities. The analysis reveals that strategic decisions often involve trade-offs between personal, familial, and business needs. These choices demonstrate adaptability, creativity, and resilience in managing competition pressures.

The interviews highlighted that Iranian women entrepreneurs make deliberate adaptive choices to balance the demands and constraints they encounter. These choices reflect resilience, creativity, and strategic thinking in managing family roles, business operations, financial risks, and regulatory challenges. In line with Stewart's DCC framework, these women make purposeful decisions within their constraints, often opting for incremental growth, delegation, or boundary settings to achieve long-term sustainability and personal well-being. Their ability to navigate these choices underscores the importance of flexibility and self-discipline in managing the complex realities of entrepreneurship in challenging environments.

These women entrepreneurs demonstrate strategic business decisions and adaptability [90–92]. Many have strategically aligned their businesses with market needs and constraints, demonstrating flexibility in their response to economic conditions. Interviewee 6 shifted her business online and allowed employees to work from home to cut costs and respond to the pandemic. They also chose business sustainability, often prioritizing small-scale investments and incremental growth to minimize risks, as in the case of Interviewee 10, who decided to create demand for avocados rather than rely solely on medical equipment sales.

*Due to the economic conditions, I closed the workshop and continued the business online with the help of women who sew from their homes. (Interviewee 6)*

*... we determine what can be done with our limited budget. We list our wants and prioritize them based on our budget and time. If the budget is not met, we are forced to reschedule, or, for example, if we see that the dollar is rising, we quickly change our plans to avoid financial losses. (Interviewee 10)*

Given their dual roles prioritizing family and business responsibilities—entrepreneurs are often forced to make deliberate compromises between family and business obligations. Interviewee 28 limited the number of classes she held to balance household duties and allocated 50% of her time to family needs. Many sought to negotiate time, such as Interviewee 1, who prioritized family activities by planning family vacations at the beginning of the year to avoid conflicts with business operations. These choices reflect how they negotiate their time and energy between competing personal and professional demands while managing their choices regarding opportunities and risk management, as they must decide which opportunities to pursue, often making calculated trade-offs to minimize risks and optimize benefits. For instance, Interviewee 5 evaluated opportunities based on feasibility and potential impact; when realizing that she could not afford new machinery, she postponed the purchase or found second-hand alternatives.

*Fifty percent of my responsibility is taking care of the family, so I reduced the number of classes to manage everything and seek help from people I have trained before. (Interviewee 28)*

*If the situation is such that I can postpone my business work, I will take care of my child and family first, but if the situation is very difficult, For example, if I have an important meeting, I give my child mental preparation, and then I get help from my wife, her mother, or my own mother. (Interviewee 1)*

*I do not evaluate management in this way at all, but I take action with risk and follow up extensively. When I see something good, I take action by reading a few articles and consulting with somebody. (Interviewee 5)*

Incremental growth is one of these entrepreneurs' choices when considering demand and constraints. Many interviewees, such as Interviewee 10, adopted trial-and-error approaches, testing products or markets on a small scale before expanding. These cautious decisions reflect the risk-averse behavior typical of entrepreneurs operating in uncertain environments, which also leads them to be purposeful in their employee management and delegation choices, fundamentally whether to delegate tasks or take on additional responsibilities, such as with Interviewee 17, who is unable to retain reliable staff, offer commissions to motivate employees and prevent turnover.

*We move forward by trial and error, correcting mistakes. My team members are specialists, and through a lot of trial and error and working on the patterns of great masters, we were able to fix the flaws in our patterns. (Interviewee 10)*

*I offer a commission to those who innovate . . . My child wanted to go out with me, or my employees needed to work more, so I gave them a commission. (Interviewee 17)*

Another aspect of these women entrepreneurs is their choice to adjust to the regulatory constraints. They must decide whether to comply with regulations while maintaining business operations. For instance, Interviewee 25 adjusted her operations by segregating boys and girls in compliance with new government regulations, even though this increased the operational costs. When regulatory constraints are unavoidable, such adaptive choices often result in restructuring their businesses or pivoting their strategies to comply while minimizing disruption, as in the case of Interviewee 5.

*In the middle of the summer term, we were mandated to segregate boys and girls, which imposed high costs on me. If any class was mixed, the institute would be closed. Parents also wanted their children to attend classes on the same day to reduce commuting costs, which meant [that] I had to deal with the expenses. (Interviewee 25)*

*We need to identify [the] limiting factors, set goals, and take action accordingly. For example, if our time is limited, we [will] accept orders based on that. We handle [the] processes based on our capabilities and resources. The salary expectations of potential hires are important because we have financial constraints, and we do not want someone with excessively high qualifications. (Interviewee 5)*

These interviews show that Iranian women entrepreneurs handle demands, constraints, and choices with remarkable adaptability and resilience. They balance competing demands from family, business, and societal expectations by strategically prioritizing tasks and effectively managing time. Faced with financial, regulatory, and social constraints, they make creative adjustments such as pivoting business models, delegating responsibilities, or setting personal boundaries to maintain well-being. Their choices reflect a careful balance between risk and opportunity, often favoring incremental growth and sustainable decisions over rapid expansion. Ultimately, their ability to navigate the complexities of the DCC framework demonstrates the importance of flexibility, resourcefulness, and perseverance in sustaining entrepreneurial ventures and their personal lives.

## **5. Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations**

Iranian women entrepreneurs demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability in navigating complex socioeconomic environments shaped by financial, regulatory, and societal challenges. While they face significant constraints such as gender biases, limited financial access, and restrictive cultural norms, they leverage personal creativity, strate-

gic decision-making, and resourcefulness to balance family responsibilities and business operations. Their motivations are driven by “push” factors, such as economic necessity and gender inequality, and “pull” factors, including personal fulfillment, autonomy, and the desire for social impact. Despite these challenges, entrepreneurs actively engage in incremental growth strategies, build supportive networks, and pursue innovative solutions to sustain their ventures, illustrating the critical role of entrepreneurship in promoting empowerment and economic development amid adversity. Table 3 summarizes the key findings regarding how women entrepreneurs manage demands, constraints, and choices, along with the emergence of resilience and adaptability as the central theme.

**Table 3.** Summary of how women entrepreneurs navigate demands, constraints, and choices (DCC) and the emergence of resilience as a major theme.

Category	Description
Demands	Women entrepreneurs faced multiple demands, including balancing family responsibilities, managing business operations, and meeting customer expectations. They often used creative time management and integrated family roles into their ventures to manage these competing demands.
Constraints	Constraints included financial limitations, gender biases, and regulatory hurdles. Limited access to loans and discriminatory practices were key barriers, but entrepreneurs adapted by using informal networks and restructuring operations to comply with regulations.
Choices	Entrepreneurs made strategic choices to mitigate risks, focusing on incremental growth and sustainable practices. They leveraged digital platforms, delegated tasks, and set personal boundaries to manage both personal and business priorities effectively.
Major Theme	Resilience and adaptability emerged as a single major theme across the study. Women entrepreneurs displayed remarkable creativity in managing constraints and demands, using informal support systems, digital tools, and emotional well-being strategies to sustain their ventures.

Source: compiled by the authors.

### 5.1. Discussion

The findings from this research on Iranian women entrepreneurs align with much of the existing literature but also provide new insights and noteworthy findings, particularly within Iran’s unique socio-economic and cultural environment. This confirms that financial access, gender norms, and work–life balance remain vital challenges. It also offers new insights into Iranian women entrepreneurs’ risk-averse strategies, emotional constraints, and innovative adaptations. The roles of digital platforms and informal networks are particularly significant and offer new avenues for future research. These findings emphasize the importance of resilience, adaptability, and creativity in navigating complex environments and contribute valuable knowledge to the global discourse on gender, entrepreneurship, and cultural dynamics.

Financial challenges remain a persistent barrier, including limited access to loans and investor bias, echoing the experiences of women entrepreneurs in other contexts. Gender-based bias further compounds these issues, as investors often dismiss women entrepreneurs unless accompanied by their male counterparts [8,15]. However, risk-averse behavior has emerged as a noteworthy finding, with many entrepreneurs prioritizing sustainability through incremental growth to mitigate financial risks, especially in Iran’s economically volatile environment [19].

The study also highlights innovation and adaptability as key strategies, with entrepreneurs pivoting business models such as shifting to mask production during COVID-19 and demonstrating resilience under pressure. Digital platforms and e-commerce emerged



as another significant finding, with Iranian women leveraging these tools to bypass social mobility restrictions and reduce operational costs [32]. Furthermore, this study underscores the mental health burden of entrepreneurship in patriarchal contexts, suggesting the need for urgent research on the relationship between well-being and entrepreneurial resilience [89]. This finding highlights the importance of addressing emotional and psychological challenges in entrepreneurship, such as the stress from societal expectations and financial instability.

### Implications to Theory

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of women's entrepreneurship in Iran by expanding existing frameworks and providing transformative insights into how gender, culture, and socioeconomic factors intersect in shaping entrepreneurial behavior. This study offers several implications for relationship-related theories, gender studies, and institutional frameworks, paving the way for a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of entrepreneurship. Its findings align with and expand upon existing research on women's entrepreneurship. Push and pull factors remain central drivers, with women entering entrepreneurship out of necessity because of economic pressure and gender discrimination [16]. Simultaneously, pull factors, such as autonomy and enhanced social status, attract women to pursue entrepreneurship, reflecting the global patterns observed in emerging markets [22].

Additionally, Iranian women entrepreneurs face the work–life balance dilemma, managing societal expectations and household responsibilities while often relying on time management strategies and family support networks to navigate these competing demands [13,18]. It examines existing theories by demonstrating the dynamic interplay between push and pull factors in entrepreneurial activities among women in Iran. It also shows that push factors, such as economic necessity and social restrictions, often coexist with pull factors within the same entrepreneurial journey, such as the desire for autonomy and self-fulfillment. This nuanced perspective suggests that motivational theories should be more comprehensive, particularly in environments with significant socio-cultural constraints.

This study underscores the value of informal networks, highlighting their critical role in sustaining women-led businesses in which formal institutional support is limited [18]. This finding and the concept of regulatory adaptation, in which entrepreneurs creatively restructure operations to comply with government mandates while minimizing disruptions, showcase how regulatory constraints can foster strategic innovation [19]. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of women's entrepreneurship and underscore the importance of adaptability, resilience, and informal support networks in challenging environments. It also extends institutional theory by showing how entrepreneurs adapt to regulatory frameworks creatively rather than merely complying with them. It introduces the concept of regulatory adaptation as a strategic response to institutional constraints, illustrating that entrepreneurs in restrictive environments find innovative ways to align their business practices with policies while sustaining their operations. This challenges the conventional understanding that regulations merely act as obstacles, which suggests that institutional constraints foster entrepreneurial creativity.

This study significantly contributes to gender and entrepreneurship theory by highlighting the role of cultural norms in shaping entrepreneurial strategies. While existing theories acknowledge that women entrepreneurs face gender-specific barriers, our study emphasizes the importance of context-specific coping mechanisms, such as integrating family roles with business activities. This finding suggests that gender theories in entrepreneurship must move beyond viewing gender as a barrier to considering how women actively negotiate cultural expectations to build and sustain their ventures.

These findings align with the resilience theory, expanding it by incorporating emotional well-being as a critical component of entrepreneurial resilience. The study emphasizes that entrepreneurial success in challenging environments is not solely about overcoming financial and operational challenges but also involves managing emotional and psychological stress. This insight suggests that future theoretical models of resilience should integrate mental health and well-being into the framework. It also underscores the importance of the social capital theory, particularly the role of informal networks in sustaining entrepreneurial ventures. While previous studies have focused primarily on the value of formal networks and institutional support, this study highlights the critical role of informal support systems in providing resources and emotional support, such as family and community connections. This expands social capital theory by emphasizing the importance of informal structures, particularly in environments with limited institutional backing.

This study has significant implications in several theoretical frameworks. It encourages scholars to rethink traditional entrepreneurial models by incorporating context-specific insights such as regulatory adaptation, emotional resilience, and the role of informal networks. It also provides practical guidance for future research and policy developments. The findings suggest that theories of entrepreneurship must be more adaptive and nuanced, recognizing the complex interplay of motivations, gender norms, institutional constraints, and personal well-being in shaping entrepreneurial behavior.

## 5.2. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study provides valuable insights into the challenges and strategies of Iranian women entrepreneurs and contributes to a broader understanding of female entrepreneurship in restrictive socioeconomic environments. These findings emphasize the importance of resilience, adaptability, and resourcefulness in navigating complex demands and constraints. Resilience and adaptability have emerged as core strengths of entrepreneurs. Faced with financial, societal, and regulatory challenges, they employ creative strategies to pivot business models and adopt risk-averse, sustainable growth approaches. These strategies reflect their ability to thrive under uncertainty, prioritizing stability over rapid expansion to effectively manage economic risks.

This study also highlights the intersection of gender norms and entrepreneurial strategies, demonstrating how cultural expectations shape women's business management. Many women entrepreneurs interviewed blended family responsibilities with business operations by leveraging context-specific coping strategies such as setting personal boundaries or integrating family roles into their ventures. This approach reveals how they navigate patriarchal norms while maintaining autonomy over their entrepreneurial pursuits. A significant conclusion relates to the impact of structural barriers, including gender bias, limited financial access, and restrictive government regulations. These obstacles present challenges but also prompt strategic innovation. For instance, entrepreneurs often adapt their operations to comply with regulatory mandates, such as segregating boys and girls in educational settings, which fosters creative restructuring rather than merely acting as a hindrance.

This study underscores the pivotal role of informal networks and digital platforms in entrepreneurship support. These informal support systems, including family, friends, and local connections, are crucial for helping women access resources and sustain their ventures, particularly in environments that lack institutional support. Furthermore, the increasing use of e-commerce and digital platforms enables entrepreneurs to overcome social mobility restrictions, reduce costs, and reach broader markets, highlighting the empowering potential of technology in entrepreneurship.

Another significant finding of this study is the emotional and psychological tolls experienced by these entrepreneurs. This study reveals that societal expectations, financial

instability, and customer demand create significant stress and anxiety. This finding underscores the urgent need for further research on the relationship between entrepreneurial resilience and emotional well-being, emphasizing the importance of mental health support for female entrepreneurs.

This study's novel insight is the concept of regulatory adaptation as a form of innovation. Entrepreneurs actively restructure their operations to comply with government mandates while minimizing disruptions, demonstrating that constraints can foster strategic creativity and innovation. This finding expands the understanding of the interplay between regulation and entrepreneurship, suggesting that restrictive policies can prompt new approaches to business development.

In conclusion, Iranian women entrepreneurs navigate a complex landscape by balancing personal, social, and professional demands with remarkable creativity and determination. Their ability to adapt to constraints, leverage informal networks, embrace technology, and foster innovation underscores the importance of resilience in sustaining entrepreneurial efforts. These insights contribute to the broader literature on entrepreneurship and offer lessons for researchers and policymakers seeking to understand how female entrepreneurs succeed in challenging environments.

### Recommendations

Several recommendations have emerged to support women entrepreneurs in Iran better and address their personal and structural challenges. These recommendations include strategies for entrepreneurs, community actors, and policymakers to create inclusive entrepreneurial environments, reduce barriers, and foster sustainable business development.

One crucial aspect of supporting women entrepreneurs is bolstering their access to financial resources. This can be achieved by establishing mechanisms to enhance loan availability and reduce interest rates in women-led businesses. Policies promoting microfinancing and specialized grants for women entrepreneurs can address the persistent barrier of limited financial access and significantly boost their capacity to invest in ventures. Government institutions and private sector entities must collaborate to introduce funding programs catering to women entrepreneurs' unique needs, especially those of small-scale or home-based businesses.

The development of supportive family and community networks is of equal importance. Many women entrepreneurs juggle family responsibilities with business activities, often leading to the cultural expectation that women should prioritize household duties over professional goals [93]. To address this issue, it is crucial to promote cultural shifts that reduce expectations and encourage families to support female entrepreneurs more effectively. Providing services that help women with family responsibilities could also be helpful; for example, preparing healthy food for families at a reasonable price. Awareness campaigns advocating for gender equality and shared domestic responsibilities are crucial. Additionally, community-based initiatives, such as women's cooperatives and local entrepreneurship networks, can provide valuable support, mentorship, and resource-sharing opportunities.

Gender bias in the entrepreneurial ecosystem is another significant challenge women entrepreneurs face. Therefore, policymakers must take steps to address this issue. Training programs for investors and financial institutions could help reduce discriminatory practices and enhance gender sensitivity in decision-making. Encouraging gender diversity in investment portfolios and recognizing women-led ventures as viable investment opportunities can help mitigate the bias that many entrepreneurs encounter when seeking financial support. Furthermore, regulatory reforms aimed at reducing bureaucratic hurdles, such as

simplifying licensing processes, would ease the burden on entrepreneurs and enable them to focus on business growth.

Integrating digital tools, digital marketing, and e-commerce platforms should also be encouraged. These technologies offer critical pathways for women entrepreneurs to circumvent social mobility restrictions and expand their market. Government and private initiatives should promote digital literacy among women entrepreneurs through training programs and offer incentives for online business development. Facilitating access to affordable digital infrastructure such as Internet services and e-commerce platforms would further empower women to reach broader audiences and enhance their profitability.

Addressing entrepreneurs' emotional and psychological challenges is crucial to ensuring their well-being. Mental health services should be made more accessible through targeted initiatives to provide counseling to women entrepreneurs and peer support groups. Educational programs focusing on mental health awareness in business communities can reduce the stigma of seeking emotional support. In addition, business incubators and accelerators should offer wellness programs to help entrepreneurs manage stress and build resilience while growing their ventures [3,4].

Finally, promoting regulatory adaptation and innovation is essential. While constraints like government policies can pose challenges, they also offer creative problem-solving opportunities. Policymakers should encourage entrepreneurship by recognizing and rewarding innovative adaptations to regulatory frameworks, such as socially conscious business practices. Providing flexibility within regulations—for example, through waivers or exceptions for small businesses—can incentivize entrepreneurs to comply while fostering innovation. Policymakers should also foster collaborative dialogue between entrepreneurs and government agencies to ensure that regulations evolve in ways that promote compliance and business growth.

In conclusion, supporting women entrepreneurs in Iran requires a multifaceted approach that addresses financial access, gender bias, social norms, digital empowerment, emotional well-being, and regulatory adaptation. Policymakers, financial institutions, and community actors must collaborate to create an inclusive and enabling environment for women-led businesses. By implementing these recommendations, Iran can foster a more sustainable and innovative entrepreneurial ecosystem, empowering women to overcome challenges and meaningfully contributing to the country's economic development.

## 6. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

Despite the valuable insights it provides into the experiences and strategies of Iranian women entrepreneurs, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The qualitative nature of the research, relying on semi-structured interviews with a limited sample size, may limit the generalizability of the findings. While the interviews offered in-depth perspectives, the insights were context-specific, focusing on individual experiences rather than broader trends applicable to all women entrepreneurs in Iran or other similar contexts. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for subjective bias as participants may provide socially desirable responses or omit sensitive information.

Another limitation is this study's geographical and cultural specificity, which focused exclusively on Iran. Iran has a predominantly young and highly educated population. However, it may not accurately represent the global population, particularly compared to industrialized nations with older populations or developing countries with lower educational levels [39]. While this enables a nuanced understanding of entrepreneurship in a unique sociopolitical environment, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of women entrepreneurs operating in diverse cultural, regulatory, or economic contexts. Further research involving comparative studies between women entrepreneurs in Iran

and those in other Middle Eastern or emerging economies is crucial. This could offer a more comprehensive understanding of regional challenges and opportunities, making the research more relevant and impactful.

This study also primarily examines women who have achieved a certain degree of entrepreneurial success, potentially overlooking the experiences of those who have failed or exited their ventures. Understanding the barriers that lead to entrepreneurial failure is vital to designing effective support mechanisms and policy interventions. Longitudinal studies that follow the trajectories of women entrepreneurs over time are crucial. This could provide deeper insights into the factors contributing to success and failure in challenging environments, making this research more comprehensive and insightful.

Another area of improvement is the limited focus on digital entrepreneurship and technology adoption. While this study touches on the role of e-commerce, further research could explore how digital platforms shape entrepreneurial strategies and opportunities in greater detail. This provides valuable insights into how technology enables women entrepreneurs to overcome mobility constraints and access new markets.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

Several key themes have emerged as important avenues for future research. One promising area of entrepreneurship is emotional well-being and mental health. Given the significant psychological challenges identified in this study, future research could explore the intersection between mental health and entrepreneurial resilience, particularly in patriarchal societies where women face unique pressures. This is not just an interesting area for research but is also crucial for the well-being and success of women entrepreneurs.

Therefore, cultural adaptations and gender norms warrant further investigation. Understanding how women entrepreneurs navigate and negotiate traditional cultural expectations and how these strategies vary across regions and socioeconomic classes would provide deeper insights into the gender dynamics in entrepreneurship.

Another critical area for future research is the role of informal networks and social capital in sustaining entrepreneurial ventures. Investigating how women leverage familial, social, and community connections to access resources and support can highlight the importance of informal structures without formal institutional support. Additionally, comparing the effectiveness of formal and informal networks offers practical insights for policymakers and support organizations.

Finally, regulatory adaptation and policy innovation are opportunities for future research. This study shows that entrepreneurs do not merely comply with regulations but actively adapt their operations to fit within existing frameworks. Future studies can explore the innovation potential of regulatory constraints by examining how entrepreneurs transform these challenges into opportunities for growth and creativity. This area of research can provide valuable insights into entrepreneurs' adaptive strategies when faced with regulatory hurdles.

Although this study offers valuable contributions, future research must address its limitations. This will significantly enhance our understanding of women's entrepreneurship, particularly in challenging socioeconomic environments. Expanding the scope to include comparative studies, longitudinal research, and a deeper exploration of technology adoption, emotional well-being, and social capital will provide more comprehensive insights into the evolving landscape of entrepreneurship. Such efforts will encourage further investigation into women's entrepreneurship and address the identified gaps.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Under the MDPI/Merits “Share upon reasonable request” policy, the anonymized transcripts supporting this article’s conclusions will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation, to any qualified researcher. Requests for access to these data should be addressed to the corresponding authors. Please note that digital recordings of the interviews were not available to protect privacy and maintain the anonymity of the participants.

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## Appendix A. Interview Questions Used in the Semi-Structured Interviews

### *DCC Semi-Structured Interview Research Questions*

Stewart’s Demand Constraint and Choice (DCC) model for entrepreneurial leadership is adopted in this study to understand how women leaders can shape and respond to their personal, enterprise, and customer demands and external constraints. This semi-structured interview aims to understand their leadership style, how they respond to demands (and challenges), the constraints they face, and how they make their choices and decisions.

These interview questions were designed to assess women entrepreneurs’ leadership styles as entrepreneurs and their approach to meeting staff, peers, and customer needs while navigating external constraints. By asking these questions, we would like to gain insight into women entrepreneurs’ decision-making processes, their ability to inspire and motivate their teams, and the overall approach to managing their early-stage (start-up) businesses. Additionally, we seek to understand how they respond to challenges and shape their businesses to meet customer needs while balancing the needs of their personal lives, employees, and shareholders.

Before the interview, please ask them (optional response). Their 1. age, 2. level of education, 3. leadership role/position, 4. years of experience in leadership roles, and 5. industry.

1. How do you set a vision and goals for your business that align with your personal, business, and customer demands?
2. How do you balance your customers’ needs with those of your employees and stakeholders?
3. How do you foster a culture of innovation and creativity within your business?
4. How do you promote diversity and inclusion within your business, and why is it essential?
5. What critical demands do you face when starting a new venture?
6. How do you navigate the various demand conditions you face?
7. In your experience, which demands conditions have been most challenging, and why?
8. How do you assess and manage your constraints when deciding which choices to pursue?
9. How does the presence or absence of constraints affect your choices regarding which job or demand to attend to and execute?

10. How do you balance your desire for autonomy and control with the constraints of satisfying the demand?
11. How do you choose when considering the demands and constraints you face in your business and personal environment?
12. Considering your constraints, how do you choose which jobs/opportunities to pursue?
13. Can you describe a situation where you faced a demand or constraint you could not decide to engage in or overcome? What lessons can be learned from this experience?
14. Can you describe when you had to make a difficult choice that impacted your personal life, customers, employees, or stakeholders?
15. How do you approach the choices or decisions you make?
16. Is there anything you want to share regarding handling the daily demands of various actors, the constraints you typically have in addressing such needs, and how you choose what to engage in and execute? In other words, how do you decide on what to focus on?

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