

BARRIERS TO WOMEN-LED SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: *Women-led social entrepreneurship has emerged as an important approach to addressing social challenges and promoting community development. Despite growing scholarly interest, the literature remains fragmented, methodologically limited, and geographically concentrated, resulting in a limited comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by women social entrepreneurs. This study aims to systematically identify and synthesise the key barriers, determine the most frequently reported challenges, and examine research gaps in the field. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework was conducted using four academic databases, resulting in the inclusion of 21 peer-reviewed studies published between 2022 and 2026. The findings indicate that gender bias and discrimination are the most prevalent barriers, followed by limited access to financial resources and socio-cultural and patriarchal constraints. These barriers are interconnected and reinforce one another across diverse contexts. The study highlights the need for integrated*

policy interventions, greater use of quantitative and mixed-methods approaches, and the development of intersectional theoretical frameworks to better support women-led social entrepreneurship globally.

Keywords: *financial exclusion, gender bias, institutional barriers, socio-cultural norms, women-led social entrepreneurship*

Introduction

Social entrepreneurship combines entrepreneurial activities to create positive social impact (Yunus et al., 2021; Aryus & Husin, 2025). Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a transformative enterprise model that prioritises the creation of social value alongside or in place of financial returns. Within this expanding field, women have established themselves as significant and active forces. Across developed, emerging, and lower-income economies, women are increasingly founding and leading social ventures driven by a commitment to addressing social issues (Tayyeb & Paulet, 2025; Ihejiamaizu & Inyang, 2022). Scholarly evidence indicates that women are more inclined toward socially oriented entrepreneurship than their male counterparts are. This is partly because the values associated with social venture creation, including empathy, care, and concern for collective well-being, align with the roles societies have historically attributed to women (Taferner & Leitner, 2025; De Magdalene, 2023). However, this alignment has not translated into equal participation or opportunities. Women-led social entrepreneurship remains a marginalised subject in the broader literature. It is often subsumed within either the general social entrepreneurship discourse, which treats gender as secondary, or the gender and entrepreneurship literature, which focuses on commercial rather than social contexts (Stahl et al., 2023; Saleh et al., 2026). Consequently, the structural conditions that shape women's experiences as social entrepreneurs and the barriers that constrain their ability to initiate, sustain, and grow social ventures remain insufficiently understood.

There is a developing body of scholarship on this topic; however, it has serious drawbacks that limit its usefulness for theory and practice. Qualitative, micro, and single-country and cultural context studies predominate. This reduces the applicability of their results and the extent to which they can be used for more general policy statements (Behera et al., 2025). The theoretical divide is split into two parts. Individual studies are based on institutional theory, social capital theory, and feminist perspectives, but these are not sustained. This makes it difficult to have a clear conceptual base needed to develop cumulative knowledge (Oh, 2025; Ummiroh et al., 2022). Geographically, the evidence is concentrated in a limited number of economies, mainly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, while other under-researched regions remain largely overlooked, leading to limited scholarly understanding of women's social entrepreneurship in these contexts (Saleh et al., 2026; Tayyeb & Paulet, 2025). There is also limited integrated evidence providing a focused and comprehensive synthesis of the barriers facing women in this area in the literature to date. Challenges cited in individual studies include gender bias, financial exclusion, patriarchal norms, institutional inadequacy, and work-family conflict. However, they do not provide a unified picture of the most prevalent barriers, the nature of their interaction, or their significance in different contexts. Consequently, integrated evidence remains limited for scholars and practitioners.

This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature on barriers to women-led social entrepreneurship. The aim is to identify and synthesise the key

barriers documented in the literature, determine which barriers are most commonly reported across empirical studies, and examine remaining research gaps. The objective is informed by three research questions: What are the barriers identified in the literature? What are the most reported barriers in empirical studies? What are the gaps in the literature regarding the barriers to women's social entrepreneurship? There are three important implications of this study. It conceptually integrates existing research on barriers in this sub-field systematically, at least in theory, and provides a synthesised conceptual basis for future scholarship. In practice, it provides policymakers, funding institutions, and support organisations with evidence-based insights that will help them develop interventions to tackle cross-contextual and persistent constraints affecting women social entrepreneurs. In terms of method, it introduces a clear and replicable approach that other investigators can follow to build upon the evidence base in under-represented areas and populations.

Literature Review

The Concept of Women-Led Social Entrepreneurship

Women-led social entrepreneurship is a unique type of entrepreneurship that combines the leadership and agency of women with the social mission (Tayyeb & Paulet, 2025). This idea has been treated in various ways by scholars. Some view it in the context of social innovation. They highlight the critical contribution of women in solving community-level challenges that markets and governments could not solve (Magdalene, 2024; Ihejiamaizu & Inyang, 2022). Others place it in the context of the larger gender and entrepreneurship literature. The social aspect of this type of entrepreneurship is seen as being preferable for women, as it matches the social roles they fulfil, such as caring and serving the community (Taferner & Leitner, 2025; Boluk & Panse, 2022). The current literature is marked by this conceptual shift between seeing women's social entrepreneurship as a byproduct of their social agency and as an expression of the social conditioning of the gender. There is, however, a consensus among scholars that women-led entrepreneurship is a nexus of two streams of structural pressures: pressures from gender inequality and pressures from the socio-economic pressures inherent in operating social businesses with constrained resources (Saleh et al., 2026; Stahl et al., 2023).

Barriers As A Conceptual Domain

A barrier is broadly conceptualised as a multidimensional obstacle, encompassing structural, psychological, and relational dimensions, that impedes individuals or groups from accessing opportunities, exercising agency, or achieving desired outcomes (Jacobsson & Jałocha, 2025). There are different ideas of what constitutes a barrier in this context presented in the literature. A few scholars view barriers as external and structural. Their foundations lie in institutional frameworks, legal regulations, and market dynamics (Suryanti et al., 2025; Kanth & Sinha, 2025). Others argue that barriers are equally internalised. They are influenced by culture, self-perception, and the expectations of society that women have internalised over time (Skubis et al., 2023; Hamida & Gherzouli, 2025). A smaller body of work is dedicated to relational barriers. It reveals that the environment of a household and family unit may be either enabling or restricting to women social entrepreneurs (Khurshid & Mackie, 2026; Ummiroh et al., 2022). The various conceptualisations are important because they result in different explanations and policy and practical implications. There is no consensus about what a barrier is in this context, and this is only a part of the literature gap addressed by this review.

Feminist Theoretical Perspectives

The most prominent theoretical tradition in the existing literature draws on feminist frameworks. Feminist Standpoint Theory, as applied by De Magdalene (2023), holds that women's lived experiences constitute a valid basis for generating knowledge about entrepreneurship. It challenges positivist assumptions that treat gender as a control variable rather than a central analytical category. Social feminist theory, employed by Skubis et al. (2023), focuses on the way social structures and institutions reproduce gender inequality within entrepreneurial ecosystems. Liberal feminist theory, used by Saleh et al. (2026), focuses on removing formal institutional barriers to give women equal access to resources and rights. These frameworks illuminate different dimensions of women's entrepreneurial experience. They also reflect different assumptions about the source of inequality and the appropriate remedy. Boluk and Panse (2022) extend this conversation by applying a feminist ethic of care lens. It argues that values of care and regeneration, rather than competition and profit, are central to how women conceptualise and practise entrepreneurship. Together, these feminist theories offer a rich but fragmented theoretical base with limited dialogue between them.

Social, Institutional, and Capital-Based Theories

Beyond feminist traditions, a second cluster of theories approaches barriers through the lens of social structures and resources. Social capital theory, applied by Behera et al. (2025) and Hamida and Gherzouli (2025), holds that access to networks, trust, and social relationships is as critical to entrepreneurial success as financial capital. It also argues that women are systematically disadvantaged in building and accessing these networks. Institutional theory, used by Saleh et al. (2026), examines how formal and informal rules, including laws, regulations, and cultural norms, shape the conditions under which women can participate in entrepreneurship. Gender Role Theory and Role Congruity Theory, applied by Taferner and Leitner (2025), offer a complementary perspective. They argue that social expectations about femininity create a mismatch between the traits associated with leadership and those attributed to women. This results in lower perceived legitimacy for women-led ventures. Human capital theory, as used by Oh (2025), focuses on education, experience, and skills as determinants of entrepreneurial performance. It also acknowledges that women and men do not accumulate these assets under equal conditions. This text highlights the importance of integrated evidence for policymakers and funding bodies to create effective gender-related interventions. Without a holistic view, efforts tend to be fragmented, such as offering financial aid alone without tackling deeper systemic issues like institutional barriers, social norms, and work-family conflicts that hinder women's progress. An integrated approach is crucial for crafting comprehensive strategies, optimizing resource allocation, and addressing the complex, overlapping challenges women face. These theories offer valuable insights but also reveal tensions. Human Capital Theory suggests enhancing skills can reduce entrepreneurial disadvantages, while feminist theories argue structural inequalities may still limit opportunities. Social Capital Theory promotes network building, but feminist views highlight that networks can perpetuate exclusion. Institutional Theory supports policy changes to increase participation, yet feminist perspectives warn that informal cultural norms may persist despite reforms. Some studies were included when their findings addressed structural factors relevant to women-led social entrepreneurship, such as gender-based barriers, resource access, institutional challenges, and social expectations, even if they focused on rural women entrepreneurs, MSMEs, or general entrepreneurship rather than specifically on women-led social entrepreneurship. These theories converge on a shared insight: barriers to women-led social entrepreneurship are systemic outcomes of how societies allocate resources, assign roles, and evaluate leadership.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) as its primary research design. An SLR is a systematic process that involves the identification, assessment, and consolidation of existing research on a specific research question, which is rigorous and transparent (Tranfield et al., 2003). This was deemed to be a suitable strategy for the study's aim of systematically mapping barriers to women-led social entrepreneurship in different contexts. The review process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 (Page et al., 2021) standardised checklist and flow diagram to ensure transparency.

Search Strategy

The search was performed in a structured way in four scientific databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, and Emerald Insight. The databases were chosen because they cover a wide range of peer-reviewed business, management, entrepreneurship, and social sciences literature. The search was carried out between June 1, 2022, and May 20, 2026, to allow for the inclusion of only the newest and most relevant empirical contributions in the review. Population terms, concept terms, and exclusion terms were used in Boolean search strings to keep the conceptual precision and to avoid topical overlap.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were well applied, and there were consistency and minimal subjectivity in the selection of studies. Studies were selected if they were published in English, targeted women-led social entrepreneurship or female social entrepreneurship, and examined one or more aspects of barriers, challenges, or constraints to women's social entrepreneurship. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were considered, as this is the most formal form of academic quality assurance, using a blind-review process. Studies that focus on social enterprises or that focused on female entrepreneurship in general but did not take a social approach were not included. Likewise, conference papers, book chapters, theses, and grey literature were not included in this review. These criteria were used throughout the screening process.

Study Selection Process

The total hit count for the initial search of the databases was 408 records, comprising 19 from Scopus, 25 from Web of Science, 308 from ProQuest, and 56 from Emerald Insight. After applying preliminary search filters, 159 records remained. These records were further reduced by applying a publication year filter (2022-2026), resulting in 83 records. After a subsequent document type filter, which included only journal articles. These were filtered to only English-language publications, leaving 81 records. Afterwards, two duplicate records were found and deleted, leaving 79 unique records for screening.

The researcher independently screened both the title and abstract to determine the relevance of the records to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. At this stage, 79 records were screened, with 44 records being excluded because of a lack of relevance to the research focus, and 35 records were then read in full text. All 35 articles in full text were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. Of these, 14 were excluded due to specific reasons: six were not relevant to barriers in the field, four did not focus specifically on women's social entrepreneurship, two did not have an empirical, conceptual, or review-based nature, and two were inaccessible or lacked data to be

analysed meaningfully. Twenty-one studies were included in the review and became the final sample.

Data Extraction and Analysis

The literature matrix was created to structure the information from the 21 included studies to systematically extract and organise relevant information. The matrix recorded important information such as authors and publication year, country of study, research methodology, theoretical framework, key variables, major findings, and identified research gaps. This method allowed for comparison across studies and for synthesising the themes.

Prisma Flowchart Diagram

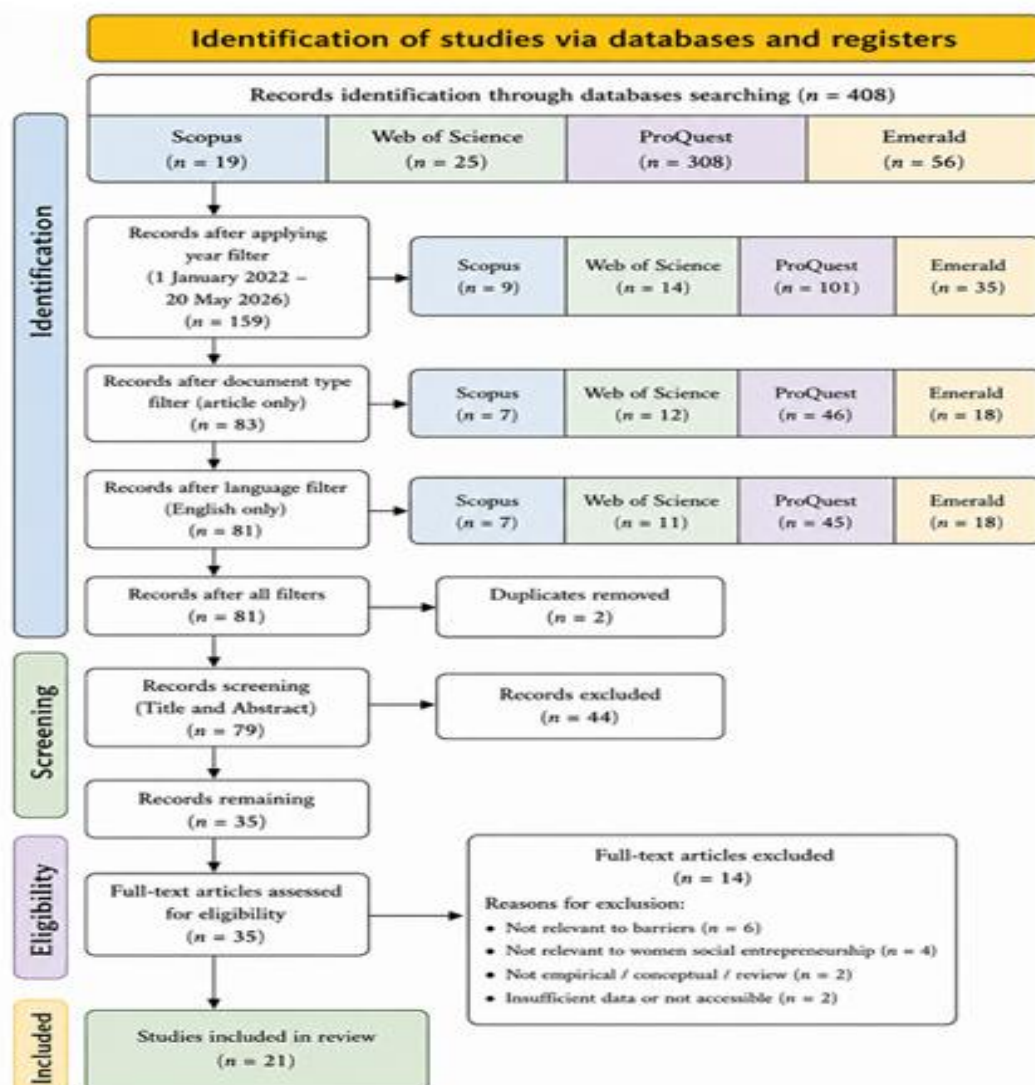


Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart Diagram

Source: Page et al. (2021) / Compiled by Authors

List of Eligible Journals

Table 1: List Of Eligible Journals Included in the Studies

No.	Authors	Year	Title
1	De Magdalene, P.	2023	Antecedents of women's social entrepreneurship: values development and the perceived desirability and feasibility of social venture creation
2	Saleh M.A.K.; Muhammad A.A.S.; Patrick H.A.; Farhan A.A.N.	2026	Empowering women or empowered by women: the female perspective of entrepreneurial empowerment in lower-income economies
3	Tayyeb S.M.; Paulet E.	2025	Analysis of Women's Social Entrepreneurship in Underdeveloped, Emerging and Developed Economies: A Multicultural Exploratory Study
4	Skubis I.; Akahome J.E.; Wodarski K.	2023	Exploring the Characteristics, Motivation, Challenges, and Support System of Female Social Entrepreneurs in Nigeria
5	Taferner J.; Leitner K.	2025	Founding team gender diversity and social entrepreneurship: implications for venture growth and equity acquisition
6	Boluk K.A.; Panse G.	2022	Recognizing the regenerative impacts of Canadian women tourism social entrepreneurs through a feminist ethic of care lens
7	Khurshid S.; Mackie V.	2026	Female social entrepreneurs in India: familial embeddedness in an emerging economy
8	Behera S.K.; Panda R.K.; Senapati S.	2025	Role of financial and social capital in rural women micro-enterprises: assessing entrepreneurial orientation as a performance catalyst
9	Seferiadis, A., Cummings, S., & Essegbey, G	2023	Young Women as Social Entrepreneurs in the Environmental Sector in Ghana: Development Hackers and the Re-imagining of Sustainable Development Models
10	Zarestky J.; Deer S.; Ray S.M.	2024	Power dynamics and social enterprises: A case study of an international NGO
11	Oh N.	2024	Nascent Social Ventures' Inaugural CEO Appointment: Human Capital and Gender Expectancy Violation Perspectives
12	Maharaja R.; Ganapathy S.; Ravichandiran G.; Paramasivan C.	2025	Opportunities And Challenges: Empowering Women Entrepreneurs Through Digital Transformation

13	Kanth D.; Sinha A.R.	2025	Sustainable Entrepreneurship and Business Performance among Rural Women Entrepreneurs: Investigating the Influence of Entrepreneurial Intention, Social Innovation and Government Support
14	Macías-Prada J.F.; Silva Y.; Zapata Á.M.	2024	The Role of Universities in Latin American Social Entrepreneurship Ecosystems: A Gender Perspective
15	Suryanti N.; Yuanitasari D.; Judiasih S.D.; Assalihee M.	2025	Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in MSMEs: The Role of Legal Advocacy in Overcoming Gender Barriers
16	Hamida R.; Gherzouli I.	2025	Women's Social Interaction and Feminist Entrepreneurship: A Comprehensive Analysis of Challenges and Opportunities: An Overview of the Creation Reality and Business Climate Challenges in Algeria
17	Ummiroh I.R.; Schwab A.; Dhewanto W.	2022	Women Social Entrepreneurs in a Muslim Society: How to Manage Patriarchy and Spouses
18	Schachter H.L.	2022	Race, Class, Gender and Social Entrepreneurship: Extending the Positionality of Icons
19	Stahl G.; Burnard P.; McDonald S.	2023	Exploring the Experiences of Women Social Entrepreneurs: Advancing Understandings of 'Emotional Capital' in Women-only Networks
20	Ihejiamaizu G.C.; Inyang J.J.	2022	Women in Nigeria: Examining the Motivations for Engaging in Social Entrepreneurship
21	Raniga T.	2022	Sustainable Livelihoods And Value Chain Development With Women Entrepreneurs: Evidence And Lessons From The Clothing Bank, South Africa

Source: Compiled by Authors

Research Methodology Distribution

Table 2: The Methodology Used in the Included Study

Methods Used	Number of studies	Percentage (%)
Qualitative	17	81%
Quantitative	4	19%
Total	21	100%

Source: Compiled by Authors

Discussion

The research questions underpinning this review are addressed, and the key themes that appeared in the 21 studies included in the review are summarised and synthesised. The implications of key themes for this review are discussed, and gaps in the current evidence base are identified. The approach to analysing the studies is done in a way that integrates across studies, regions, and theoretical perspectives and thus creates a more substantive and critical understanding of the field as a whole.

Gender Bias As A Systemic and Unresolved Barrier

The most uniform conclusion from this review is that gender bias and discrimination are underlying obstacles to the development of women-led social entrepreneurship in 19 of the 21 studies. This almost universal agreement over a wide range of geographical, cultural, and methodological settings is itself important. It implies that gender bias is a structural condition, not just a context-specific issue, and is rooted in the institutions, norms, and relationships that shape entrepreneurial activity. But how this bias operates, and how it might be different at different phases of entrepreneurship, has yet to be determined.

A close examination of the evidence shows two different angles. The first (Taferner & Leitner, 2025; Oh, 2025) highlights the formal institutional and investment contexts as the source of gender bias. Empirically, show that, even though social entrepreneurship is traditionally viewed as a female business area of care and community, women-led social ventures receive less equity than their male counterparts. Even if social ventures are a feminine business area that values care and community, women-led social ventures receive less equity than male-led teams, as demonstrated. This is significant as it contradicts a popular belief in the field that social entrepreneurship is a more gender-balanced field than commercial entrepreneurship. From another perspective, Oh (2025) further establishes that female entrepreneurs must perform 'above and beyond' expectations compared to male entrepreneurs to be selected as initial CEOs, suggesting a limited expectancy violation. These studies collectively indicate that the formal entrepreneurial ecosystems have not progressed as much as believed toward gender neutrality. The second, which is more evident in qualitative studies from the Global South, focuses on gender bias in relational and cultural contexts, not formal structures. Instead of being based on investment choices or corporate structures, gender bias is deeply embedded in spousal authority, family expectations, and community norms, as shown by Ummiroh et al. (2022), Khurshid and Mackie (2026), and Ihejiamaizu and Inyang (2022). This split between the formal-institutional and relational-cultural gender bias is significant for a number of reasons. It also implies that a policy intervention aimed at simply altering access to credit or anti-discrimination laws may be ineffective in tackling the elements of bias that are most limiting for women in low-income and more conservative settings. This is the disconnect between these two sets of data and shows the importance of context-specific research and intervention.

Financial Exclusion and the Limits of Institutional Support

Financial resources are cited as a second barrier in 13 out of 21 studies. A careful analysis of the evidence, however, shows that financial exclusion is not a one-dimensional and uncomplicated issue. Its nature and seriousness differ widely from one institutional context to another where women entrepreneurs work, and the literature is not always nuanced enough to consider this difference.

One of the most illuminating accounts on this issue is given by Saleh et al. (2026). In Yemen, women have access to microfinance institutions that have a formal mandate to serve women

but place collateral requirements that effectively preclude the poorest women from accessing those microfinance institutions. This is more than a funding hole; it is a structural contradiction in the very systems created to fill the funding hole. A similar paradox can be seen in the case of Suryanti et al. (2025) on the access of female entrepreneurs to state social assistance in Indonesia, which is only 15 percent, even though there is national MSME legislation in Indonesia. These cases show that formal support structures are not always sufficient to ensure access and that the design of these institutions can be a major obstacle to access as well.

In the financial exclusion narrative, Behera et al. (2025) further show that social capital has a greater impact on entrepreneurial performance than financial capital and that entrepreneurial orientation fully mediates between social capital and firm performance. This discovery suggests that financial access is not a standalone solution and must be accompanied by other measures. Women who receive funding but lack the social capital, networks, mentoring, and institutional relationships that go with it can also find it hard to make that funding work in real terms. It is a practically important insight recognised descriptively by the majority of the qualitative studies in this review, but the existing studies have not been approached with an analytical rigour like that of Behera et al. (2025). More studies are needed that look at financial and social capital as a combined entity, rather than separately.

Socio-Cultural Norms and the Double Burden

Socio-cultural and patriarchal norms are identified in 11 studies and are qualitatively distinct as a barrier since they are norms in everyday life and not institutional policies. The difficulty about this category is that it has both external constraints that limit women's actions and constraints that women themselves often place on their own activity because they believe they should not pursue certain actions.

One of the most analytically critical approaches to this problem comes from Skubis et al. (2023) demonstrate that the concept of low self-confidence is not a standalone personality characteristic, and thus an intervention that aims to boost self-confidence without working on the structural conditions that lead to low self-confidence will likely have limited success. Maharaja and Ganapathy (2025) take this to the digital realm and argue that women's access to and use of digital tools, especially in conservative and rural communities, is constrained by socio-cultural norms that limit their access and use of digital tools, even though these new tools offer opportunities to enter new markets. Together, these studies make it clear that women in many settings have a double burden: the struggles of operating a social enterprise under challenging circumstances and the added pressure of living with cultural norms that were not considered in women's involvement in entrepreneurship.

The Role of Support Systems and Adaptive Strategies

Yet another discovery in the literature, but one that is not theorised, is the importance of support systems, whether familial, institutional, or network-based, for women social entrepreneurs. Six studies mention support systems, and 4 studies mention adaptive strategies that women use to sustain their entrepreneurial ventures due to structural constraints (Magdalene, 2024; Khurshid & Mackie, 2026; Raniga, 2023; Schachter, 2022; Stahl et al., 2023; Zarestky et al., 2024). This discovery should be analysed more than has been done in the literature. The presence of adaptive strategies shows not only women's resilience but also the weakness of formal systems, as adaptation is an immediate reaction to institutional failure. Stahl et al. (2023) demonstrate that women-only networks provide a space for the development of emotional capital, confidence, trust, and a sense of safety in a context where the professional network encourages

masculine privilege. Raniga (2023) demonstrates that NGO support can have a positive impact on livelihoods when it is well designed and relationally based. But Zarestky et al. (2024) provide a cautionary reminder that empowerment and constraints can coexist in programmes facilitated by NGOs, especially when programmes are influenced by external cultural assumptions or power dynamics between different parties in the international organisation or the local beneficiaries. There is no clear practice or theory in the literature that allows distinction between successful and unsuccessful support interventions.

Research Gaps in the Evidence Base

The following three overlapping gaps are identified in this review that hinder the field from producing transferable and cumulative knowledge. The first is methodological. 21 studies report, 17 of which are all qualitative, mostly small-sample, single-context case studies. This approach has yielded valid and descriptive findings but has constrained the generalisation or testing of findings to other populations. There is a limited quantitative and mixed-methods studies, so the relative importance of various barriers and the situations in which they are most acute are not well understood. The few quantitative studies included in this review (Taferner and Leitner 2025; Behera et al. 2025; Kanth and Sinha 2025; and Oh 2025) all show that quantitative research can uncover patterns and relationships that cannot be detected with qualitative research, such as the mediation of entrepreneurial orientation and the continued presence of funding bias regardless of the social venture context.

The second gap is the geographical gap. There is a focus on the literature in South Asia, especially in India (4), and sub-Saharan Africa (with very few studies on conflict-affected economies, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Latin America, apart from a single study from Colombia). This geographic bias is reflected in the fact that the most contextually extreme barriers (for women in fragile and conflict-affected states) are the barriers that are the least understood. The few exceptions of Muhammad Tayyeb and Paulet (2025) and of Saleh et al. (2026) are useful but are based on small numbers.

The third gap is between intersections. The connection between gender and other aspects of identity (race, class, and ethnicity) is addressed in only 10% of the studies (4 studies) (Schachter, 2022; Suryanti et al., 2025; Seferiadis et al., 2023; Muhammad Tayyeb & Paulet, 2025). This is an important missing point because the problems a rural, poor woman entrepreneur in a conflict-affected economy has to face are qualitatively and quantitatively different from those of an educated middle-class woman entrepreneur in an urban developed economy. The blanket terms used for women (as in most of the literature), without recognition of the fact that women are not all alike, can lead to recommendations that are relevant and appropriate to some women and irrelevant or even harmful to others.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

The implications of the findings of this review are not limited to the realm of scholarship. At an operational level, evidence clearly shows that one-dimensional interventions are not likely to be effective. Programmes that offer financial assistance but fail to address socio-cultural norms will be able to reach only those women who are primarily financially constrained. Policies that tamper with the formal institutional structures but not the informal norms that shape family and community dynamics will be beneficial to women in the more developed institutional contexts in higher-income countries but will offer no assistance to the most marginalised women. Responses to the barriers identified in this literature must be multi-

layered, going to the financial, institutional, relational, and cultural components of barriers and responding to these in ways that are sensitive to local context.

In a theoretical sense, this review identifies the need for integrative frameworks that are able to explain the multi-layered and intersecting nature of these barriers. There is a wealth of individual-level theories in the current theoretical field and a limited number of mid-range theories that integrate institutional conditions, cultural norms, relational dynamics, and individual agency into a single framework. In a field that has hitherto treated women as a single group with common experiences, an intersectional approach, one that considers gender as not just a single variable but as a category that connects with class, race, geography, and religion, would add analytical sharpness. Theoretical development in the future should be an attempt to combine the insights gained from the studies of institutional theory, social capital theory, and feminist frameworks, as well as to create a more comprehensive model of the mechanisms by which barriers to women-led social entrepreneurship are created and maintained.

Conclusion

The current review was a systematic identification of the empirical literature available and a synthesis of the literature on the barriers to women-led social entrepreneurship. The review drew on 21 peer-reviewed publications between 2022 and 2026 and focused on three central research questions. The results indicate that gender bias and discrimination are the biggest challenges, followed by financial resources and ingrained socio-cultural and patriarchal norms. Most importantly, these barriers are not standalone. They overlap and reinforce each other in a manner that requires more than a one-dimensional approach to policy. This is true for many different economic and cultural settings around the world.

The results of these studies have implications for theory and practice. Ideally, the field is fragmented with no single framework to identify multiple layers of barriers faced by women. Some of the studies are also not theoretically grounded. This restricts the field's capacity for building up cumulative knowledge and transfer. In practice, effective support for women entrepreneurs needs to tackle issues of finance, institutions, relationships, and culture together and not separately. Interventions focusing on a single dimension are not likely to lead to lasting and significant results.

The review makes a unique contribution to the field by synthesising and summarising the barriers unique to social entrepreneurship by women as a subfield for the first time. It also provides an overview of the methodological and geographic scope of the existing evidence and sets a conceptual framework for future research. Future researchers are encouraged to use a quantitative and mixed-methods approach, as well as to push research into geographic areas that have been under-researched.

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