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Drivers and motivations of Lebanese women entrepreneurs: insights from the demand-constraint-choice framework

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates women entrepreneurs' multifaceted challenges and opportunities in Lebanon, using the Demand-Constraint-Choice (DCC) framework to analyze their drivers, motivations, and challenges. Through a qualitative research approach, the study adopted semi-structured interviews with twelve female entrepreneurs from various sectors in Lebanon. These interviews aimed to gain insights into their entrepreneurial drive, challenges, leadership roles, and decision-making processes within the local entrepreneurial ecosystem. Despite significant socio-economic hurdles, including restricted access to financial resources, prevalent gender biases, and cultural stereotypes, the findings reveal that Lebanese women entrepreneurs are highly resilient and adaptable. They strategically utilize their social networks and innovate within their means to navigate and prosper in the challenging entrepreneurial landscape. The study highlights that these women's entrepreneurial leadership skills include coping with demands and constraints and making difficult choices. The research further identifies critical challenges such as inadequate financial support, societal biases against women, and the difficulties imposed by Lebanon's economic environment. In response to these challenges, the study proposes several policy recommendations to enhance support for women entrepreneurs. These include increasing access to financial resources, establishing robust support networks, and implementing gender-sensitive policies to facilitate a more conducive environment for women's entrepreneurship. It underscores the importance of supporting and empowering women entrepreneurs in Lebanon as vital agents of economic change and innovation, recommending strategic actions to alleviate their challenges and maximize their entrepreneurial potential.

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1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship, as the process of building wealth by combining resources to capitalize on market opportunities, has been increasingly recognized as vital to national economic development, particularly in emerging economies (Taleb et al., 2023). Entrepreneurship is a social process involving building wealth by combining resources to exploit marketplace opportunities (Ratten, 2023). It has been identified as an influential contributor to economic development in many nations (Ayentimi, 2020). It is a social process that amalgamates resources to capitalize on market opportunities, bolstering economic development in various nations. According to an investigation by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2019), entrepreneurship significantly affects economic growth, particularly in emerging economies (Hussain et al., 2023). GEM's analysis found that entrepreneurship positively influences the creation of jobs, wealth, and innovation, leading to economic growth. Research also finds that nations with higher rates of entrepreneurship have higher degrees of economic development.

Research by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2019) and the Global Entrepreneurship and Development Institute (GEDI) underscores entrepreneurship's vital role in enhancing economic growth, job creation, and social mobility, particularly in emerging economies. This

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relationship also underscores the significant role entrepreneurship plays in improving the living standards of individuals and communities, advocating that a supportive environment for entrepreneurship correlates with greater economic prosperity. Entrepreneurship necessitates effective leadership, with entrepreneurs taking the helm in risk management, decision-making, and venture guidance. Leaders with robust business acumen, technical skills, and an ability to inspire and adapt are likelier to excel in their endeavors. The leadership aspect of entrepreneurship, crucial for the success of any venture, entails taking risks, making decisions, and guiding enterprises toward growth. Effective entrepreneurial leaders are distinguished by their ability to motivate teams, envision strategic direction, and adapt to market conditions. Research suggests that entrepreneurs equipped with leadership skills are more likely to prosper. This study explores this intersection of entrepreneurship and leadership within the specific context of Lebanese women entrepreneurs.

Despite the widespread awareness of the significance of studying women in entrepreneurship, more research is still needed on the effectiveness and leadership of women entrepreneurs (Botha, 2020; Bullough et al., 2022; Wells, 2021; Goncalves & Gil Vasquez, 2024). This study investigates the drivers and motivations of women entrepreneurs in Lebanon, focusing on the factors that drive them to establish start-ups, how they navigate business challenges, and the support mechanisms that can enhance their success. It aims to understand the perceptions and experiences regarding the demands, limitations, and decisions they face in entrepreneurial settings.

The main objective of this investigation is to provide insights to inform policy recommendations and support initiatives tailored to the unique needs of women entrepreneurs in Lebanon, aligning with broader efforts to achieve gender equality under the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender equality. By examining how gender dynamics influence entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes, this study seeks to contribute to policy discussions to foster an inclusive economic environment. It concerns how entrepreneurial and leadership qualities can help women entrepreneurs overcome demands and constraints and make choices, including handling the barriers due to gender biases and cultural expectations. It focuses on the critical intersection of entrepreneurship and leadership within the context of women entrepreneurs in Lebanon.

Research questions include:

1. How do leadership qualities influence the success of women entrepreneurs in Lebanon when dealing with the demands and constraints of running a business, and the choices they make?
2. What are the main challenges that Lebanese women entrepreneurs face in their entrepreneurial journey?
3. How can policy changes support the growth and success of women entrepreneurs in this region?

2. Literature review

Research indicates that women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to economic growth by establishing new ventures and maintaining the business. Various factors motivate women to start businesses, including intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Al Matroushi et al., 2020; Vardhan et al., 2020). *Push* and *pull* factors drive women to engage in a startup, where intrinsic motivations such as independence, desire for achievement, and being one's boss are considered pull factors (Al Matroushi et al., 2020; Vardhan et al., 2020). Conversely, push factors resulting from a lack of opportunity or necessity, such as work-home balance and income, are extrinsic motivators (Smagulova & Goncalves, 2023a). Although research suggests both types of motivation drive women to start new business ventures, intrinsic or pull motivation factors are considered more critical (Sree Madhumitha & Karthikeyan, 2020; Mulawarman et al., 2020), as these tend to be more influential than extrinsic or 'push' ones (Nayak et al., 2023).

Entrepreneurship implies leadership on the part of entrepreneurs, as they are the ones who take risks, make decisions, and lead their ventures (Gunawan & Cahayani, 2022). Ahmed and Harrison (2023) argue that entrepreneurship demands many attributes, mainly business acumen, technical skills, and leadership capabilities. They argued that entrepreneurs with leadership skills are likelier to thrive in their new business ventures, suggesting that leadership development must be integrated into entrepreneurship

education to improve the success of new ventures. The GEM report indicates that successful entrepreneurs demonstrate strong leadership qualities. They are skilled in motivating and inspiring teams, creating a vision, and adapting to changing environments (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2022). Many scholars support such findings. Sánchez-García et al. (2023) support the idea that entrepreneurship requires leadership, arguing that entrepreneurs who display transformational leadership behavior are more likely to attain higher levels of business performance. They further say that entrepreneurs who exhibit leadership capabilities can impact workers' behavior and attitudes, leading to improved motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Florek-Paszkowska et al., 2021; Gunawan & Cahayani, 2022). Entrepreneurial leaders possess an outstanding talent for identifying and exploiting market opportunities. They typically profoundly understand their customer's needs and can promptly adjust their offerings to fulfill them (Akbari et al., 2021; Iqbal et al., 2022; Sawaeen & Ali, 2020b). Consequently, they are frequently the pioneers in emerging markets and new industries, leading the way toward growth and expansion.

Entrepreneurial leaders are renowned for their strong commitment to social and environmental causes and are motivated to establish enterprises that positively impact society. They typically consider gender, recognizing that both men and women are influenced by social-cognitive elements that encourage them to pursue ventures that align with their gendered social identity (Kleinert & Mochkabadi, 2021; Poggesi et al., 2020). These factors are particularly crucial today, where consumers increasingly seek businesses that prioritize the environment, sustainability, governance (ESG), diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Recent studies indicate that women approach entrepreneurship differently than men, exhibiting some common trends (Rocha & Van Praag, 2020; Ughetto et al., 2020). Women entrepreneurs are motivated by various factors, such as work-life balance, financial independence, and alignment with their values, which often differ from men's (Putranti et al., 2020; Williams, 2021). They start new business ventures for several reasons, including escaping poverty and gaining financial independence (Chancel et al., 2022; Goncalves, 2014; Lakner et al., 2022). They may also encounter unique obstacles and face challenges in their entrepreneurial journey due to gender biases, cultural stereotypes, and societal expectations (Maseda et al., 2022; Nair, 2020).

Understanding the differences in how women and men approach entrepreneurship is crucial for policymakers, financial institutions, early-stage venture investors, and support organizations to develop targeted programs and initiatives that address women entrepreneurs' specific needs and challenges. One prevalent pattern is that women often initiate new business ventures to attain work-life balance and more autonomy over their schedules (Putranti et al., 2020; Williams, 2021). In addition, they may be more inclined than men to launch a new business venture in sectors that align with their values, such as social or environmental causes (Maseda et al., 2022). Nevertheless, women entrepreneurs still face significant challenges, such as restricted access to financing and networks, which can impede their growth and success (Nair, 2020; Ughetto et al., 2020).

Global women's entrepreneurship related to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality indicates progress in many regions. However, challenges persist; the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030 (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, 2023). In Lebanon, women entrepreneurs face barriers such as limited access to finance, cultural norms, and legal constraints. However, initiatives supporting women's entrepreneurship, such as capacity-building programs and networking opportunities, have gained momentum. Organizations like the UN and local NGOs have been working to address these challenges and promote gender equality in entrepreneurship.

Despite the growing recognition of women's entrepreneurship as a critical driver of economic growth and innovation, there remains a significant gap related to SDG 5 in ensuring that women entrepreneurs have equitable access to resources and opportunities (Kamberidou, 2020; Rosca, Nastase, et al., 2020). Social and cultural factors play a pivotal role in shaping women's entrepreneurship. Cultural norms and expectations around women's roles and responsibilities affect their ability to start and develop businesses (Kamberidou, 2020; Mohamadi & Ertensir, 2020). Women across the globe are often expected to prioritize their domestic responsibilities over their career aspirations, leading to a lack of motivation to pursue entrepreneurial ventures. Moreover, women's businesses frequently receive less support and attention than their male counterparts (Kamberidou, 2020; Rosca, Agarwal, et al., 2020b).

Women's entrepreneurship is frequently viewed as a deviation from the norm, making it challenging for women to access funding, networks, and other essential resources. This perception of women's entrepreneurship is particularly prominent in emerging economies, where access to education and training remains limited, and cultural norms reinforce gender stereotypes and biases (Mohamadi & Ertemsir, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to address the underlying social and cultural factors that hinder women's entrepreneurship and to promote policies and programs that support and empower women entrepreneurs.

Researchers have highlighted the significance of exploring the factors that inspire people to initiate and maintain businesses, particularly in areas where poverty is widespread. In emerging economies, women's entrepreneurship is often considered the most practical job option (Cardella et al., 2020; Kamberidou, 2020). Some scholars (Goncalves, 2015a; Matharu & Juneja, 2023; Smagulova & Goncalves, 2023b; Zhang & Zhou, 2021) have asserted that women entrepreneurs in emerging economies, such as Lebanon, are more self-assured, less fearful of failure, and highly driven. Women entrepreneurs are driven not only by push factors but also by pull factors, such as the desire for independence and self-achievement (Karthikeyan, 2020; Mulawarman et al., 2020; Nayak et al., 2023). In addition, they may face unprecedented challenges linked to gender biases or stereotypes, which can affect their perceptions by investors, customers, and other stakeholders (Afshan et al., 2021; Aladejebi, 2020; Bullough et al., 2022; Mozumdar et al., 2020; Rashid & Ratten, 2020; Ughetto et al., 2020). Despite the challenges, women's entrepreneurship has the potential to contribute significantly to these nations' economic development. On the other hand, pull factors such as the need to develop revenue, independence, and personal growth and development encourage women to become entrepreneurs (Džananović & Tandir, 2020; Rashid & Ratten, 2020). The desire for autonomy, self-achievement, and personal growth and development are some pull factors that motivate women entrepreneurs to pursue their goals.

It is worth noting that the motivation for women to start a business varies depending on the country and business size, as evidenced by the GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2022). Research shows that women entrepreneurs face various push factors, such as limited access to funding, market, and social support (Randerson et al., 2020; Rashid & Ratten, 2020). Studies have also found that married women with young children are more likely to start their businesses than work for someone else, indicating the need to generate income as a push factor (Milkman et al., 2021; Nayak et al., 2023; Rosenfeld & Tigges, 2021). Other push factors include the desire for work-life balance and a need for more attention from a previous employer (Fielden & Davidson, 2005; Shastri et al., 2022; Tahir, 2022). However, research suggests that women entrepreneurs from both advanced and emerging economies are equally motivated by push and pull factors (Al Matroushi et al., 2020; Vardhan et al., 2020).

To best understand how women entrepreneurs contribute to the economic growth of emerging economies, it is essential to address the challenges they face and how adequate support and resources can be accessed (Al-Qahtani et al., 2022; Yousafzai et al., 2022). These challenges include push factors such as gender bias, limited access to financing, and lack of access to networks, which can hinder the growth potential of women-owned businesses in emerging economies. Despite the availability of funding and resources, women entrepreneurs still need assistance in accessing capital, which can limit their ability to scale their businesses. However, women in emerging economies are also motivated by pull factors such as the desire for autonomy, flexibility, and work-life balance, encouraging them to start their businesses (Adom & Anambane, 2020). As research increasingly recognizes the importance of women entrepreneurs in driving economic growth and innovation, such perception in emerging economies is evolving. Governments are implementing policies, incentives, and programs that support women's entrepreneurship, and there is an increase in investments in initiatives aimed at helping women entrepreneurs (Lingappa et al., 2023; Yousafzai et al., 2022).

The location where women start businesses may impact their motivation, suggesting a country-specific effect. Previous research has explored women's decisions to establish enterprises in various economies. Recent studies have focused on advanced economies like Australia (Newsome, 2020; Smith et al., 2020), Canada (Cukier & Hassannezhad Chavoushi, 2020), and Hong Kong (Franzke et al., 2022). Other recent studies have been conducted in transitional and emerging economies such as Afghanistan (Wafeq et al., 2019), Bangladesh (Shoma, 2019), China (Burt, 2019; Dewitt et al., 2023), the Czech Republic/Poland (Bilan et al., 2019; Pehe, 2022), Kazakhstan (Smagulova & Goncalves, 2023a, 2023b), Kyrgyzstan (Chong &

Velez, 2020), Malaysia (Hassan et al., 2020), Saudi Arabia (Sabri & Thomas, 2019; Hashim, 2023), Turkmenistan (Bayramov et al., 2023), Turkey (Ağır, 2020; Bozoğlu Batı & Armutlulu, 2020), Uzbekistan (Tashpulatova, 2021), and Latin America/Caribbean region (Alecchi, 2020; Ruiz-Martínez et al., 2021). These studies show that women entrepreneurs encounter different opportunities and challenges than male entrepreneurs. Notably, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2019) reports that men are more likely than women to become entrepreneurs in the countries surveyed (Brush et al., 2020b; Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020). However, some studies (Žur, 2021) suggest that women are more likely than men to set up new ventures to pursue social and economic missions.

Researchers have noted that women in emerging economies often pursue entrepreneurship for independence and personal fulfillment, motivated by internal factors (Al Matroushi et al., 2020; Botha, 2020; Goncalves, 2015a, 2015b; Rashid & Ratten, 2020; Smagulova & Goncalves, 2023a, 2023b). However, the factors that drive women entrepreneurs in these regions may vary depending on the country and specific circumstances (Rosca, Nastase, et al., 2020a; Guerrero et al., 2021). While some women start new ventures for similar reasons, others may do so out of necessity (Al Matroushi et al., 2020; De La Chaux & Haugh, 2020; Vardhan et al., 2020). For example, recent studies suggest Lebanese women entrepreneurs receive support from their social networks, indicating a positive societal attitude toward entrepreneurship. A study by Tlaiss (2023) examining Lebanese women entrepreneurs' conceptualizations of career success, the mechanisms they use to realize it, and their overall awareness of it found that they experience career success as an act of disobedience against socially imposed cultural and gender mandates. Furthermore, their career drive and success evolve as a contextual, dynamic process that is culturally dependent but individually negotiated, interpreted, and constructed using external and internal conceptualizations. These conceptualizations are intertwined with agency and unfold as a process at the intersection of gender, patriarchy, and cultural values.

Lichy et al. (2021) argue that social network sites fundamentally enable Lebanese women entrepreneurs as it allows them to optimize their networks in prospecting, communicating, and developing relationships with stakeholders while also allowing them to support the social fabric of the family unit by providing an extra source of income and facilitating connections. Similarly, in another study by Tlaiss and McAdam (2021a) equipped with Islamic feminism, Arab women entrepreneurs experienced Islam as a malleable resource. Islam allowed them to construe success and their identity as successful at the juncture of their lived experiences as women entrepreneurs, Muslims of good character and standing, and Arab females. Furthermore, a study by El Ali and Le Loarne-Lemaire (2022) underlines the role of spousal support in the emancipation of refugee women entrepreneurs in Lebanon, focusing on the Syrian women's entrepreneurial drive.

In recent years, women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon has made significant advancements, propelled by various factors. These include increased access to finance and training opportunities provided by government and non-governmental organizations to foster women's entrepreneurship, as highlighted by Kobeissi et al. (2020) and Hassan et al. (2021). Additionally, supportive policies and legal frameworks have been instrumental in enhancing women's economic participation, with measures such as the introduction of maternity leave and anti-discrimination laws, as noted by the World Bank (2019) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), (2021a, 2021b). The rise in education levels among women has also contributed to a larger pool of skilled and qualified female entrepreneurs (Hassan et al., 2021; Kobeissi et al., 2020). Furthermore, increased access to technology and digital platforms has allowed women entrepreneurs to reach a broader customer base and navigate some traditional barriers to entry (Kobeissi et al., 2020; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), (2021a, 2021b)). Finally, a shift in societal attitudes towards women's entrepreneurship has been observed, with Lebanese women entrepreneurs receiving robust support from their social networks, as documented by Pedroza-Gutiérrez (2019), Alecchi (2020), Blanco-Gregory, Alemany et al. (2020), Blanco-Gregory, López-Canto et al. (2020), Deng, Kassar, et al. (2020), Deng, Liang, et al. (2020) and Rosca, Agarwal, et al. (2020).

Women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon has gained significant attention in recent years due to several factors. One of the main drivers is the country's economic situation, which has forced many women to seek alternative income-generating activities (Kenney et al., 2024). Moreover, the increasing demand for women's products and services, coupled with the development of innovative technologies and funding availability, has created a favorable environment for women entrepreneurs in Lebanon (Mounzer, 2023).

Additionally, the country's cultural and societal attitudes toward women's entrepreneurship have shifted recently, as Lebanese women have become more empowered and encouraged to pursue their entrepreneurial aspirations (Aloulou et al., 2024). Furthermore, the government's initiatives to support and promote women's entrepreneurship, such as establishing the National Committee for Women's Affairs, have also contributed to the growth of women-owned businesses in Lebanon (U. N. Women, 2021). These factors have led to a significant increase in the number of female entrepreneurs in Lebanon, making substantial contributions to the country's economy and society.

The current body of literature on women entrepreneurs in emerging economies primarily focuses on community-based or disadvantaged group-based women entrepreneurship, leaving a gap in the understanding of women entrepreneurs who exhibit elite traits, are innovative, and are driven by opportunities (Gano-An & Gempes, 2020; White et al., 2021). Nevertheless, multiple studies have identified many common factors among women entrepreneurs, including limited access to finances, lack of motivation, risk aversion, low education levels, desire to start a business, capacity to access support for decision-making, and effective use of networks (Kappal & Rastogi, 2020; Lladós-Masllorens & Ruiz-Dotras, 2021; Nyanga & Chindanya, 2021; Henry et al., 2022). Further research on women entrepreneurship in emerging economies could be crucial in highlighting the significance of context as a critical dimension of analysis. Such research could provide valuable insights into understanding the broader factors contributing to women's entrepreneurial success.

2.1. Women and entrepreneurial leadership

The intersection of entrepreneurship and leadership is a critical area that has not obtained adequate awareness in research, leading to a significant gap in understanding the impact of gender in entrepreneurship. While entrepreneurship and leadership are interrelated, the extant literature has primarily focused on entrepreneurship as an individual phenomenon rather than a leadership role (Ahl & Marlow, 2021a; Mmbaga, Kikwasi, et al., 2020). Gender bias and stereotyping have influenced the understanding of entrepreneurship, leading to a narrow perception of what constitutes a successful women entrepreneur. Scholars argue that culture, through gender stereotypes, acts as a *push* motivational factor for women's entrepreneurship and breeds more necessity-driven women entrepreneurs than opportunity-driven ones. However, gender stereotyping is perceived as a challenge to the entrepreneurial success of several women-owned enterprises. Due to gender stereotypes, countless women entrepreneurs are skeptical about venturing into unknown sectors that are not familiar and operating larger businesses that are likely to yield more profits (Adom & Anambane, 2020).

Research indicates that understanding the intersection of entrepreneurship and leadership can assist in addressing gender biases and stereotypes and promote gender equality in entrepreneurship (Ughetto et al., 2020). For instance, successful entrepreneurship is often associated with masculine qualities, such as assertiveness, risk-taking, and competitiveness, strengthening the gender gap in entrepreneurship (Konutgan, 2022). On the other hand, women are often perceived as lacking the required characteristics for entrepreneurship leadership, leading to a lack of representation of women in leadership positions (Kimbu et al., 2021). Several scholars have argued that entrepreneurship and women entrepreneurship are often regarded as conflicting discourses that result in women entrepreneurs facing more significant obstacles in entrepreneurial pursuits (Mmbaga, Mathias, et al., 2020; Ahl & Marlow, 2021b). This perception is supported by the common association of successful entrepreneurship with male attributes, which can lead to an incomplete and biased understanding of the field (Donaldson et al., 2023).

There is a need for further research on women's entrepreneurship to examine the intersection of entrepreneurship and leadership and its impact on gender in entrepreneurship, especially in the context of DEI. The opportunity exists to advance theoretical understandings of how gender is operationalized within gendered contexts and places. While some researchers argue that entrepreneurship and womanhood are opposing concepts based on entrepreneurial identity, others propose that alternative entrepreneurship structures and distinct forms of gender exist, which can help overcome universal gender discourses through contextual approaches that consider the geographical and historical situatedness of gender and entrepreneurship (Webb et al., 2020). Such contextual approaches may include non-privileged, non-dominant, under-represented, disadvantaged, or unusual demographic backgrounds, such as women,

ethnic-minority and LGBTQIA+ individuals, and individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Samdanis & Özbilgin, 2020). By examining entrepreneurship within the context of gender, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the experiences and challenges distinct groups of entrepreneur's face.

Additionally, a social constructionist strategy to conceptualize leadership emphasizes the importance of context in analyzing women's entrepreneurial leadership (Leitch & Volery, 2017). Such an approach recognizes that leadership is a social construct shaped by historical, cultural, and social factors and can vary across different contexts. By considering the context in which women entrepreneurs operate, researchers can better understand the unique ways women lead their businesses and their challenges. Through these approaches, researchers can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection of gender, entrepreneurship, and leadership.

Several studies have pointed out gender differences in transformational leadership, a critical aspect of building efficient and sustainable organizations and fostering innovative management and leadership practices (Begum et al., 2022; Schiuma et al., 2022). Transformational leadership qualities, such as proactiveness and innovation, are closely related to entrepreneurial leadership, highlighting the need for more women in leadership positions in entrepreneurship (Bilal et al., 2021; Sawaeen & Ali, 2020a). Women are effective role models who can establish mutual expectations, rewards, and responsibilities, contributing to a favorable organizational climate (Calvo et al., 2023; Smagulova & Goncalves, 2023b), creativity, and innovation (Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020; Setini et al., 2020), teamwork (Mareque et al., 2022; Vize, 2022), and ongoing learning and cooperation (Komives & Sowcik, 2020).

Women entrepreneurs can play a significant role in fostering a positive organizational culture and encouraging innovative practices that lead to sustainable growth and success (Badghish et al., 2023; Zhang, 2020). However, women still face challenges when establishing themselves as transformational leaders in entrepreneurship, including a lack of access to financial resources, social and cultural norms, and structural barriers. Addressing these challenges can pave the way for more gender-diverse leadership in entrepreneurship, resulting in more efficient and innovative organizations.

2.1.1. Women's leadership behavior in early-stage companies

The literature on leadership roles underscores the gendered nature of leadership and how cultural expectations around women's behavior and attitudes have institutionalized gender distinctions in organizations (Bullough et al., 2022). Women leaders and entrepreneurs must navigate and counteract these expectations in their leadership roles (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Smagulova & Goncalves, 2023a, 2023b; Teixeira et al., 2021). While individual-level characteristics are recognized as crucial enablers of entrepreneurship, little research explains how individuals become influential leaders. Context plays a vital role in shaping perceptions of effective leadership (Martin & Slepian, 2021).

In contrast, studies exploring transformational leadership highlight gender variations in the leadership style necessary to establish efficient and sustainable organizations and promote innovative management and leadership practices (Begum et al., 2022; Schiuma et al., 2022). Transformational leadership qualities, such as proactiveness and innovation, align with entrepreneurial leadership (Bilal et al., 2021; Sawaeen & Ali, 2020a). Moreover, women tend to become influential role models who define and convey mutual expectations, rewards, and responsibilities, contributing to a favorable organizational climate (Badghish et al., 2023; Zhang, 2020), creativity, and innovation (Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020; Setini et al., 2020), teamwork (Mareque et al., 2022; Vize, 2022), as well as ongoing learning and cooperation (Komives & Sowcik, 2020). Therefore, understanding the gendered nature of leadership roles and exploring transformational leadership can provide valuable insights into how individuals become influential leaders and how women can navigate cultural expectations to become influential leaders and entrepreneurs.

While individual-level factors are frequently regarded as the key factors that encourage entrepreneurship, extant research indicates that gender should be recognized as a critical determinant of entrepreneurship and leadership (Adom & Anambane, 2020; Arshad et al., 2021; Shen & Joseph, 2021). To better understand these phenomena, it is essential to consider individual-level characteristics and the broader social context in which they operate. Such an approach must also acknowledge the role of gender in shaping perceptions of effective leadership. In particular, the contextual approach can supply valuable insights into how gendered expectations and stereotypes shape the leadership styles of women

entrepreneurs and leaders (Choi & Kim, 2021). This is particularly relevant given that women often face unique challenges and barriers in entrepreneurship and leadership due to cultural and societal norms (George et al., 2022). Hence, by taking a contextual approach that considers the intersection of gender and entrepreneurship, researchers and practitioners can better understand the complex factors that drive entrepreneurial success and effective leadership.

More research is needed to understand how individuals can develop their leadership skills in entrepreneurial activities, as this remains an important topic that requires further investigation (Mulyana et al., 2022; Schiuma et al., 2022). Leadership roles are shaped by situational communication during radical changes, and they rely on the support of other actors and contextual structures (Bodin et al., 2020; Su et al., 2021). The concept of a leadership role is influenced by demands and constraints, which impact an individual's preferences, perceptions of their role, and the degree of discretionary choice available to them within that role (Garavan et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2021).

The perception of leadership is a complex and multi-faceted concept, influenced by various attitudinal dimensions, including content, structure, function, and the broader social context (Islam et al., 2021; Samimi et al., 2022). Both personal and contextual factors determine behavioral choices at all levels. While considerable research has been conducted in this area, integrative models still need to consider the complex interactions between contextual and individual determinants of leadership effectiveness, particularly for women entrepreneurs.

Understanding the interplay between individual and contextual factors is crucial for developing effective leadership in entrepreneurship. Integrative models, such as the situational leadership model, have been proposed to bridge the gap between individual and contextual factors (Gottfredson & Reina, 2020). However, these models require further exploration, particularly regarding the effectiveness of women entrepreneurs' leadership styles in different contexts (Foss & Grandori, 2020; Kimmitt et al., 2022). Therefore, continued research into the complex interplay between individual and contextual factors is necessary to fully understand leadership effectiveness in entrepreneurship, particularly for women entrepreneurs in Lebanon, as such leadership skills play a major role in how they cope with DCC.

2.1.2. Women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon

Lebanese culture represents a fusion of European, Christian, and non-fundamentalist Arab Muslim values. The lack of available data on women managers in Lebanon and the growing emphasis on their professional development underscores the pressing need for further research in this domain. Women's entrepreneurship is crucial to any nation's economic and social development. In Lebanon, women entrepreneurs have made significant strides in the entrepreneurial landscape. However, such an endeavor has been challenging (Bastian et al., 2020; Tahir & Raza, 2020). Many factors contribute to the competitive advantage of Lebanese women entrepreneurs, including their overall education and skills, support networks, and the Lebanese government's growing recognition of their significance to the country's economic growth.

One of the critical transformations aimed at eliminating workplace gender discrimination in Lebanon revolves around female education, which has significantly contributed to the socioeconomic advancement of Lebanese women (Skaf et al., 2024). The representation of women as managers and decision-makers within the public sector is nearly negligible. However, in October 2004, the Lebanese Cabinet witnessed a historic milestone as two women were appointed for the first time (Al Hassanieh, 2023). Lebanese women entrepreneurs have made remarkable progress in accessing education (Bastian & Hill, 2021; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2020). The World Bank (2021) reports that female enrollment in tertiary education in Lebanon has exceeded that of males in recent years. Such an educational advantage equips them with the skills and knowledge needed to excel in entrepreneurial endeavors across various sectors, including technology, healthcare, and the creative industry.

Lebanon benefits from numerous supporting networks for women entrepreneurs (Lichy et al., 2021). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governmental initiatives, and international organizations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and U. N. Women (2021), offer training, mentorship, and financial support to empower women in business (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021a, 2021b; Theaker, 2023). These networks create an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs to initiate and expand their businesses.

In the past few years, the Lebanese government has recognized the significance of women's economic participation and entrepreneurship as essential drivers of economic growth (Al-Qahtani et al., 2022). The National Strategy for Women in Lebanon 2021–2030, launched by the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs (Ministry of State for Women's Affairs 2021), underscores the commitment to advancing women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship (U. N. Women, 2021). This strategy reflects a growing acknowledgment of women's pivotal role in Lebanon's economy.

Nonetheless, despite these positive trends, women entrepreneurs in Lebanon face several barriers, including but not limited to societal norms and gender stereotypes, legal and regulatory challenges, and access to finance (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2019). The existing literature regarding the entrepreneurial experiences of Lebanese women often portrays the influence of local sociocultural values and gender ideologies as impediments that constrain women's career options. Lebanon is characterized as a patriarchal and masculine society that upholds traditional labor division and enforces delineated gender roles (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2019). Throughout their upbringing, individuals in Arab cultures are taught to enact behaviors following their gender. They are anticipated to conform to predetermined gender roles and prescribed behaviors stereotypically associated with being either male or female (Alrubaishi et al., 2021). A significant portion of Lebanese society continues to define women primarily in terms of their domestic roles as homemakers, mothers, and wives, and these expectations dictate socially acceptable career choices for women (Bhuiyan, 2022).

Lebanon's traditional patriarchal society continues to perpetuate gender stereotypes and norms that hinder women's entrepreneurship (Tlaiss, 2021; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2019). Deep-rooted cultural beliefs may lead to discrimination and limit women's access to resources and opportunities. For instance, balancing their traditional roles with the demands, constraints, and choices when running a business is often challenging, making entrepreneurship seem less accessible (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021a, 2021b).

Although significant progress has been made in some areas, legal and regulatory hurdles persist. The confluence of sectarianism and patriarchy in Lebanon has substantially eroded the social standing and autonomy of women. Lebanon's unequal inheritance laws disadvantage women, and gender bias can be present within the legal system, making it difficult for women to secure loans, own property, and protect their businesses (Bou Younes, 2022). Access to finance, however, remains a significant hurdle for women entrepreneurs in Lebanon. A lack of collateral and scarce financial resources can make it challenging for women to secure loans and investment capital for their ventures (Ali et al., 2023). Women may also face skepticism and bias when seeking financial support, limiting their ability to grow their businesses (Daou et al., 2022; World Bank, 2021). These challenges pose significant barriers to women's entrepreneurial success (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021a, 2021b).

In addition to the many challenges women entrepreneurs face in Lebanon, other significant concerns might impose further challenges to the sector. Lebanon is currently facing an unprecedented and rapidly escalating humanitarian crisis that is pushing the nation further into poverty and endangering the well-being of its population, economic growth, social welfare, as well as regional and national stability. This dire situation results from the compounding impacts of the August 2020 Beirut explosion, a severe economic downturn, and the ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. All of this occurs against the backdrop of persistent political corruption and a dysfunctional, poorly managed crisis response by the state. The country's economic challenge may be a significant impediment. Lebanon has grappled with an ongoing economic and political crisis since 2019 (Abouzeid et al., 2021). The instability, hyperinflation, and shortages of essential goods have severely impacted the overall business environment, including for women entrepreneurs. Economic challenges have made it increasingly difficult for women to initiate and sustain their businesses (World Bank, 2021).

The country's dire economic situation has prompted many young, educated Lebanese women to seek better opportunities abroad (Awad, 2023; U. N. Women, 2021). This emigration poses a significant concern for the country's economy, as it may result in a loss of entrepreneurial talent and a decrease in the number of women contributing to Lebanon's economy. This migration and brain drain can have long-term economic and social repercussions (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021a, 2021b; Merhi, 2022).

In addition to economic, migration, and brain drain challenges, sustainability and inclusion also present barriers. Addressing the societal and legal barriers that hinder women's economic participation is essential to ensuring the sustainable growth of women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon. Empowering women economically and promoting inclusivity in all sectors is critical. Governmental and non-governmental efforts must persist in supporting and uplifting women in business to enhance their role in the national economy (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021a, 2021b).

2.2. The Stewart's role demands-constraints choice model

Stewart's (1982) Demand-Constraint-Choice (DCC) framework is adeptly utilized to assess the business leadership of women entrepreneurs in Lebanon, focusing on the intricate interplay of demands, constraints, and choices they encounter. This framework proves particularly effective in highlighting how these entrepreneurs navigate the complex socio-economic environment they operate within. Demands represent the essential tasks and goals that must be achieved, constraints are the barriers or limitations faced, and choices involve the strategic decisions made in response to these demands and constraints. By applying the DCC framework, this investigation systematically explores how Lebanese women entrepreneurs manage the intense demands of business leadership, overcome the constraints imposed by socio-cultural norms and economic challenges, and utilize their available choices to innovate and drive their businesses forward while addressing the many other demands they have outside their business. This systematic approach offers valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of women in leadership roles within the entrepreneurial sector, illustrating how they leverage their unique positions and networks to meet objectives and enhance their enterprises despite significant obstacles.

The DCC framework is a model that examines jobs through the lens of demands, constraints, and choices. Specifically, the framework analyses the behaviors of individuals in managerial positions and categorizes their choices as either discretionary or prescribed, depending on their perception of role demands and constraints. Demands refer to the minimum core of required tasks, activities, duties, and responsibilities that managers must fulfill. At the same time, constraints are internal and external factors that restrict what the role-holder can do (Stewart, 1982). Despite its age, the DCC framework remains a relevant tool for analyzing managerial roles. It has been used in numerous studies across various industries and sectors (e.g. Lee, 2021).

Stewart argued that effective leadership depends on the applicability of the role-holder's choices in a given situation. According to the model, role behavior reflects an individual's response to perceived job requirements and expectations, which can create both demands and constraints. The interplay between these demands and constraints provides opportunities for the role-holder to make choices about their behavior. The DCC model identifies three specific choices that role-holders can make: highlighting certain job factors, delegating tasks, and managing job boundaries.

The DCC model applies to micro, meso, and macro leaders. It encompasses various demands and constraints that leaders face and stresses the significance of contextual awareness in determining leadership effectiveness, as several researchers have suggested (Kakabadse et al., 2018; 2020).

3. Research methods and approach

In this research, the methodology employed a social constructionist ontology and interpretive epistemology to best understand entrepreneurial leadership as a gendered phenomenon rooted in the idea that the perceptions and experiences of women leaders in entrepreneurial contexts are socially constructed through choices and constraints (Ince-Yenilmez, 2021). As delineated in Table 1, this investigation employed a purposive snowball sampling method to assemble a cohort of 12 Lebanese female entrepreneurs originating from microenterprises, start-ups, and new venture enterprises to gain an understanding concerning the perceptions and experiential dimensions of these women leadership within the entrepreneurship environment of Lebanon. The selection of the sample was inherently informed by the central research inquiry aimed at elucidating the determinants underpinning women's entrepreneurial endeavors within the Lebanese context (Hiebl, 2021; Khan, 2020).

Table 1. Profile of Lebanese entrepreneurs interviewed.

Identifier	Age	Education	Leadership role	Experience yrs	Industry
Interviewee 1	NK	BA Graphic Design	Founder and CEO	10	Event Planning
Interviewee 2	33	BS Business	Founder and CEO	7	Jewelry Design
Interviewee 3	38	MBA/Ph.D. ongoing	Founder	3	Yoga online business
Interviewee 4	39	Masters in Math	Founder and CEO	7	Retail
Interviewee 5	54	Ph.D. in Pharmacy	Founder and CEO	36	Pharmaceutical
Interviewee 6	53	Elementary	Founder	3	Fashion
Interviewee 7	52	BA computer science/ master's ongoing	Freelance	10	Consulting
Interviewee 8	44	Master's degree	Founder and CEO	10	Hospitality
Interviewee 9	38	BA Graphic Design	Freelance	8	Graphic design
Interviewee 10	50	BA Graphic Design and Fine arts	Founder and Creative Director	19	Jewelry Design
Interviewee 11	33	Ph.D. in economics ongoing	Founder and CEO	3	Agriculture
Interviewee 12	27	MS in Civil Engineering	Founder and CEO	5	Manufacturing

Source: Compiled by the authors.

3.1. Sample selection

The women entrepreneurs included in this study were selected based on several criteria, as described by one of the researchers, who is a native of Lebanon and familiar with the language and culture. These criteria were: being an early-stage, relatively new venture entrepreneurial organization, with women in leadership who were actively involved in their roles as entrepreneurs, whether they led startups, were sole proprietors, or were part of a team that sought to enhance business and innovation, with a focus on understanding their entrepreneurial ability to implement and develop their ideas in their leadership positions within their context. Additionally, the selection criteria required women to have at least three years of experience in senior management roles. The semi-structured interview questions, which can be found in the [Appendix A](#), were only administered to women who demonstrated leadership in entrepreneurial settings.

3.2. Interview protocol and data collection

Several researchers argued that selecting semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method was based on their potential to yield information-rich data narratives (Renjith et al., 2021). This approach aligns with the social construction tradition, which emphasizes the importance of rich narratives in understanding the dynamics of high-echelon positions (Jones et al., 2021; Thinane, 2020).

In this study, written informed consent and respective consent signatures by 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 Arabic, 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.

During the summer of 2023, semi-structured interviews (see [Appendix A](#)) lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes were conducted. One of the researchers in this study, a Lebanese and native speaker of the language and familiar with the culture of the interviewees and also fluent in English, effectively probed, clarified, and provided feedback during the interviews, allowing for a deeper understanding of the participants' expressions of their leadership roles. A round of qualitative questions was used to explore the themes and trends. To ensure the validity of the protocol, the interview questions were tested by four professional Lebanese women entrepreneurs in leadership roles and refined based on thematic-based questions. Most of the interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed. The transcribed responses were coded and analyzed using NVivo, with frequently repeated answers highlighted and grouped.

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences as entrepreneurs in Lebanon and related activities, using the DCC model developed by Stewart as a framework, which was explained to the participants during the survey and the semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked to discuss their chosen activities, why they chose them, and how they implemented them. The questions focused on the nature of their responsibilities and level of accountability, any obstacles that may have prevented them from performing their work duties, and their choice of activities, considering the demands and constraints they faced. The interview notes were translated into English and re-typed by the lead bilingual researcher, ensuring the preservation of the original meaning of the interviewees' comments. The translation issue surfaced during the coding and categorization process.

The research process included data gathering, cleaning, preparation, coding, categorizing, visualizing representative data, verifying, interpreting, and drawing conclusions (Monaro et al., 2022). The data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically using Stewart's DCC framework to identify frequent, dominant, or significant themes from the raw data. This analysis aimed to find typical patterns and regularities of demands, constraints, and preferences among the lived experiences of interviewees, regardless of their diverse professional backgrounds. To ensure anonymity, interviewees were assigned codenames. The data coding process was divided into three stages. First, data was organized by themes, and recurring themes were identified and coded through a detailed reading of the transcripts to allow categories to emerge within the text (Neale, 2021). Second, axial coding (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022) was developed, and the themes' axes were analyzed to construct broader categories. Finally, the more general categories were examined within Stewart's DCC framework according to the content that was especially rich or theoretically interesting to the researchers. The core selected categories adopted were role demands, constraints, and choices, which were organized using Stewart's DCC model as a theoretical framework to identify lower-level codes.

4. Data analysis and findings

The data analysis emphasizes the importance of role demands, constraints, and choices in the context of leadership roles among female entrepreneurs in Lebanon. Moreover, these three dimensions are interconnected and interdependent in the manifestation of leadership by female entrepreneurs, forming a dynamic relationship. Illustrated in Figure 1 is a word cloud derived from semi-structured interviews, accentuating the principal themes discerned among all participants in the interview process.

During data analysis, diverse thematic elements were identified. The main themes focused on work, business, the constant presence of demands and constraints—related to childbearing, spouse, and family—and decisions compelled by circumstances, often with limited choices, especially those related to the welfare of their children. While the outcomes of the interviews are not generalizable owing to the limited sample size, they reveal a notable emphasis among Lebanese women entrepreneurs on their work and



Figure 1. Main themes arising from semi-structured interviews.

business pursuits and the constraints intrinsic to their role as mothers, wives, and family nurturers, manifested through various ways. These entrepreneurs, it was observed, prioritize their work and business demands (for subsistence, provision for their children and familial needs, or supplemental income) by leveraging entrepreneurial activities to garner financial resources, thereby ensuring the stability and sustenance of both familial and professional spheres. Such entrepreneurial efforts display a collective orientation, transcending individual realms of accomplishment, as their work, business, and constraints are all integrated as a cohesive analytical unit, converging and occasionally constraining the intersection of their interests surrounding these four major concerns. Hence, within this framework, an active engagement in work activities to foster their businesses is evident, driven by their imperative to cater to the needs of their children and enhance their living conditions despite the demands and constraints they face. Additionally, considerations related to work-life balance are manifest, with a strategic embodiment of leadership roles to reconcile professional obligations while recognizing the significance of nurturing and sustaining their family connections. Such a work-centric approach highlights the intricate interplay between entrepreneurial pursuits and family dynamics, underscoring the subtle relationship they need to maintain between entrepreneurship and the holistic well-being of their families within the Lebanese sociocultural context.

4.1. Stewart's DCC framework analysis

The study adopted Stewart's DCC model as a theoretical framework to explore how women entrepreneurs in Lebanon embody leadership and how role demands, constraints, and choices influence their experiences. The analysis focused on understanding the women's perceptions of their role and their success in performing it while navigating the demands, constraints, and choices they face.

4.1.1. Role demands

The interviewees emphasized the crucial role demands for effective leadership, arguing that it plays a pivotal role in shaping leadership effectiveness. The nature and extent of these demands varied among the interviewees. Still, most of them were influenced by their ability to navigate challenges and drive success, which aligns with extant literature (Oc et al., 2023). Among these demands, one of the most pivotal was achieving results toward a specific goal,

So it is all about trying to. I mean, at the end of the day, whether we like it or not, at the end of the day. What do we need to achieve? We need to. Grow financially and creatively at the same time in terms of a brand, and, of course, the team needs to grow. OK, this is what we are after, right? And you know, I mean, so it has to stay a brand. That's true. (Interviewee 10)

I'm not talking about [being] creative, you know, about creating nicer jewelry; I'm talking about that [demands]. You know, creating, in general, better ideas to achieve what we want. (Interviewee 11)

From their leadership positions perspective, interviewees underscored the critical role demand of effectively navigating challenging situations. High role demands experienced by leaders are associated with elevated levels of stress and burnout, compromising decision-making capabilities and hindering effective team communication (McPherson et al., 2022). Furthermore, excessive demands may contribute to role overload, impeding a leader's strategic thinking and long-term planning capacity (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023). This adeptness in handling difficulties allows leaders to offer credible insights into new realities and propose manageable structures for organizational actors and entrepreneurs, a concept supported by extant literature, particularly in contexts marked by financial, investments, and socioeconomic transformations, as exemplified in Lebanon (Scott et al., 2021):

I would say the operations, such as salaries and raw materials, no one covers it. The investors tell us to give percentages to employees, but employees are not interested in this. However, investors here in Lebanon they don't understand this, and this puts a lot of pressure on us. Me and my sister we are not earning any profit from the business yet. (Interviewee 12).

Uh, so one of the most challenging things here in Lebanon is explicitly the investment because we participated in different competitions and won a lot of grants, and we used those grants, too. To invest in our startup and to, buy the raw materials, and start building our machines, however. (Interviewee 13)

Other than the investment, there is also something about the skills. When we started biowaste, it was very hard for us. To find people who are familiar with such innovations, waste energy, and the industry itself, we had to hire normal engineers, and we were just trying to teach them everything (Interviewee 14).

The interviews with Lebanese women entrepreneurs revealed a broad perception of role demands, encompassing financial and non-financial returns on their startup investments. Interviewees exemplified this perspective by emphasizing the interconnection between non-financial returns, demands, and overall performance:

OK. Listen, my business is online. It's not a typical business, so I have a YouTube channel. The content offered is totally free for the audience. So, the profit I make from YouTube and the advertisements on my videos is not typical. (Interviewee 2)

Before, I used to work less because I needed to take care of my kids and my house. Now they are both married, but I'm not working too much because my profit has decreased not 20% but 80%, so I am also not working too much. I open late and close early. (Interviewee 3)

The participants in the study perceived their role demands through the lens of positive leadership, marked by the systematic integration of leadership traits, processes, and intentional behaviors aimed at enhancing the developmental potential of leaders, followers, and organizations across diverse contexts (Liu et al., 2021). Consistent with existing literature, positive leadership was identified as adding value by elevating the context, process, or outcomes within its operational sphere (Collinson, 2020; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). Notably, among the participants, the sense of accountability to supporters, partners, and stakeholders was pivotal in establishing a connection between role demands and the pursuit of self-actualization:

Of course, [I rely on] the financial support and also the supplies that I need; not everything is found in Lebanon anymore. (Interviewee 4).

Interviewee 6 highlighted the significance of staff support during challenging business moments:

As for the staff, now things are different. I approach them with joy and happiness. Always thinking, how can I make myself more available? What support can I get to make to not say no? Interviewee 6.

In this study, entrepreneurs' resilience refers to the capacity of interviewees to effectively navigate and adapt to adversity, setbacks, and challenges encountered in their dynamic businesses. It encompasses the ability to withstand, recover from, and positively respond to entrepreneurial endeavors' stressors, uncertainties, and failures. This resilience involves psychological and emotional fortitude, persistence, and an adaptive mindset that enables entrepreneurs to bounce back from setbacks, learn from experiences, and sustain their commitment to entrepreneurial demands (Sharma & Rautela, 2022; Shepherd & Williams, 2020). One interviewee shared the much-needed encouragement received from direct and extended family and early customers when starting up her business:

Let me tell you how I started my business. My children and my daughters-in-law encouraged me to work a lot, and work is nice. Why not? It is not something you should be ashamed of. My daughter is taking care of my Instagram page. As for my customers, the first customers were my family, such as my sisters and nieces. They encouraged me a lot. (Interviewee 5)

I actually borrowed money in order to start strong, and I also [received] encouragement, especially on social media. This [made] me feel powerful. (Interviewee 6)

The findings on role demands underscore two pivotal themes warranting further examination in the context of female entrepreneurial leadership in Lebanon. Firstly, they accentuate the critical role of affective competencies in contributing to entrepreneurial success. Affective competencies, encompassing emotional intelligence, trust-building, effective interpersonal communication, and inspiration, are deemed increasingly essential in navigating the complexities of contemporary business environments.

It highlights a shift from competency-based leadership solely focused on delivering present value based on past performance.

Secondly, the research underscores the significance of interpersonal relational abilities women entrepreneurs in Lebanon leverage in their leadership roles. These relational qualities, including emotional intelligence, trust-building, effective interpersonal communication, and inspiration, are paramount in contemporary business's intricate landscape. Unlike competency-based leadership, which is retrospective, these relational qualities are positioned to introduce new and more relevant approaches for future outcomes.

In addition to the support and encouragement that some women receive from their children and extended family, some mention the role of their husbands in their success and attempt to engage in entrepreneurial journeys. Previous research shows that a spouse's support influences a woman's entrepreneurial performance, such as providing hands-on support, advice and networks, emotional support, financial resources, household assignments, and business interference (Alene, 2020). Three interviewees were excited to mention the role of their husbands in their success:

When I started my business...My husband's first uh ordered me I can't work for someone and I can't work as a full-time job or anything and he has his own business coming, which is flexible. I never worked in my life, and I don't know how to make a profit. I wanted to get experience first by working as a teacher at a university before opening my business, but my husband didn't allow me. (Interviewee 2)

A lot of times, I have to plan in advance, just deliver it [the content video] like two weeks ago or so. So, I prerecorded 20 videos, everything. Comment in advance. my husband would be traveling, so when he come, I don't record (Interviewee 3)

I don't have much, really; I am very supported by my husband. I am free. But as a woman, I can't work at night, for instance. We are not safe in Lebanon. Men can experience that as well, but women more...My husband didn't like the idea because they thought that this was an added stress for me. I tried to convince him with my negotiation (Interviewee 4).

Although a positive attitude from the spouses and their relatively positive outcome on their wives' success in entrepreneurship may be inferred, these quotes show that some women potentially lack awareness regarding the influence and control exerted by men on their lives. Thus, male dominance and unequal gender power are prevalent in a masculine culture even when women feel they are appreciated and powerful due to their spouses' support. Women dismiss the idea that they are under a veiled submission to their husbands and are 'subjects of masculine desire' (Babakhani, 2024).

4.1.2. Role constraints

Interviewees felt that the intricacies associated with role constraints in Stewart's DCC model are sophisticated factors that can be difficult to grasp completely. These interviewed entrepreneurs encountered difficulties articulating role constraints in the operation of their businesses due to the multifaceted and dynamic nature of these constraints. Role constraints encompass a variety of factors, such as organizational structures, interpersonal dynamics, and societal expectations, which can be intricate and interconnected. Entrepreneurs, particularly women in fast-paced and demanding environments such as Lebanon, found it challenging to fully comprehend these constraints' complexity and pervasive influence on their roles and responsibilities. Their entrepreneurial ventures were affected by family demands, sociocultural norms, limited experience, evolving business landscapes, and a lack of established government norms. They contributed to their difficulty in fully understanding and navigating role constraints within their operations:

I feel that I can't leave my work, and I don't want to stop doing it. I know how to manage my time with my family, my home, my husband, and my work at the same time. (Interviewee 5)

I don't feel that I am not giving my family enough time; it's the opposite. I actually feel that I need to do more for my family so that they'd be sure that I am more than they expect me to do, and at the same time, I am working on the bags. I told them (people) that I take care of my family, I give love to my grandchildren, I cook, I clean, I laugh, and I do all this with my work. (Interviewee 6).

As a woman, I think I have more restrictions than if I were a man because I have a family, so I have to double my work. (Interviewee 7)

Stewart's findings (1982) confirm the evidence that women underscore the notion of mentally developed perceptions over constraints for entrepreneurial efficiency, which is also supported by extant literature (Badghish et al., 2023; Chang et al., 2021; Kawai & Kazumi, 2021):

Execution of projects financed by donors [can be a challenge]. So whenever I train, I emphasize that procurement is not a copy-paste business. If you consider the procurement a copy-paste business, please leave now! It is always about looking for innovative solutions because you will not know how to deal with procurement or advance with it—uh, being in IT, social, climate, and being in[serted]. And yeah, yeah. Don't base on all technologies and all the thoughts. This is my main message in the capacity building I do [develop]. (Interviewee 6)

Lebanese women entrepreneurs frequently express a sense of substantial constraint in establishing a shared understanding among various enterprise stakeholders. Scholars (Bastian et al., 2020) have identified specific challenges these entrepreneurs face in Lebanon when navigating shared understanding among their stakeholders. These challenges may stem from cultural, organizational, or interpersonal factors, influencing the overall effectiveness of communication and collaboration within the entrepreneurial context. Consistently, they stressed the vital importance of successful teamwork, highlighting the relevance of team dynamics and cooperation to address these constraints.

I keep giving them little prizes and saying, yeah, you need to show them and tell them you appreciate what they are doing, and I'll add their names to the project to give them attention. Or I offer creative projects or something they have signed. I don't want a miserable team. (Interviewee 1)

I keep a communal team; they can visualize it, and we are a family. (Interviewee 2)

I give them the freedom to express their ideas and creativity. If you are planning a new work, I always ask them and then get to an answer or idea based on all their ideas. I want them to be successful as one team. (Interviewee 3)

In the context of role limitations, the interview data emphasizes the significance of adaptability within the ever-changing entrepreneurship landscape. Lebanon's business environment changes are increasingly complex and cannot be predicted with certainty. Technological developments, market dynamics, and regulatory changes are challenges Lebanese women entrepreneurs and their businesses must face. Adaptive and flexible leadership becomes critical to ensure business success and continuity in light of these rapid changes.

Respondents acknowledged constraints on their leadership behaviors when their adopted structures became excessively inflexible. The inertia to change is a substantial barrier to adopting an innovative business model characteristic of start-ups. These findings align with Stewart's (1982) perspective and are consistent with contemporary scholars' viewpoints (Kakabadse et al., 2020; Moradi et al., 2021), highlighting constraints' fluid and dynamic nature. It is noted that these constraints may restrict specific alternatives while enabling others. The findings of this study suggest that Lebanese female entrepreneurs embrace calculated risks when compelled to seek alternatives. Furthermore, they effectively integrate new opportunities with their existing business competencies.

At first, we didn't have experience. I come from a rural area in Baalbek, and we don't have an education in startups and entrepreneurship, although I own small businesses like pizza places. (Interviewee 8)

So I was participating in different competitions related to entrepreneurship and startups and we won many competitions, national and international ones. And then after like more than. I think 30. Programs I got certified as a trainer to other entrepreneurs, so I'm currently a trainer. And a consultant with different OK organizations in Lebanon and abroad. (Interviewee 9)

This perspective is congruent with previous studies that have reported varying results on women entrepreneurs balancing familial and business responsibilities (Tajpour et al., 2022). However, it is noteworthy that the interviewees in this study did not uniformly perceive a compelling requirement to rigidly demarcate the boundaries between family and business affairs.

My family comes first, no matter what I have. (Interviewee 2)

First of all, I always want to be financially independent. And to have a successful career. And a successful venture if you want. So. So this is happiness for me. Think, and also, of course, on a personal level, I would. I love to have my family. And because I really love people, I would love to have a family later. (Interviewee 12)

As argued above, Lebanese female entrepreneurs often perceive their businesses as integral facets of their lives, serving as a conduit for self-actualization. They strive to configure their enterprises to facilitate mutual reinforcement and synergy between their business and family roles. Recent research supports these findings, underscoring the continued significance of businesses in the lives of female entrepreneurs (Lichy et al., 2021; Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021b). Echoing the sentiments of interviewees, the principal constraints encountered by female entrepreneurial leaders in Lebanon revolve around a lack of shared meanings, insufficient resources, and inflexible contextual frameworks. Recent studies elaborate on these challenges, shedding light on the evolving constraints female entrepreneurs face in Lebanon, such as the impact of changing societal expectations and economic conditions (Tlaiss, 2022; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2019).

4.1.3. Role choices

An in-depth analysis of the interview data brings to light the nuanced role choices made by the interviewees, particularly shedding light on the unique challenges and strategic considerations women entrepreneurs face in Lebanon. These women adeptly navigate myriad role choices, strategically crafting alternatives that may not always be readily discernible to external observers. The complexity of these decisions lies in the delicate balance between weighing role requirements, acknowledging limitations, and assessing their perceived capacity for creativity and innovation to chart a viable course forward. In seeking optimal alternatives, women entrepreneur leaders in Lebanon showcase their prowess and adaptability skills in entrepreneurial leadership. This involves the discernment, selection, and embrace of relevant pathways, even amid ambiguity and challenging circumstances, a phenomenon well-supported by existing literature (Shepherd & Williams, 2022; Evans, 2023). The research findings distinctly illustrate that women occupying entrepreneurial leadership roles in Lebanon navigate their choices within the parameters of demand and constraint, factors resonating with other researchers in the field (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2019).

The exercise of choice within this context often entails endorsing specific options, reflecting the deliberate and strategic decision-making processes inherent in women's entrepreneurial leadership roles. Moreover, Lebanese women entrepreneurs exhibit a dynamic approach by employing various soft and hard skills behaviors, adapting them to specific contextual and situational factors, and juggling family, business opportunities, and stakeholders' interests. This adaptability aligns with the nuanced nature of entrepreneurial leadership and is corroborated by extant literature (Ahadi & Kasraie, 2020; Dsouza & Panakaje, 2023; Sanogo & Sall, 2023). By doing so, these women not only navigate the challenges inherent in their roles but also contribute to the evolving narrative of women's entrepreneurial leadership, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of their decision-making processes.

I had a huge wedding in India, and I refused it although it was a lot of money., They wanted me to stay three months in India, and I couldn't leave my daughter., I had other events to keep an eye on. (Interviewee 1)

It's all [about understanding what my customers need]. Once I do a study [of their needs] and check the needs overall needs, then I decide what I have to work on, and I adapt! (Interviewee 2)

The findings of this study shed light on the intricate decision-making processes employed by women in leadership roles in Lebanon, emphasizing the exercise of discretion within established parameters. Task complexity, individual personality traits, and organizational dynamics are pivotal influencers in shaping their leadership approaches, challenging conventional notions of strictly adhering to predefined gender role boundaries (Croft et al., 2021; Jogulu & Franken, 2023; Ulreich, 2023). Consequently, unraveling the impact of individual leadership necessitates a nuanced understanding of the specific contextual factors at play.

Delving into the distinct choices confronting women entrepreneurs in leadership within the Lebanese context, this study reveals two recurring themes: expertise and cooperation. In harmony with insights from recent literature, cooperative behavior emerges as a consistent and fundamental leadership strategy

(Alblooshi et al., 2021; Iannotta et al., 2020; Van der Voet & Steijn, 2021). It aligns with traditional views of women's leadership, where collaborative styles drive societal transformation and foster equity (Arriaga et al., 2020; Bryson et al., 2021; Martinez-Leon et al., 2020). Moreover, the semi-structured interviews underscore the importance of trust, respect, and teamwork as integral facets of effective leadership strategies (Smith et al., 2020; Hatta et al., 2023). This emphasis on relational elements in leadership resonates with the broader discourse on women's leadership styles, highlighting the interconnectedness of trust-building and collaborative endeavors in advancing effective and equitable leadership practices. The relevance of these principles is particularly pronounced in addressing the unique challenges women entrepreneurs face navigating Lebanon's entrepreneurial landscape:

Women are more trustworthy than men, though – that's the perception about her in society, but men have smarter ways of dealing with customers. (Interviewee 4)

I am actually appreciated by my customers as a woman because they think that I have a good eye for fashion since I am a woman. I am also trustworthy because I am a woman, and I sell them good quality. (Interviewee 5)

There's, uh, it's really bad. [We] can feel how they look [at us] when they see that..., when they..., see that we are [women]. Two female founders. So, they don't. They definitely don't trust women founders. (Interviewee 12)

Acknowledging the paramount importance of collaborative efforts in cultivating a positive organizational climate, interviewees also underscored its pivotal role in augmenting the competencies of team members through knowledge exchange and mutual learning. This perspective aligns with the growing literature emphasizing the efficacy of collaborative leadership and the heightened motivation and enthusiasm observed among women fostering emotional connections with their peers (Foster et al., 2020; Onyekwere et al., 2023). The thematic emphasis on teamwork remains intricately linked with another recurrent facet in leadership roles: the imperative for individual and collective learning to catalyze enterprise development. Participants identified the succession and transfer of expertise as essential prerequisites for the practical realization of organizational objectives (Jones et al., 2021; Baltazar et al., 2023; Duckworth-Chambless et al., 2023):

The type of work that we do. It does involve. A lot of teamwork. And a lot of long hours, a lot of emotions, and a lot of you know. And I feel the team. (Interviewee 10)

Within the team, whenever I had males, I just felt that they were uncomfortable just being surrounded by just a lot of you. (Interviewee 11)

Furthermore, in addition to setting transparent performance benchmarks, the participants articulated the perspective that non-monetary incentives such as career development programs and training opportunities play a crucial role (Duckworth-Chambless et al., 2023):

... performance honestly, that this comes ahead of anything. (Interviewee 9)

For me, it doesn't make any difference as long as they have the performance and the character. (Interviewee 12)

Ultimately, Lebanese female entrepreneurs, in such a diverse business environment, opt to exemplify models of effectual conduct, considering it a strategy to bolster the dedication of their followers. Furthermore, the participants underscored the significance of promoting employee development and enabling collective learning as indispensable leadership competencies. The findings of this investigation underscore that Lebanese female entrepreneurs perceive knowledge transfer as a pivotal developmental imperative, aligning with existing literature (Martinez-Leon et al., 2020; Bryson et al., 2021).

We are able to offer knowledge as [we] experience it. Ideas, innovation, heritage preservation, arts, culture promotion, and local products and designs. (Interviewee 7)

I participated in many programs and gained a lot of knowledge, which I shared with the team. (Interviewee 12)

Multiple scholars in the field have advanced the notion that Lebanese entrepreneurs can be conceptualized as proactive learners, and the entrepreneurial process can be perceived as a systematically

structured learning trajectory (Goncalves, 2014; Gomes et al., 2022). This current investigation advances this viewpoint by framing Lebanese women's entrepreneurship as a collaborative developmental undertaking. They emphasize teamwork and collective learning as essential elements in sustaining adaptability within their enterprises, a critical determinant of their success. This study asserts that these women's entrepreneurial endeavors manifest a collaborative approach oriented toward co-development, highlighting the cultivation of positive relationships, role modeling, and shared learning. This interpretation aligns with academic discourse on the intricate facets of gender, interwoven with identity and diverse forms of power dynamics (Bolton et al., 2023). Consequently, the findings of this research underscore that relational qualities bolster leadership behaviors within the context of entrepreneurial organizations.

5. Discussion, limitations, conclusions, implication to theory and recommendations

This research asserts that Lebanese women entrepreneurs significantly influence the country's economic landscape by establishing and managing businesses, thereby contributing to employment opportunities. The study utilizes insights from semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs in Lebanon to unveil a nuanced array of motivations driving their engagement in entrepreneurial pursuits. These motivations exhibit contextual variations shaped by Lebanon's unique economic landscape. This viewpoint resonates with current scholarly discussions, which highlight that women in emerging economies are attracted to entrepreneurship as a result of push factors such as economic necessity and the quest for a balanced work-life equilibrium (Banu et al., 2023; Jacob et al., 2023; Lingappa & Rodrigues, 2023). Conversely, women in more advanced economies pursue self-employment driven by pull factors, including a desire for personal fulfillment and increased autonomy. However, it is imperative to critically examine the opportunities or constraints that Lebanese women entrepreneurs face in navigating the entrepreneurial landscape within the specific socio-economic context of Lebanon.

The primary aim of this study was to enhance the comprehension of female entrepreneurial leadership within the context of Lebanon by investigating the perspectives and experiences of women entrepreneurs in their leadership capacities. Stewart's DCC framework was applied as a conceptual framework, providing a structured approach to examining how these entrepreneurs perceive and negotiate the multifaceted demands, constraints, and choices intrinsic to their leadership roles. Through a detailed analysis of the fundamental motivations propelling Lebanese women to initiate and manage businesses, this research fills a significant knowledge gap at the intersection of gender, leadership, and entrepreneurship within the Lebanese socio-economic landscape.

5.1. Discussion

The prevailing entrepreneurship narrative has traditionally centered on male entrepreneurs as innovative leaders, while women are often disproportionately represented among the most economically vulnerable businesses. However, this oversimplification fails to capture women's diverse roles in entrepreneurship, spanning both ends of the spectrum. While evidence may support these stereotypes, it is crucial to acknowledge that such a binary classification is inherently flawed, akin to the simplistic division between necessity and opportunity entrepreneurship (Brush et al., 2022).

Generally, men and women initiate businesses across formal and informal sectors, engaging in high-growth and subsistence entrepreneurship within various countries and cultural contexts. Recent research also indicates that opportunity motivations are robust among entrepreneurs traditionally categorized as necessity-driven (Brush et al., 2022). Perpetuating these stereotypes risks perpetuating gender inequality in entrepreneurship by reinforcing misleading assumptions.

Notwithstanding the progress, considerable efforts are still required to champion and assist women entrepreneurs in Lebanon as they establish businesses that contribute to economic and social development for themselves, their families, and their communities. As scholars delve into the motivations behind women entrepreneurs initiating and expanding businesses, policymakers and program leaders can develop more nuanced and practical solutions to tackle the barriers to business startup and growth women face across diverse industry sectors and within various countries.

5.2. Research limitations and further research

The limitations intrinsic to this study primarily arise from the contextual specificity of attributes displayed by the Lebanese women entrepreneurs interviewed and the challenges associated with making inductive generalizations from qualitative data collected in the field, as underscored by Fischer and Guzel (2023) and Levitt (2021). Despite these limitations, it is crucial to emphasize that this methodological approach constitutes a constructive response to identified research gaps in the examination of entrepreneurship within specific contexts, especially in non-Western, non-Anglo-Saxon settings, as highlighted by Corpuz and Augoustinos (2020) and Hennart and Sutherland (2022). However, it is essential to recognize that, akin to many analogous studies grounded in inductive, qualitative inquiry, our comprehension of entrepreneurship as a gendered activity is restricted, especially in Lebanon, primarily due to the scarcity of relevant research evidence beyond the conventional male normative framework, as articulated by Panteli and Urquhart (2022). To address these limitations, future research should concentrate on accumulating additional evidence from emerging economies, such as Lebanon, to validate and elucidate this study's nuances (i.e. emic themes) and outcomes. Furthermore, an opportunity exists to formulate a comprehensive model featuring testable propositions that underscore the intricate interconnections between women's entrepreneurial pursuits, the specific attributes of the entrepreneurial entities involved, and the macro, meso, and micro dimensions of the social constructs that shape their entrepreneurial progress.

Additionally, it is imperative to recognize access-related issues as inherent limitations in this study, given the reliance on snowball sampling, contingent upon the networks of interviewees in Lebanon. Nevertheless, it is essential to underscore those disparities and the promotion of gender equality in values and attitudes that constitute an integral facet of research endeavors aimed at conceptualizing the leadership exhibited by Lebanese women in entrepreneurship. In this regard, the insights gleaned from this study contribute substantially to the body of knowledge concerning Lebanese women entrepreneur leaders and catalyze the exploration of novel research avenues from the perspective of women, particularly regarding perceptions and experiences of leadership dynamically influenced by the intricate interplay of individual and contextual factors shaped by female entrepreneurs' gender in Lebanon.

5.3. Implication to theory and entrepreneurial research

This study significantly contributes to women's entrepreneurship, particularly within the Lebanese context. By employing Stewart's (1982) Demand-Constraint-Choice (DCC) framework, it intricately analyzes Lebanese women entrepreneurs' multifaceted challenges and opportunities, including their drivers, motivations, and resilience. It offers deep empirical insights into specific socio-economic hurdles such as limited access to financial resources, prevailing gender biases, and cultural stereotypes. Despite these barriers, Lebanese women display remarkable adaptability and resilience, using their social networks innovatively to navigate and succeed in their entrepreneurial endeavors.

The findings enrich our understanding of these women entrepreneurs' unique leadership roles. Highlighting the intersection of gender, cultural norms, and entrepreneurship, the study reveals how Lebanese women entrepreneurs exhibit strong leadership qualities even in challenging circumstances, qualities that are distinct and intriguing. This adds a nuanced layer to our understanding of leadership within the Lebanese entrepreneurial ecosystem, enhancing theoretical discussions on gender and entrepreneurship.

This research has profound theoretical implications. It enhances gender and entrepreneurship theory by applying the DCC framework. It offers a structured approach to examining how gender influences entrepreneurial activity in specific cultural and economic contexts like Lebanon. The insights gained are crucial for policymakers, investors, and educators, pointing to the need for targeted policy interventions, broader access to financial resources, and educational programs to support women's entrepreneurship more effectively.

Overall, this study advances theoretical understanding and provides practical insights that can help support and empower women entrepreneurs in Lebanon and similar environments. It underscores the importance of supportive policies and educational frameworks that recognize and address the unique

challenges faced by women, aiming to foster more inclusive economic growth and innovation. These insights offer hope, suggesting that women's entrepreneurship can thrive and contribute significantly to economic development with the proper support.

5.4. Conclusions and recommendations

The results highlight that the motivations of female entrepreneurs in Lebanon significantly diverge from those typically emphasized in the literature on female entrepreneurship in advanced economies. [Table 2](#) encapsulates the critical findings and dimensions of role demands, constraints, choices, and beliefs. The empirical evidence underscores the significance of the context in comprehending Lebanese women's entrepreneurial leadership. The outcomes of this study suggest that female leaders within Lebanese entrepreneurial enterprises perceive the fundamental role of leaders to revolve around value generation, enhancing well-being, and fostering benefits for a diverse set of stakeholders, including employees, local communities, and the organization. Moreover, women's adept navigation of the dynamic and unpredictable Lebanese business landscape is also pivotal in ensuring the firm's prosperity.

Furthermore, female entrepreneurs in Lebanon consider generating outcomes that align with the interests of various stakeholders and the broader society to be a fundamental aspect and requirement of their leadership responsibilities. They emphasize the importance of financial and non-financial gains and the sustainability of results derived from their entrepreneurial endeavors. The conclusions drawn from this study highlight that Lebanese women entrepreneurs perceive the effectiveness of their leadership as a contribution to both the profitability and well-being of their collaborative network, encompassing leaders' and other participants' backgrounds, entrepreneurial objectives, broader context, and business and political environment (Bastian et al., 2020; Eilertsen, 2023). Therefore, these findings stimulate further research and complement the DCC model, providing insights into the unique dynamics of female entrepreneurial leadership in the Lebanese context.

The findings of this study have led to several key policy recommendations aimed at advancing women's entrepreneurship in Lebanon, as supported by existing research. First, it is crucial to advocate for policy reforms that encourage governmental and institutional stakeholders to develop and implement strategies addressing the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, thus promoting gender-inclusive regulations and support mechanisms (Brush et al., 2022; El-Jardali et al., 2020). Additionally, there is a need to facilitate greater access to financial resources for Lebanese women entrepreneurs through dedicated funding programs, financial literacy initiatives, and partnerships with financial institutions to bridge gender-based financial disparities (Shamieh & Gergess, 2024).

Comprehensive capacity-building programs and training tailored to the needs of women entrepreneurs have significant potential benefits. These programs should include leadership skills, business management, and technology adoption (Humphries, 2020). Establishing networking platforms and mentorship programs will also play a vital role in fostering connections among women entrepreneurs, providing opportunities for knowledge exchange, skill development, and mutual support (Carter et al., 2020).

Table 2. Summary of findings.

Items descriptors	Descriptors
Credence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation • Value creation for business, stakeholders, and society • Welfare, prosperity, and happiness
Demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business results, both financial and non-financial • Sustainability and resilience • Self-discovery and self-fulfillment
Constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of experience and mental models • Lack of shared discernment • Family and business commitments • Inflexible sociocultural structures • Resource scarcity, both human and financial • Government bureaucracy
Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-improvement alternatives • Cooperation • Adaptive personal conduct • Professional/Career advancement

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Encouraging technology adoption and enhancing digital literacy are crucial for enabling women entrepreneurs in Lebanon to leverage digital tools for business growth and market expansion (Foss et al., 2021; Kizgin et al., 2020). Another critical step is advocating for educational reforms that promote gender-inclusive curricula and emphasize entrepreneurship as a viable career path for women while nurturing an environment encouraging girls to pursue STEM-related fields (Wu, 2024).

Support for work-life balance through developing workplace policies that recognize the multiple roles women often play is also essential. Moreover, establishing mechanisms for regularly measuring and addressing gender gaps and disparities in entrepreneurship will support focused research and data collection on women's experiences in the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Lebanon (Brush, Carter, et al., 2020; Collica-Cox & Schulz, 2023).

Lastly, fostering collaborations between government bodies and civil society organizations can enhance the effectiveness of initiatives supporting women's entrepreneurship, ensuring a collaborative and holistic approach (Brush, Carter, et al., 2020; Lerner et al., 2021). Implementing awareness campaigns to challenge gender norms and stereotypes about entrepreneurship is critical to fostering a cultural shift and promoting equal opportunities and recognition for women entrepreneurs (Gupta et al., 2019a; Gupta et al., 2019b; Gupta et al., 2019c).

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Author contributions

Marcus Goncalves is the leading and corresponding author responsible for the conception, design, literature review, research methodology, instrumentation, selection of the analysis framework, data analysis, conclusions, and recommendations of this research. He is also responsible for the final approval of the version to be published. Nolla Haidar is responsible for the country-related literature review, primary data collection through semi-structured interviews in-country or remotely via Zoom, MS Teams, or Google Meets, data analysis, conclusions, and recommendations. Elif Celik is responsible for the logistics of setting up the interviews, ascertaining that informed consent was distributed and explained, permission granted by prospective interviewees' signatures, substantial data preparation, cleaning, checking, and analysis, as well as paper editing and reference checking.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

Under the Taylor & Francis '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 author. Please note that the digital recordings of the interviews are not available to protect the 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 research 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 best, how they respond to demands (and challenges), the constraints they face, and how they make their choices and decisions.

These interview questions are 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, ability to inspire and motivate their teams, and 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 Role, and 5. Industry their business is in.

1. How do you set a vision and goals for your business that align with your personal, business, and customer demand?
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 about 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 demand?
11. How do you make a choice 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 which to engage in or overcome? What lessons can be learned from that experience?
14. Can you describe a time 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 daily demands from various actors, the constraints you typically have in addressing such demands, and how you choose what to engage in and execute? In other words, how do you decide what to focus on?