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Women Entrepreneurs and the Power of Networks: Mitigating Challenges in Business Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the challenges unique to women entrepreneurs and the role of their networks in overcoming these obstacles, based on semi-structured interviews with female entrepreneurs in Poland, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. The identified gender-specific barriers to women entrepreneurship include limited access to financial resources, insufficient prior knowledge or experience, difficulties in achieving work-life balance, gender- and industry-specific biases, fear of failure, lack of self-efficacy, and inadequate institutional support. The findings indicate that female entrepreneurs use both strong and weak connections within their personal and business networks to address these hindrances. The research also underscores the dual function of networks as both resource suppliers and sources of emotional resilience, aiding women entrepreneurs in overcoming gender limitations and bolstering their entrepreneurial identities. These observations contribute to the existing body of literature by showing that women strategically use various kinds of networking during different phases of venture development and in distinct situations, therefore contesting the prevailing notions regarding the constraints of women's networks.

Keywords: women entrepreneurship; entrepreneurial networks; gender-specific barriers; semi-structured interviews; cross-national comparison

Abstrakt

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie wyzwań charakterystycznych dla kobiet przedsiębiorczyń oraz roli ich sieci kontaktów w przezwyciężaniu wspomnianych wyzwań, na podstawie półustrukturyzowanych wywiadów przeprowadzonych z kobietami prowadzącymi działalność gospodarczą w Polsce, na Ukrainie i w Wielkiej Brytanii. Zidentyfikowane bariery związane z płcią, utrudniające kobietom prowadzenie działalności gospodarczej, obejmują ograniczony dostęp do zasobów finansowych, niewystarczającą wiedzę lub niewystarczające doświadczenie, trudności w godzeniu życia zawodowego z prywatnym, uprzedzenia związane z płcią i branżą, lęk przed porażką, brak poczucia własnej skuteczności oraz zbyt niskie wsparcie instytucjonalne. Wyniki badań wskazują, że kobiety przedsiębiorczynie wykorzystują zarówno silne, jak i słabe powiązania w ramach swoich sieci kontaktów osobistych i zawodowych, aby przezwyciężać istniejące przeszkody. Badanie podkreśla również podwójną rolę odgrywaną przez wspomniane sieci – rolę dostawcy zasobów i źródła odporności emocjonalnej, pomagającego kobietom przedsiębiorczyniom przezwyciężać ograniczenia związane z płcią i wzmacniającego ich tożsamość przedsiębiorczą. Uzyskane obserwacje stanowią istotny wkład do literatury przedmiotu, pokazując, że kobiety korzystają w strategiczny sposób z różnych form sieci kontaktów na różnych etapach rozwoju działalności i w różnych sytuacjach, kwestionując tym samym powszechne panujące przekonania na temat ograniczeń przypisywanych kobiecym sieciom kontaktów.

Słowa kluczowe: przedsiębiorczość kobiet; sieci przedsiębiorcze; bariery związane z płcią; wywiady półustrukturyzowane; analiza porównawcza między krajami

1. Introduction

Dating back to the April of 2007, The Economist released an article titled “Womenomics Revisited”, offering a conclusion that “men govern the world’s economies, but it may be up to women to rescue them” (The Economist, 2007; Hanson, 2009). And, indeed, numerous researchers perceive women entrepreneurship as a nascent and rapidly flourishing phenomenon of the century, as women not only have become a significant part of the workforce, but they also care for their families at the same time. Based on Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2023/24 Women’s Entrepreneurship Report 2024, the average startup activity rate among women entrepreneurs accounted for 10.4%, representing one in three high-growth entrepreneurs worldwide. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2023/24 Women’s Entrepreneurship Report 2024, over 50% of women entrepreneurs are involved in the wholesale/retail sector and government and social services industries, whilst the information and communications technology sector has the lowest representation of women entrepreneurs.

According to existing scientific literature, nowadays women have the opportunity to get significantly involved in entrepreneurial endeavours and have the potential to play an important role in economic and innovation development as well as entrepreneurial diversity (GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor), 2022) – not only by creating new employment opportunities, but also by counteracting social exclusion and poverty (Langowitz & Minniti, 2007; Rae, 2015), and therefore contribute to the growth of gross domestic product. Nevertheless, the number of women opting for a career in business in comparison with men is considerably lower (Elam et al., 2019; Goel & Madan, 2019), and the situation becomes more evident in the domain of national development (Coduras & Autio, 2013; Abdelwahid & Kaoud, 2022), influence of gender stereotypes (Rubio-Bañón & Esteban-Lloret, 2016), and other socio-cultural factors that limit women’s entrepreneurial growth (Mashapure et al., 2022).

One of the most important aspects of women’s entrepreneurship is networking, which substantially contributes to women’s success and resilience. The social networks of women entrepreneurs are a blend of personal and professional ties, playing a crucial role in providing access to essential knowledge, valuable resources, and emotional support, while also fostering the long-term sustainability of their ventures (Johannisson, 1995). Nonetheless, the literature covering women’s entrepreneurship has mostly been

focused on the study of obstacles (economic, political, and social ones) (Brindley, 2005; Sharma, 2013; Tur-Porcar, Mas-Tur & Belso, 2017; Guzman & Kacperczyk, 2019; Bullough et al., 2022), whereas our article aims to fill in the literature gap by examining how women entrepreneurs overcome various challenges using the power of their social networks. The research employs a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs representing diverse professional experience as well as cultural and national backgrounds. Although no clear culture- or nation-specific differences were identified, the study revealed that women entrepreneurs across various industries rely on different types of social networks – formal and informal, personal and professional, strong and extended ties – at different stages of business development, from the nascent to the mature phase. These networks play a crucial role in addressing challenges such as limited access to finance and/or technical resources, lack of work experience, difficulties in achieving work-life balance, gender bias and stereotypes challenge, low self-efficacy, and insufficient institutional support. The findings obtained demonstrate that both strong and weak ties are essential for women entrepreneurs throughout the growth of their ventures.

2. The Nature of Women's Entrepreneurship

A pioneer of entrepreneurial education and research, Jeffrey Timmons, stated that entrepreneurship entails “creating and building something of value from practically nothing” (Timmons, 1989), while Harvard professor Howard Stevenson defined it as “seizing an opportunity and pursuing it regardless of the resources currently controlled” (Stevenson, 1987). The essence of entrepreneurship is predominantly explained through the identification of opportunities, risk-taking, innovation, and the pursuit of change by entrepreneurs who continuously seek and respond to it (Drucker, 1985). The phenomenon of women's entrepreneurship is grounded in the notion that women take the initiative to organise and manage the resources required to start and sustain a business, while simultaneously developing a new vision for the enterprise (Coughlin & Thomas, 2002). Scholars further define women's entrepreneurship as the process of founding, operating, and owning a business that contributes to women's economic empowerment (Coughlin & Thomas, 2002; Abdelwahid & Kaoud, 2022). Today, female entrepreneurs are increasingly recognised as

skilled managers and decision-makers who are willing to take risks in exchange for financial gain (Coughlin & Thomas, 2002; Oridi et al., 2022). According to Women on Board Progress Report 2024 (Milhomem and Porter, 2025), women currently represent approximately 27% of directors across all economic sectors.

The motives for starting a new venture vary considerably between men and women. Recent findings indicate that women most frequently cite employment shortages, the desire to make a difference, and the need for flexible hours as primary motivations for establishing a business (Langowitz & Minniti, 2007; Zou, 2015). Moreover, research highlights that women often perceive entrepreneurship as a way to achieve work-life balance (Sullivan & Meek, 2012), (Koellinger et al., 2013), gain financial independence (Coughlin and Thomas, 2002), and secure economic benefits (Oridi et al., 2022). Women entrepreneurs also emphasise the pursuit of challenge, autonomy in business, and the desire to overcome personal tragedy or gender-based discrimination (Langowitz & Minniti, 2007). Additional motives include social recognition, empowerment. And opportunities to build self-confidence, as well as access to institutional assistance and social network support (Sullivan & Meek, 2012). Conversely, men generally attach less importance to these factors when considering embarking on an entrepreneurial path (Sullivan and Meek, 2012). Their main motivation for starting a company is the aspiration to “build great wealth or very high income” (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2024/2025 Global Report: Entrepreneurship Reality Check, 2025). Moreover, male entrepreneurs are often driven by identified market needs, whereas female entrepreneurs are motivated by higher expectations regarding the personal and social benefits they can achieve through their entrepreneurial endeavours (Sullivan & Meek, 2012).

Despite being one of the fastest-growing entrepreneurial groups, female entrepreneurs still constitute a minority, outnumbered by men among established business owners (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2024/2025 Global Report: Entrepreneurship Reality Check, 2025). This disparity is mainly attributed to lower risk tolerance among women (Brindley, 2005; Sullivan & Meek, 2012; Dawson & Henley, 2015; Gerke et al., 2023). Studies show that women entrepreneurs often experience fear of failure, low confidence in their abilities and entrepreneurial skills, and limited support from social networks. Gender differences and marital status also exert a significant influence on

women's entrepreneurial behaviour. Compared to men, women who start a business while single, tend to display weaker entrepreneurial ambitions due to family responsibilities traditionally assigned to them (Byrne et al., 2016). However, other studies suggest that married women are more likely to become entrepreneurs thanks to the financial and emotional support they receive (Ahmetaj et al., 2023). At the same time, single mothers are often found to be more motivated to succeed as entrepreneurs for the sake of their children and family stability (Ismail et al., 2016).

As noted by (Brindley, 2005), individuals often select a business venture based on their prior job experience in order to mitigate the risks associated with entering unfamiliar territory. Nonetheless, women and men differ in how they identify entrepreneurial opportunities. Men typically use financial assets to either acquire existing businesses or enter markets with unmet demands, while women tend to rely on their previous industry experience to identify customer needs that are not yet adequately addressed (Sullivan & Meek, 2012).

Both men and women rely heavily on their networks to exchange ideas and engage in activities that facilitate the identification of business opportunities. However, women tend to depend more on their family and social networks for support and assistance in identifying entrepreneurial opportunities than men (Sullivan & Meek, 2012). These networks often consist of trusted individuals who have previously provided emotional or material support. Numerous studies have shown that women's strong orientation towards interpersonal relationships often determines the sectors in which they operate. Consequently, the majority of women-owned businesses are operated in the service, hospitality, and retail industries (Coughlin & Thomas, 2002; Carranza et al., 2018; Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2023/24 Women's Entrepreneurship Report, 2024).

Overall, the motives driving women's entrepreneurship are shaped by a combination of push and pull factors (Sharma, 2013; Riaheen Farzana, 2018; Bikorimana & Nziku, 2023). Push factors refer to pressing needs or unfavourable circumstances that compel (push) women to consider entrepreneurship as a viable option – such as insufficient family income, low wages, limited employment opportunities, or the need for flexible working hours. Pull factors, on the other hand, denote favourable conditions that attract women to entrepreneurship, reflecting their aspirations for personal fulfilment and professional growth.

Nonetheless, the experience of women entrepreneurs differs significantly across urban and rural contexts, as well as across industries and countries. Previous research identifies a wide range of barriers commonly faced by women entrepreneurs, including limited access to finance, societal prejudices and stereotypes in men-dominated cultures, educational disparities, cultural and religious influences, family norms and ties, work-life conflict, lack of access to technology, social networks, and low self-confidence (Cowling & Taylor, 2001; Brindley, 2005; Sharma, 2013; Ratten et al., 2017). In addition, Sharma (2013) identifies several practical obstacles such as inadequate access to raw materials, exploitation by intermediaries, legal complexities, intense competition, and limited mobility. Studies further indicate that a substantial proportion of women run small-scale businesses (Brindley, 2005; Robichaud et al., 2015) marked by low employee count, high production costs, and modest turnover. Women are also more likely than men to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities in sectors with lower growth potential, partly due to lower expectations of success in high-performance industries (Sullivan and Meek, 2012). This tendency often reinforces sceptical perceptions portraying female entrepreneurs as less competent business owners (Bullough et al., 2022).

However, multiple studies prove that one of the most significant obstacle faced by women entrepreneurs involves **access to financial resources** (Brindley, 2005; Robichaud et al., 2015). Without adequate funding, women are unable to develop innovative products and services, create employment, or plan for business expansion. This challenge is most evident in difficulties obtaining bank loans or investment capital (Bullough et al., 2022). Guzman and Kacperczyk (2019) highlight a pronounced gender gap in external financing: women are 63% less likely than men to secure venture capital funding. According to Langowitz and Minniti (2007) and Sullivan and Meek (2012), personal savings remain the primary source of capital for most female entrepreneurs, followed by contributions from family and friends. Only a small proportion of women obtain venture capital or private equity, which consequently limits the growth potential of their businesses (Koellinger et al., 2013).

Due to **limited managerial experience and business knowledge**, women entrepreneurs are also underrepresented in high-value sectors such as information and communications technology (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2023/24 Women's Entrepreneurship Report, 2024). A lack of formal business education can further impede success, as individuals who perform well

in employment roles may not necessarily possess the competencies required for entrepreneurship (Brindley, 2005).

Another major challenge concerns maintaining a healthy **work-life balance**. Women are often perceived as emotionally oriented and family-centred (Klyver, 2011), which leads to expectations that they fulfil dual roles (Sharma, 2013; Bullough et al., 2022) – managing both household responsibilities and business operations. As a result, female entrepreneurs tend to experience higher stress levels than men, as family obligations frequently reduce the time and motivation available for professional activities (Shelton, 2006). In addition to these pressures, women entrepreneurs face persistent **societal biases and stereotypes** that undermine perceptions of their leadership and decision-making abilities (Collerette & Aubry, 1990). (Bullough et al., 2022) note that women frequently encounter prejudice arising from assumptions regarding their leadership styles and competence. Because societal expectations of femininity often conflict with traits traditionally associated with effective leadership, women are perceived less favourably than men in managerial contexts.

Fear of failure is another recurring challenge observed across groups of entrepreneurs (Sharma, 2013; Mashapure et al., 2022). Entrepreneurship is inherently risky, involving market volatility, potential business failure, and management uncertainty. However, research suggests that women experience greater anxiety related to failure than men (Brindley, 2005), and that cultural factors intensify fears of bankruptcy and self-doubt (Mashapure et al., 2022). As a result, this apprehension may discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurial ventures or expanding their existing businesses. Failure can often stem from inadequate market knowledge, limited accounting and marketing skills, or challenges in recruitment and employee retention – issues further compounded when staff demand salary increases (Cardella et al., 2020). Another issue to consider at this point, one closely related to fear of failure, is **self-efficacy**, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to achieve specific goals in given circumstances (Madawala et al., 2023). In the entrepreneurial context, self-efficacy encompasses the confidence to identify opportunities, establish a business, and persevere towards success (Gerke et al., 2023).

Another major concern highlighted in the literature is **the lack of institutional support** and bureaucratic efficiency (Johannisson, 1995; Sharma, 2013). This is closely followed by issues such as policy instability, corruption, and

burdensome tax regulations, which further hinder entrepreneurial development. Consequently, fostering entrepreneurship – especially among women – requires not only individual initiative, but also consistent governmental support to create an enabling and equitable business environment.

3. Entrepreneurial Networks

According to Barnes, a network may be defined as a set of points (individuals or organisations) connected by lines representing the relationships between them (Shulman, 1997). Similarly, Nelson (1989) described networks as ties among individuals, while Nohria and Eccles (1992) characterised them as structures of social bonds linking people within a social framework. Both Johannisson and Mønsted (1997) and Gudkova (2008) stress that entrepreneurial networks are egocentric – centred on the entrepreneur, who maintains both personal and business relationships. (Newman, 2003) defines an egocentric network as one in which an individual acts as the “ego” (the focal point) surrounded by an interconnected group of others. Gudkova (2008) distinguishes three zones within such a network: the private, effective, and extended spheres. The private sphere consists of close family members and friends; the effective sphere includes acquaintances with weaker ties and fewer mutual expectations; and the extended sphere involves individuals with whom the entrepreneur has no direct relationship. In this sense, the entrepreneur functions as the nucleus of an egocentric web of diverse personal and professional ties.

Networks are generally characterised by size and density. Hislop (2005) defines network size as the number of individuals engaged within it, while Wojtowicz et al. (2015) interpret it as the number of distinct people with whom an entrepreneur exchanges information. A larger network increases access to varied information and resources, enhancing opportunities for business growth. However, as Gudkova (2008) notes, a greater number of ties does not necessarily translate into additional resources. Furthermore, as networks expand, individuals tend to maintain weaker or less frequent contact with many members ((Hislop, 2005).

Network density refers to the relationship between the total number of possible connections and the number that actually exist (Gudkova, 2008). Hislop (2005), in turn, defines it as the average strength of ties within a network, reflecting the intensity of interaction between its members. Burt (Swedberg,

2000) distinguished between compact and dispersed networks. Compact networks are characterised by redundant connections and repetitive information flows, whereas dispersed networks consist of non-redundant links that facilitate the exchange of novel and diverse information (Gudkova, 2008).

Johannisson and Mønsted (1997) further differentiate between business and personal ties. Business relationships are primarily strategic, centred on professional exchanges of goods, services, or knowledge, while personal ties arise from trust-based, supportive relationships that often originate within families or friendships. Both types of connections provide entrepreneurs with vital resources, flexibility, and guidance, while reducing costs and risk (Gudkova, 2008).

Birley (1985) distinguished between formal and informal networks in entrepreneurial contexts. Formal networks involve structured interactions with institutions such as government agencies, financial bodies, lawyers, real estate professionals, and trade associations. Informal networks, by contrast, are based on personal ties with relatives, friends, and business acquaintances. Wojtowicz et al. (2015) observed that entrepreneurs rely more heavily on informal interactions, particularly during the early stages of business development, as these provide essential information and practical support (Brush et al., 2002). Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez and Sánchez-García (2020) similarly found that informal networks play the most influential role in the initial phases of women's entrepreneurship. Clements (2004) additionally classified networks as direct, where individuals are connected to each other, and indirect, where connections are mediated through intermediaries.

The seminal theory proposed by Granovetter (1973) distinguishes between strong and weak ties within personal networks. The strength of a tie depends on factors such as time spent together, emotional closeness, intimacy, and reciprocity. Strong ties typically exist among family and close friends, whereas weak ties occur in relationships with colleagues or acquaintances. Paradoxically, weak ties are often more valuable to entrepreneurs because they bridge different social groups and open access to new information and opportunities. Such connections enable entrepreneurs to enter new environments, establish new relationships, and expand their business reach.

Networking is now widely recognised as a critical entrepreneurial competence essential for identifying opportunities and acquiring strategic resources necessary for business growth. Gudkova (2008) identified nine key benefits of

personal networks, including access to knowledge and information, financial and material resources, client acquisition, opportunity recognition, enhanced self-confidence, motivation, and emotional support. Entrepreneurs commonly begin their ventures by leveraging their immediate private networks (Brush et al., 2002). In women's entrepreneurship, there is often a stronger emphasis on building a solid base of social support before taking action (Brindley, 2005). Entrepreneurs also use their networks to attract initial clients through existing contacts or newly established customer relationships. Over time, networks become sources of sector-specific expertise, financial support, and physical resources (Gudkova, 2008). At later stages of development, networks serve as channels for securing orders, reinforcing self-efficacy, and providing emotional support (Wojtowicz et al., 2015).

Research consistently shows gender-based differences in the composition and function of entrepreneurial networks. Women tend to be motivated by social goals, while men prioritise economic and material objectives (Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez and Sánchez-García, 2020). Women's networks are often characterised by stronger emotional connections and include a higher proportion of family members (Moore, 1990; Klyver, 2011), whereas men's networks are typically built around shared professional or leisure activities. Studies by Klyver and Terjesen (2007) show that despite gender differences in pre-venture labour market experience, men and women activate similar types of networks during successive stages of venture development. Later studies by Klyver (2011) and Malewicki, and Leitch (2011) indicate that women's networks are denser and more locally embedded, promoting collaboration but potentially limiting access to new markets or innovative information. Conversely, men's networks are broader and more diverse, allowing for greater exposure to unique sales opportunities (Webb et al., 2019).

Robichaud, Cachon, and McGraw (2015) reported that women experience lower success rates than men in establishing strong ties with other entrepreneurs, prospective stakeholders, and financial advisors, as they tend to pursue broader, relationship-oriented networks extending beyond purely business purposes. However, Klyver and Terjesen (2007) argued that women who adopt more "male-oriented" networking patterns – focused on resource acquisition – tend to be more successful in their business.

It is certain that networking plays an essential role in mitigating gender-based constraints faced by women in entrepreneurship by facilitating

access to financial capital, knowledge, and both tangible and intangible assets – including prospects (Bullough et al., 2022). It also helps identify emerging market segments, new product opportunities, and alternative distribution channels. Such connections act as bridges to distant clients and sources of valuable information. Male entrepreneurs often have greater access to financial, material, and technological resources, enabling them to implement more aggressive marketing strategies (Malewicki, and (Folker) Leitch, 2011).

Apart from that, men's network positions and behaviours tend to accelerate business growth (Klyver, 2011). Women also tend to engage less in self-promotion, which might potentially hinder their access to crucial resources. From a behavioural perspective, it may appear that men tend to exhibit higher levels of aggression and self-interest in circumstances that lack clarity or are open to interpretation. This tendency enables them to further their utilitarian objectives and seek assistance in their social networks as well as emotional support from their spouses (Webb et al., 2019). By contrast, according to Hampton, Cooper, and McGowan (2009), women's networking initiatives often help alleviate feelings of isolation, strengthen emotional well-being, and build reputation during the early stages of entrepreneurship.

Klyver (2011) noted that men and women receive emotional support equally often, though men are less inclined to provide it. Women's networks contain a higher share of female contacts, and communication within them tends to occur primarily among women. Moreover, women's networks typically include family members who are not business partners, whereas men's networks consist mostly of co-workers. Brush et al. (2002) observed that women tend to perceive business, family, community, and society as interconnected, rather than treating business as a separate economic entity. Consequently, women value emotional relationships more than men and see networking as integrated with broader aspects of life rather than confined to the rational, profit-driven sphere (Malewicki, and (Folker) Leitch, 2011).

This relational approach enables women to offset financial and practical constraints by nurturing staff, building trust, and developing shared visions with suppliers and stakeholders. Through relationship-based management and collaborative networking, women enhance their ability to access funding and strengthen long-term business performance.

According to Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez, and Sánchez-García (2020), women entrepreneurs often receive substantial support from spouses, children, relatives, and friends. Such personal networks play a crucial role when institutional assistance is limited – offering both financial backing at the start-up stage and emotional support later, when women must balance family obligations with career aspirations. Family support generally improves business performance, though family-related difficulties can negatively affect it (Tur-Porcar, Mas-Tur and Belso, 2017).

4. Research Methodology

The objective of this study is to examine how women entrepreneurs use their network to overcome obstacles encountered in their entrepreneurial pursuits. Based on a review of the relevant literature, the study addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs?

Research Question 2: How do networks help to mitigate these challenges?

4.1. Research Design

To address the research questions, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary research method, defined as “a set of predetermined open-ended questions” (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). According to Qu and Dumay (2011) and Wilson (2014), the widespread use of semi-structured interviews stems from their advantages, such as flexibility, accessibility, comprehensibility, and the ability to reveal significant – and often concealed – aspects of human and organisational behaviour. This method enables interviewees to express their thoughts and use language in their own unique way (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006), while also allowing the interviewer to adjust the tone, pace, and sequence of questions in order to elicit the most comprehensive responses. Therefore, collecting empirical data through semi-structured interviews offers considerable benefits, particularly when exploring a sensitive topic such as networking.

4.2. Data Collection

The empirical for this study were gathered from interviews conducted with women entrepreneurs who had been operating their own businesses for at least two years. Two primary groups of respondents were included in the study framework: the first comprised entrepreneurs operating in Poland, and the second – entrepreneurs from Ukraine. In addition, one interview was conducted with a woman entrepreneur based in the United Kingdom. The purpose of these interviews was to analyse whether national business practices and cultural backgrounds affect the use of entrepreneurial networks in addressing business-related challenges. A brief description of each interviewee is presented below:

WB – a woman entrepreneur who emigrated to Poland from Belarus nearly 5 years ago and established a furniture production and assembly business without prior expertise in the field. The company operates in the Polish market and has recently expanded its facilities in Warsaw.

RK – a women entrepreneur with previous industry expertise, who, together with a Ukrainian partner (also a woman), established a beauty salon 3 years ago. The company operates in the Polish beauty market in Warsaw.

LO – a woman entrepreneur from Ukraine, owner of a stationery business founded 22 years ago. Although she possessed relevant experience, a male partner was involved during the initial phase. Ownership was later fully transferred to her. The company is based in Kyiv and serves the Ukrainian market.

CM – a woman entrepreneur from Ukraine who, together with a female partner, emigrated to Poland 3 years ago because of the war in Ukraine. With over 3 years of experience in the beauty industry, they have established 5 beauty salons in Poland and 1 beauty salon in the United Arab Emirates.

AQ – a woman entrepreneur from Ukraine, owner of a dermatology clinic, with over 10 years of experience in the field. The clinic has been operating in Kyiv since 2020 and has recently expended its services to include gynaecology, gastroenterology, and body aesthetics.

SJ – a woman entrepreneur who emigrated to Poland from Belarus 2 years ago and started a flower business with no prior experience in the field. The company operates in major shopping centres in Warsaw.

RL – a woman entrepreneur from Ireland, running a recruiting firm specialising in market research in the United Kingdom. Before starting her business, she worked as a recruiter. The company operates in the British market, but also works with and for international clients.

The interviews were conducted online via MS Teams and Zoom in February and March 2024, with an average duration of 55 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed, and the data were supplemented with participant observations and email correspondence. An inductive coding scheme was applied to code and summarise the transcribed interviews.

4.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative data were initially analysed using open coding techniques (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to categorise the primary findings and insights into open codes derived from the participants' experiences relevant to the scope of this research. Subsequently, axial coding, defined as “a process of identifying relationships among open codes” (Simmons, N., 2017), was applied to organise the data into key categories. These categories highlighted the critical ways in which women entrepreneurs leveraged their networks to address challenges related to: the acquisition of financial resources (Brindley, 2005; Robichaud et al., 2015; Guzman & Kacperczyk, 2019; Bullough et al., 2022); insufficient knowledge or experience (GEM, 2022; Brindley, 2005); work-life balance (Shelton, 2006; Klyver, 2011; Sharma, 2013; Bullough et al., 2022), societal biases and stereotypes (Collerette & Aubry, 1990; Bullough et al., 2022); fear of failure as well as difficulties arising from bureaucratic complexities, policy instability, and tax regulations and liabilities (Johannisson, 1995; Sharma, 2013).

5. Findings

This section outlines the results of the analysis of the data collected through seven semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs. It focuses on the main obstacles faced by female entrepreneurs and examines the role of networks in overcoming these challenges. The following categories of chal-

lenges will be discussed: limited access to financial resources; lack of knowledge or work experience; maintaining work-life balance; societal biases and gender stereotypes; fear of failure and lack of self-efficacy; lack of institutional support.

5.1. Limited Access to Financial Resources

The interview findings indicate that women entrepreneurs draw on both strong and weak ties to secure financial resources at different stages of venture development. A private and compact network – typically composed of close family members – is often the backbone of a business in its nascent phase, particularly when raising initial investments across various industries:

“That time I had a business partner [a husband] who financed my business.”
(LO)

“Together with my husband, we invested all our money in my clinic.”
(AQ)

“My relatives gave me money to start my business. My father-in-law even sold the garage for \$8,000 and gave that money to me to open my business.”
(AQ)

When the early stages of operation require specialised and costly machinery or equipment, female entrepreneurs may also rely on their weak or informal ties. In the case of the dermatology clinic owner, this challenge was addressed by obtaining information through an effective network that enabled her to establish an indirect relationship with an equipment provider:

“One of my acquaintances said, ‘I know someone who rents out equipment’”
(AQ)

As businesses grow and financial needs intensify, women entrepreneurs frequently depend on strong family ties to help secure bank loans or to gain introductions to financial institutions – thereby forming indirect weak ties

that facilitate access to credit. Personal connections also assist in arranging alternative financing options, such as equipment leasing, which supports business scaling:

“My business partner [a husband] provided me with a contact to a bank.”
(LO)

“No one wanted to give us a loan at first, because we were nobody, but a year later, with the organizational help of my husband, my business got a loan.”
(AQ)

“My brother, who already had a certain experience related to leasing, helped to acquire the equipment needed for the manufacturing and production process.”
(WB)

Weak ties may also act as intermediaries between women entrepreneurs and external investors, even when such relationships are not family-based but stem from professional or online networks. The interviewed women entrepreneurs running a beauty salon in Warsaw shared how an indirect connection within a dispersed network led to securing an investment that enabled expansion into cosmetology and laser treatments, broadening the services beyond those offered by their initial salons:

“My partner announced on her Instagram that we were looking for an investor. A few minutes later she received a message from her follower with a proposal of a \$50,000 investment. This was the first investment that was brought to us by the business.”
(CM)

Formal business networks can also play a crucial role in accessing government financial support. For instance, the dermatology clinic owner expanded her professional network through patients who shared valuable financial information and facilitated access to grant providers:

“My patient, who is a financial director, told me about the opportunities to obtain state grants for a business. She also gave me a

contact of people who helped me in the applications to obtain 3 state grants for my clinic.”

(AQ)

5.2. Lack of Knowledge or Work Experience

Entrepreneurial networks provide crucial support for women entrepreneurs seeking to overcome gaps in their knowledge and work experience. Family and friends – forming part of a personal and informal network – often act as facilitators in identifying suppliers or potential business partners:

“Without the help of my relatives, it would be much more difficult and take much longer to find suppliers.”

(WB)

“Friends and other people I knew in the industry who had gone off to do other things made recommendations of good suppliers, and that’s what I relied on, really.”

(RL)

On the other hand, in contrast to sourcing suppliers using primarily strong ties, women entrepreneurs tend to rely on weak and extended ties when recruiting staff. The interviews revealed that participants often attend networking events, join industry industry-specific associations, and establish referral programmes to identify potential employees:

“I periodically attend different networking events. There, I talk about my company, and, among other things, I declare that I have particular vacancies open.”

(WB)

“When an employee brings someone to our company for work, he or she gets money for it. And it so happened that our employee brought one of our top managers to us, who brought our company to a new level.”

(CM)

“There’s a recruitment trade body that I joined, and by going to one of their trainings, I met somebody there who was a specialist, and that was really helpful. She’s been my accountant for the last six years.”

(RL)

Women entrepreneurs also use both weak and strong ties within their entrepreneurial networks to a new customers. While initial clients to the fact that initial customers are attracted through personal and compact networks, the customer base expands through extended business ties – such as industry-specific networking events or professional associations:

“Friends became suppliers of clients, recommending products of the business to their friends.”

(WB)

“I’m also a member of Women in Research. A couple of years ago I went on a 2-day conference, and that’s led me to join part of a network.

I’ve also got quite a lot of business out of that as well.”

(RL)

Another major advantage of networking lies in the organisational support it provides. Consistent with research findings, both strong and weak ties contribute to business setup and operations – ranging from securing premises and developing brand identity to handling administrative tasks. Private connections are particularly useful in creative or logistical aspects such as designing a logo or furnishing the business premises. On the other hand, effective and formal connections help with appointment scheduling or expansion into new locations:

“We would have invested much more, turning to the architect agency or someone else, but I have friends who supported my business by creating a logo and a name for the business.”

(RK)

“An employee in the position of administrator helped me to organize all my patients and all types of work related to the opening day.”

(AQ)

Furthermore, women entrepreneurs use their networks to acquire professional skills and business knowledge, particularly through private connections. At the same time, broader business networks assist in obtaining market insights and strategic guidance for business growth and development:

“In the initial stages of the business, I had a business partner who was responsible for the accounting part of the business.”
(LO)

“Because I don’t have accounting and financial education, my husband helps me with this.”
(AQ)

“I had a consultation with a person who helps other people establish a flower business.”
(SJ)

“For some time the development of the business stopped, we did not open any salon. We got used to the fact that every 3–4 months we have a new salon, but we didn’t open any salons because we were afraid of losing our reputation with unreliable franchisee. So we held a strategic session with a business consultant, and I can say so, we all accepted the fact that we don’t just want to be beauty salons. We want something more, something better, something cooler, something in a different niche.”
(CM)

5.3. Maintaining Work-Life Balance

Consistent with the findings, women entrepreneurs frequently experience tension their professional and personal lives. To mitigate this imbalance, they rely on both private and compact networks, especially family and friends, who provide emotional and practical support:

“My mom helps with kids while I am at work.”
(SJ)

“If something goes wrong and you are tired, just say hi to them [friends], pour a glass of wine and go out together, talk, discuss something.”
(RK)

Another example of a strategy for achieving and maintaining work-life balance is network assistance with business-related tasks, either through expert guidance from strong personal connections or through delegation of some responsibilities within formal business networks:

“My husband have quite a wide experience in working in a big structure with different businesses and sometimes his vision (of business) helps me in my business.”
(LO)

“Now I delegate part of the work to my subordinates. Now I don’t work five or six days a week. I work four days a week.”
(AQ)

5.4. Societal Biases and Gender Stereotypes

The interviews revealed that many women entrepreneurs encountered societal prejudices and preconceived gender stereotypes in their earlier employment experiences, and that entrepreneurship provided them with a sense of independence and relief from these constraints. Still, when confronted with gender-related biases in their entrepreneurial activities, participants often relied on their compact and private networks for emotional and moral support:

“In my experience, if we talk about some gender prejudices, it was probably more at work, where I was, employed in a large corporation, where the preference was given to the man in charge.”
(WK)

“I set up my own company because I wanted to create a positive environment and did not want to deal with gender biases from being employed by a man.”
(RL)

“When one supplier came to me and said that he was going to take the equipment back in three days because ‘Well, that says it all’, it was my husband who supported me emotionally.”

(AQ)

Interestingly, in addition to gender bias, women entrepreneurs also face prejudice related to the industries they operate in. Hence, in order to overcome such attitudes, they rely on formal business connections and employee collaboration:

“Our business is faced with not just prejudices on the part of gender but with prejudices on the part of the niche – that salon business is a toy, right? A dollhouse. If I build a dollhouse, I will have fun. But in fact, our goal, our mission, is to change the impression of this industry.”

(CM)

“So, these are people [employees] who, at some point, started doing as much as we do. These are people who cannot sleep at night, thinking about what else we could do.”

(CM)

5.5. Fear of Failure and Lack of Self-Efficacy

It appears that the process of starting and managing a business is often accompanied by fear of failure and lack of self-efficacy, which significantly influence women’s entrepreneurial journeys. Both personal and formal networks play a vital role in strengthening their confidence – not only by providing the necessary emotional support and encouragement, but also by inspiring them to pursue business ventures and persevere through uncertainty:

“Being an entrepreneur means constantly living in a fear of failure, because one day could be really good and the next day could be terrible.”

(RL)

“I had a business coach who supported me through some of the changes in the business.”

(RL)

“I get that [support] from my partner, I get that from my family, and also I belong to a couple of different networking groups. I’m a member of a group called the Girls Club, a group for Women in Business, and that’s really useful because there are lots of people there here sharing experience.”

(RL)

“Support is very important, as in any business. Not only in business, but in general in some goals that you set. Of course, when there are people around who support you, or at least, may be surprised by what you have in mind, and say ‘Well, why not? Everything can be done. Go ahead.’ Then you feel strong and take this task.”

(WB)

“Most likely, if it were not for her [a friend], we would not be here [in Poland].”

(CM)

5.6. Lack of Institutional Support

The interview data indicate that institutional support for women entrepreneurs remains limited, regardless of the country they operate in. To address this challenge, women rely on formal networks to obtain information on business establishment procedures, tax policies, and regulatory requirements. Additionally, private connections with individuals familiar with government processes provide practical assistance and advice:

“I had a lot of very supportive people, individuals who done it before, who I had met throughout my career, who offered me advice.”

(RL)

“We worked with a legal accounting firm, they spoke Russian, and we had ten consultations on tax policy issues. It seemed to be a little clearer, but while we really figured it all out, well, it’s been a year and a half.”

(CM)

“My partner was responsible for interactions with the government and tax policy of the company.”

(LO)

6. Discussion

This study was designed to explore the gender-specific challenges that women face in entrepreneurship and to examine how social networks enable them to mitigate these obstacles. The findings obtained prove that women are motivated to establish their own ventures by a desire to create change and achieve personal goals through business activity (Sullivan and Meek, 2012). Moreover, the interviews also revealed that the types of connections women entrepreneurs establish and utilise vary depending on industry, prior professional experience, and the stage of business growth.

First, consistent with existing research, the initial stages of a business tend to rely primarily on private connections when it comes to financing. However, when specialised and expensive equipment is required, women entrepreneurs often utilise weak ties to obtain information or referrals to equipment providers. This pattern may be explained by the nature of the industries in which the entrepreneurs operate. Those engaged in the beauty and health-care sectors typically adhere to international treatment standards, combining medical procedures with advanced laser technology. In such cases, patients and clients frequently act as weak-tie connections who provide access to new business opportunities.

Second, the level of professional expertise determines the type of network employed for the acquisition of skills and industry knowledge. In this regard, the study found that women without prior industry experience rely more on professional and extended connections – such as mentors and coaches – to develop relevant competencies. Conversely, entrepreneurs with established expertise draw more heavily on private or effective ties for guidance and information sharing.

Third, the obtained findings challenge the long-standing notion that women’s networks are inherently limited by their density (Klyver, 2011; Webb et al., 2019). Our research shows that women’s personal and informal networks effectively facilitate the identification of suppliers, while weak and extended relationships play a crucial role in staff recruitment. Interestingly, both

customer acquisition and organisational assistance initially emerge through strong connections, but as business grows and matures, weak ties become increasingly significant. Moreover, women entrepreneurs demonstrate strategic networking abilities by using private, effective, and extended networks to enter new markets, enhance their reputations, attract investors, and compensate for limited institutional support.

This research further indicates that both strong and weak ties function not only as sources of resources, but also as pillars of emotional resilience. Earlier studies have highlighted the importance of familial emotional support (Sullivan & Meek, 2012; Hampton et al., 2009), but the present findings show that both personal and formal, peer-based networks substantially boost self-confidence, help women overcome fear of failure, and strengthen their entrepreneurial identities. In addition, participants emphasised that networks play a critical role in countering not only gender-related prejudice but also industry-specific biases, for instance by reframing the beauty sector as a legitimate and professionalised commercial field.

A particularly noteworthy outcome is that cross-national differences did not emerge as expected. Despite cultural and institutional distinctions among Poland, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom, the participants demonstrated strikingly similar networking patterns and derived comparable benefits from their networks.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the multifaceted role of networking and to evaluate how women entrepreneurs use their personal and professional networks to address the distinctive challenges they face in business. The findings demonstrate that women entrepreneurs benefit from their social networks in a number of ways and across various contexts, thereby contributing significantly to the existing body of literature on women's entrepreneurship.

The principal limitation of this research project lies in the relatively small sample size, which restricts the generalisability of the results obtained. Future research encompassing a broader range of industries would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by businesswomen and the network mechanisms available to women entrepreneurs in different settings.

To enhance the understanding of gender-specific entrepreneurial challenges and deepen the insights into the issue, future studies should expand the sample to include comparisons between service-oriented and technology-driven industries. Comparative analyses could also make it possible to examine how women entrepreneurs in developing versus developed countries use their strong and weak connections to advance their businesses. Furthermore, this research highlights promising directions for further inquiry – particularly studies comparing the relative impact of family-based and non-family support networks on women entrepreneurs' success and resilience.

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