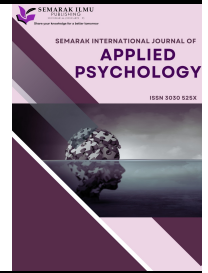




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The Impact of Cultural Norms and Gender Roles on Women Entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT

The role of women in entrepreneurship has been steadily gaining recognition globally, yet women entrepreneurs continue to face unique challenges, particularly in the context of cultural norms and gender roles. This conceptual paper explores how cultural norms and gender roles shape the entrepreneurial experiences of women, influencing their business opportunities, strategies, and outcomes. By reviewing existing literature, the paper highlights key cultural and societal factors that impact women entrepreneurs, including traditional gender expectations, access to resources, and societal perceptions of women in leadership. The paper further examines how these factors vary across different regions and cultures, offering a comparative perspective. This conceptual analysis contributes to the understanding of the intersection between culture, gender, and entrepreneurship, suggesting potential pathways to empower women and promote gender-inclusive entrepreneurship policies.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship has long been regarded as a pathway to economic empowerment, personal achievement, and societal change. It provides opportunities for individuals to generate income, create jobs, and foster innovation. However, despite the significant contributions that women entrepreneurs make to the global economy, they continue to face unique challenges that differ from those experienced by their male counterparts. One of the key factors contributing to these challenges is the influence of cultural norms and gender roles, which shape the entrepreneurial experiences of women across different societies.

Cultural norms and gender roles refer to the societal expectations and values that define acceptable behaviors, responsibilities, and roles for men and women. These roles, often deeply ingrained in cultural and social structures, can create both opportunities and constraints for women seeking to engage in entrepreneurial activities. According to Ahl [1], gender roles are pervasive in influencing how society views entrepreneurship, with many cultures viewing entrepreneurship as a

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masculine domain. In these societies, women who venture into entrepreneurship often face skepticism and resistance from family, peers, and broader society, who may not view women as capable leaders or business owners.

Moreover, women are often socialized to fulfill domestic and caregiving roles, which can further restrict their access to business opportunities [2]. This can result in a lack of encouragement, mentorship, and resources for women to pursue entrepreneurial ambitions, which are typically more accessible to men. However, there is evidence suggesting that women who manage to overcome these cultural and gendered barriers can offer innovative solutions and contribute significantly to their communities and economies [3]. As Marlow [4] points out, the increasing number of women entrepreneurs worldwide is shifting societal perceptions and challenging traditional gender roles, creating opportunities for future generations of women in entrepreneurship.

Understanding the intersection of culture, gender roles, and entrepreneurship is essential for crafting policies and practices that promote gender equality and foster a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem. This paper presents a conceptual framework that explores how cultural norms and gender roles impact women entrepreneurs' decision-making, resource acquisition, leadership styles, and overall business success. Drawing on a review of existing literature, the paper examines how cultural expectations—such as family responsibilities, societal views on women's leadership, and access to entrepreneurial networks—can either limit or empower women's entrepreneurial activities.

Furthermore, this paper explores how these dynamics vary across different cultural contexts. For example, women in Western societies may experience different societal expectations and opportunities compared to women in conservative or developing countries, where cultural norms may impose more rigid restrictions on women's entrepreneurial activities [5,6]. By examining these variations, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse challenges women entrepreneurs face and suggest strategies to overcome them. This analysis contributes to the broader discourse on gender, culture, and entrepreneurship, offering insights into how cultural norms and gender roles shape entrepreneurial opportunities for women and how these challenges can be mitigated through policy and societal change.

2. Cultural Norms and Gender Roles in Entrepreneurship

Cultural norms are the shared values, beliefs, and practices that govern behavior in a particular society. These norms influence gender roles, defining the expectations placed on individuals based on their gender. In the context of entrepreneurship, these societal constructs play a pivotal role in shaping women's opportunities, challenges, and experiences. For women entrepreneurs, cultural norms often dictate acceptable behaviors, roles, and industries, limiting their entrepreneurial scope and access to critical resources [4].

In many societies, entrepreneurship is perceived as a male-dominated activity. This perception stems from traditional gender roles, where men are viewed as breadwinners and leaders, while women are seen as caregivers and homemakers [3]. These gender roles are deeply entrenched in cultural and social structures and influence women's decisions to pursue entrepreneurial ventures. Moreover, the type of businesses they establish is often shaped by these cultural expectations. For example, women may be encouraged to engage in "feminine" industries such as fashion, beauty, food, or education, which are considered extensions of their traditional domestic roles [7]. While these sectors can provide opportunities for entrepreneurship, they are often characterized by lower profit margins and limited scalability compared to male-dominated sectors like technology or manufacturing [8].

Cultural norms also impact the level of support women entrepreneurs receive from their families and communities. In patriarchal societies, women may encounter resistance when attempting to start a business, particularly if the venture demands significant time away from domestic responsibilities [3]. This resistance forces women to navigate a “double burden,” balancing family duties with entrepreneurial aspirations. The physical and emotional strain from managing both roles can limit their ability to scale their businesses [4].

Access to resources is another critical area where cultural norms and gender roles have a significant impact. Women entrepreneurs often face challenges in securing funding, partly due to gender biases in financial institutions. Research indicates that investors and lenders tend to perceive male entrepreneurs as more competent and reliable, leading to disparities in the approval and amount of funding they receive [5]. Furthermore, in more conservative societies, cultural restrictions further exacerbate these challenges by limiting women’s mobility and their ability to network or attend professional events, which are essential for securing business opportunities [1].

Moreover, gender roles influence the development of entrepreneurial skills and self-confidence. In cultures where women are socialized to prioritize family roles, they are often excluded from leadership and decision-making opportunities, which can lower their confidence in business settings [9]. Additionally, the absence of female role models in leadership positions further compounds this issue, as women may find it difficult to imagine themselves as successful entrepreneurs [10]. The lack of mentorship and guidance from women who have navigated similar challenges can prevent aspiring female entrepreneurs from developing the leadership skills necessary to succeed.

Despite these challenges, cultural norms can also offer opportunities for women entrepreneurs. In certain contexts, women leverage their roles within their communities to build trust-based networks and gain social capital, which is critical for entrepreneurship [11]. For instance, women in rural areas often capitalize on their deep understanding of local needs and cultural practices to develop niche businesses that cater specifically to their communities [3]. These local insights can provide women with a unique competitive advantage in markets where they are more attuned to consumer needs.

The impact of cultural norms and gender roles on women entrepreneurs is not uniform across all regions, underscoring the importance of contextual analysis. For example, in Western countries, increasing awareness of gender equality has led to the development of policies and programs that support women entrepreneurs. These include funding initiatives, mentorship opportunities, and business incubators tailored to women’s needs [5]. In contrast, many developing countries face stronger cultural and institutional barriers that limit women’s access to resources and support systems [6]. In these societies, cultural norms and gender roles are more rigid, posing significant challenges for women who wish to start or grow a business.

Cultural change is necessary for improving the entrepreneurial landscape for women. Programs that challenge traditional gender roles, promote education, and encourage women to take on leadership roles can help dismantle barriers imposed by cultural norms. For instance, initiatives that involve both men and women in discussions about gender equality in entrepreneurship have been shown to increase societal acceptance of women in business roles [12].

In conclusion, cultural norms and gender roles significantly shape the entrepreneurial experiences of women. These factors can either restrict or empower women entrepreneurs depending on the societal context. While these norms often create substantial barriers, they can also offer unique opportunities for innovation and community-based business models. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of cultural contexts and the development of targeted

strategies to empower women entrepreneurs. Implementing initiatives that foster a more inclusive environment for women to lead and innovate in business will be critical in supporting women entrepreneurs globally.

2. Impact on Entrepreneurial Intentions and Opportunities

Cultural norms and gender roles play a significant role in shaping the entrepreneurial intentions and opportunities of women. In many societies, entrepreneurship is perceived as a male-dominated activity, and women are often socialized to view entrepreneurship as an inappropriate career choice [13]. These gendered expectations limit women's interest in pursuing entrepreneurial ventures, as they may view it as socially unacceptable or beyond their capabilities. Women who consider entrepreneurship may face discouragement from their families or communities, further hindering their entrepreneurial intentions [8]. Consequently, women entrepreneurs may have fewer opportunities to enter the market, and their entrepreneurial aspirations are often restricted to certain industries, typically those that are seen as "female-friendly" [4]. This sectorial limitation restricts their ability to tap into high-growth, high-reward industries, resulting in fewer business opportunities and lower entrepreneurial success.

Moreover, in cultures where men are seen as the primary economic providers, women may not be encouraged or supported in developing business ideas that are seen as requiring substantial financial investment, technical skills, or leadership capabilities [1]. These gendered assumptions about women's capabilities impact women's decision-making processes, leading to a lack of confidence or hesitancy to enter high-risk ventures that are perceived as better suited for men [10]. For example, women who wish to enter technology or engineering-based businesses may find it difficult to gain the necessary support or access to resources, as these sectors are often seen as male-dominated, and women are expected to engage in more traditional roles.

Cultural and gender expectations can also affect the types of resources that women entrepreneurs are able to access. Research indicates that women are often excluded from male-dominated networks, which are essential for discovering new business opportunities, gaining investment, and obtaining business advice [3]. This exclusion limits their access to key information and strategic business partnerships, further isolating them in their entrepreneurial journey [6]. Furthermore, financial institutions, influenced by cultural biases, are less likely to lend money to women entrepreneurs due to doubts about their reliability or business acumen [5].

At the same time, cultural norms can also have a positive influence on women's entrepreneurial intentions in certain contexts. In some cultures, women entrepreneurs leverage their family or community ties to gain access to resources that might otherwise be unavailable to them. For example, in rural areas, women entrepreneurs may capitalize on their understanding of local customs and needs to create businesses that cater to the community, which often results in unique and successful business ventures [11]. By leveraging social capital and community support, women can overcome some of the barriers created by traditional gender roles and cultural norms [3].

In summary, cultural norms and gender roles play a significant role in shaping women's entrepreneurial intentions and the opportunities available to them. These norms often limit the industries women can enter, discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurial ventures, and restrict their access to crucial resources like finance, mentorship, and networks. However, in some contexts, women can leverage their familial and community connections to overcome these challenges and create unique business opportunities.

3. Cultural Influence on Leadership and Decision-Making

Gender roles also exert a significant influence on the leadership styles and decision-making processes of women entrepreneurs. In many cultural contexts, men are socialized to be assertive, confident, and competitive—traits widely regarded as essential for effective business leadership [9]. In contrast, women are often encouraged to adopt a more nurturing, cooperative, and supportive approach. This divergence in socialization can place women in a challenging position when they assume leadership roles in entrepreneurship. Women who attempt to adopt assertive leadership styles may be perceived as deviating from traditional feminine norms, sometimes being labelled as aggressive or unfeminine, which can undermine their credibility and hinder their ability to garner support from employees, investors, and other stakeholders [5,10].

Moreover, the conflicting expectations imposed by traditional gender roles often lead to what is known as role conflict. Women entrepreneurs frequently face the dual challenge of needing to be both effective leaders and conform to societal expectations of femininity. This role conflict can result in hesitancy in decision-making, particularly when it comes to high-risk or innovative business strategies, thereby potentially limiting their capacity for bold entrepreneurial action [4]. Additionally, cultural perceptions of leadership impact how women's decisions are evaluated by peers and the broader business community. Women are often subjected to more rigorous scrutiny compared to their male counterparts, and any deviation from conventional gender norms is interpreted as a shortfall in leadership ability [8].

Furthermore, research by Morris *et al.*, [14] suggests that lower levels of entrepreneurial self-efficacy among women, partly due to entrenched gender stereotypes, further compound these challenges by affecting their confidence in making critical business decisions. Despite these obstacles, some women entrepreneurs have successfully navigated cultural constraints by developing hybrid leadership styles that integrate traditionally feminine qualities, such as empathy and collaboration, with the assertiveness typically associated with effective business management. These hybrid approaches not only allow women to maintain their authentic leadership identities but also foster inclusive, resilient, and high-performing teams [3]. For instance, research indicates that when women align their leadership style with both their intrinsic strengths and the external demands of the market, they enhance organizational performance while simultaneously redefining traditional paradigms of entrepreneurial leadership [1].

In summary, cultural norms and gender roles profoundly shape the leadership and decision-making processes of women entrepreneurs. While these influences can impose barriers by constraining leadership styles and inducing role conflict, they also provide an impetus for women to innovate and adapt by developing unique leadership approaches that harness both traditionally feminine and masculine traits. Addressing these cultural influences through supportive policies and training programs is essential for empowering women entrepreneurs and fostering a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

4. Variation Across Cultures

The impact of cultural norms and gender roles on women entrepreneurs is not uniform across different geographical and cultural contexts. In Western countries, where there is a greater emphasis on individualism and gender equality, women are increasingly encouraged to pursue entrepreneurial ventures. Supportive institutional frameworks, progressive societal attitudes, and government initiatives have improved access to financial resources, mentorship, and entrepreneurial networks

for women [5]. These environments help reduce gender disparities in entrepreneurship and foster innovation and leadership among women.

Conversely, in many developing or conservative societies, deeply ingrained cultural traditions and rigid gender roles continue to constrain women's entrepreneurial opportunities. In these regions, strong familial and community expectations often emphasize women's domestic responsibilities, making it challenging for them to balance entrepreneurship with traditional roles [6]. Furthermore, limited access to education, finance, and professional networks exacerbates these challenges, reducing the likelihood of women successfully launching and scaling businesses [3].

Recent studies have highlighted the dynamic nature of cultural change and its influence on entrepreneurship. Bruton *et al.*, [15] argue that globalization and increased exposure to diverse business practices are gradually loosening traditional constraints on women's entrepreneurship in some regions. Similarly, Roper *et al.*, [16] demonstrate that women entrepreneurs are increasingly adapting to global market trends by leveraging local cultural strengths and adopting innovative business strategies, thereby creating unique opportunities even in traditionally constrained environments.

These variations underscore the critical importance of contextual analysis when examining the entrepreneurial experiences of women. While cultural norms and gender roles can present significant barriers, they also offer avenues for innovation and adaptation. A nuanced understanding of these diverse cultural contexts is essential for policymakers and support organizations aiming to develop targeted interventions that empower women entrepreneurs and create more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

5. Empowering Women Entrepreneurs

To address the challenges posed by cultural norms and gender roles, one of the most critical strategies is promoting education and raising awareness about gender equality in entrepreneurship. Programs that offer entrepreneurial training, mentorship, and networking opportunities have been shown to help overcome societal barriers, encourage innovative thinking, and boost women's confidence in their business capabilities [7]. Such initiatives are essential in equipping women with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the complex entrepreneurial landscape and to challenge traditional stereotypes.

Another important strategy involves the establishment of women-focused business incubators and accelerators. These specialized programs provide tailored support services, including coaching, access to industry-specific networks, and dedicated funding opportunities. Research Verheul *et al.*, [17] highlights the effectiveness of these environments in fostering entrepreneurial success among women. In addition to these targeted programs, government policies that promote gender equality such as preferential procurement practices, tax incentives, and targeted grant schemes play a pivotal role in creating a more level playing field for women entrepreneurs [18]. These policy measures not only provide vital financial resources but also serve as a formal endorsement of women's economic participation.

Social capital also emerges as a crucial asset for empowering women in entrepreneurship. Engaging in professional associations, community networks, and other collaborative platforms enables women entrepreneurs to access mentorship, share experiences, and build strategic partnerships that can drive business growth [3]. These networks are instrumental in providing emotional support, practical advice, and opportunities for collaborative ventures, all of which are necessary for navigating the challenges posed by a competitive business environment.

Collectively, these integrated strategies ranging from educational programs and specialized incubators to supportive government policies and robust social networks are essential for creating an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem. By fostering an environment where women have access to the resources, mentorship, and support they need, society can empower them to innovate, lead, and succeed in the global market. Addressing these challenges through comprehensive and targeted interventions is vital for promoting gender-inclusive growth and ensuring that women entrepreneurs can fully realize their potential.

6. Future Research Directions

While this paper provides a comprehensive review of the influence of cultural norms and gender roles on women entrepreneurs, further empirical research is warranted to examine these dynamics in varying cultural contexts and across different industries. Future studies could adopt mixed-methods approaches to explore the long-term impact of gender-sensitive policies and support mechanisms on entrepreneurial success. Longitudinal research would be particularly useful in elucidating how shifting cultural norms and evolving gender roles influence women's entrepreneurial journeys over time. In addition, researchers should examine how digital transformation and globalization intersect with traditional cultural expectations to reshape opportunities for women entrepreneurs, especially in emerging economies [19].

Moreover, there is a growing need to consider the role of intersectionality in entrepreneurship research. Future investigations should explore how factors such as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status interact with cultural norms and gender roles to influence entrepreneurial intentions and performance among women [20]. Comparative studies across different regions and sectors could provide valuable insights into how diverse cultural settings either facilitate or constrain women's entrepreneurial activities. Additionally, qualitative research, including ethnographic studies and narrative analyses, can offer deeper insights into the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs, revealing the nuanced ways in which they negotiate cultural barriers and leverage available resources [21]. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the complex interplay between culture, gender, and entrepreneurship, ultimately informing more effective policies and support systems for women entrepreneurs.

7. Limitation

While this conceptual paper provides a comprehensive review of the influence of cultural norms and gender roles on women entrepreneurs, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies predominantly on secondary sources and existing literature, meaning that the findings are contingent on the quality, scope, and methodologies of previous studies. This reliance may limit the generalizability of the conclusions, as the data and frameworks used were not originally designed to address the specific nuances of this paper's focus [8].

Another limitation is the dynamic nature of cultural norms and gender roles. As these societal constructs evolve over time, some of the insights drawn from earlier research may not fully capture the current entrepreneurial landscape, particularly in regions undergoing rapid socio-economic transformation [7]. Moreover, much of the literature reviewed tends to focus on specific cultural contexts, such as Western or developing countries, which may constrain the applicability of the findings to other regions with distinct socio-cultural dynamics.

Additionally, the conceptual nature of this study means that empirical validation is limited. While the paper synthesizes multiple studies to propose a coherent framework, the absence of primary data restricts the ability to test these conceptual assertions in real-world settings. Future research employing mixed-methods or longitudinal designs would be necessary to provide more robust empirical evidence for the proposed relationships [21].

In summary, while this conceptual analysis offers valuable insights into the interplay between cultural norms, gender roles, and women's entrepreneurship, its reliance on secondary data, contextual limitations, and the evolving nature of cultural influences underscore the need for further empirical investigation to validate and expand upon these findings.

8. Conclusions

Cultural norms and gender roles play a significant role in shaping the entrepreneurial experiences of women, acting as both barriers and enablers. This paper has demonstrated that while traditional expectations can restrict women's access to resources and leadership opportunities, they also provide a framework within which innovative strategies such as hybrid leadership styles and community-based approaches can emerge. These findings underscore the importance of understanding and addressing the multifaceted influence of cultural and gendered expectations on women's entrepreneurship.

The analysis further suggests that targeted policies and supportive programs, including gender-sensitive funding mechanisms, specialized business incubators, and mentorship networks, are essential for creating an entrepreneurial ecosystem that empowers women. By fostering environments where women can leverage both traditionally feminine and masculine traits, society can help ensure that they are not only able to overcome inherent obstacles but also thrive and contribute significantly to economic growth on a global scale.

Moreover, this conceptual paper contributes to the broader discourse on gender and entrepreneurship by providing a nuanced framework that integrates cultural, social, and economic dimensions. It highlights the need for future empirical research to explore how evolving cultural norms and shifting gender roles continue to influence entrepreneurial practices across different regions. Such research could further inform the development of comprehensive strategies and policies designed to promote gender-inclusive entrepreneurship, ultimately leading to a more equitable distribution of economic opportunities.

In summary, a concerted effort to address the challenges posed by cultural norms and gender roles will not only empower women entrepreneurs but also enhance the overall dynamism and competitiveness of the global entrepreneurial landscape.

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