The Microfoundations of Global Growth: A Multilevel Framework of Women Entrepreneurial Leadership and SME Internationalisation Capability

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ABSTRACT

Small medium enterprises (SMEs) increasingly operate in volatile international environments where strategic decision-making is heavily concentrated around owner-managers. Despite the growing economic significance of women-led enterprises, existing research frequently conceptualises women entrepreneurs through the restrictive lens of structural constraints and resource disadvantages, inadvertently obscuring their capacity for strategic action. Furthermore, the literature remains theoretically underdeveloped regarding how individual-level leadership processes are translated into firm-level internationalisation capabilities. Addressing these critical gaps, this conceptual paper develops a comprehensive multilevel framework that positions women entrepreneurial leadership as a fundamental microfoundation of SME internationalisation capability. By systematically integrating Microfoundations Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Resource Orchestration Theory, and International Entrepreneurship Theory, the study delineates a sequential capability-development process. It proposes that individual-level attributes namely strategic cognition, strategic agency, and international opportunity recognition are translated into collective value through interactional mechanisms such as network mobilisation and knowledge exchange. These relational processes subsequently embed individual agency into robust organisational routines, specifically through resource orchestration, knowledge integration, and strategic adaptation. Consequently, SME internationalisation capability emerges not merely from static resource endowments, but from the dynamic interaction of micro, relational, and organisational mechanisms. To avoid gender-essentialist assumptions, the framework explicitly incorporates contextual boundary conditions, demonstrating that the efficacy of this translation process is moderated by institutional support, resource availability, and network embeddedness. This paper makes a distinct theoretical contribution by shifting the analytical emphasis from demographic constraints toward capability formation, clearly distinguishing emergent internationalisation capability from downstream market-entry outcomes. The resulting framework provides a rigorous theoretical foundation for future empirical research examining how entrepreneurial leaders shape the international growth, adaptability, and strategic resilience of resource-constrained SMEs.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurial Leadership; SME Internationalisation; Microfoundations Theory; Dynamic Capabilities; Resource Orchestration; Strategic Agency

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) increasingly operate in an international environment characterised by intensified competition, rapid technological change, institutional complexity, and heightened uncertainty across foreign markets (Mendes et al., 2025). Internationalisation can provide SMEs with access to new customers, knowledge, resources, and growth opportunities, yet smaller firms typically face substantial constraints in financial resources, international experience, market knowledge, and network access. Consequently, successful internationalisation depends not only on whether SMEs possess sufficient

resources, but also on their ability to develop and deploy capabilities that enable them to identify international opportunities, mobilise resources, establish cross-border relationships, adapt to changing market conditions, and reconfigure their strategies. Within this context, entrepreneurial leadership becomes particularly important because SME internationalisation is often strongly influenced by the decisions, interpretations, relationships, and strategic actions of owner-managers and entrepreneurial leaders. The role of women entrepreneurial leaders is therefore increasingly relevant to international business scholarship, particularly as women-led enterprises constitute an important component of the global SME landscape (Kuschel et al., 2020). However, understanding their contribution to internationalisation requires moving beyond the simple assumption that leadership is an individual attribute and examining how leadership processes become embedded within organisational capability development.

Despite growing interest in women entrepreneurship and SME internationalisation, the relationship between women entrepreneurial leadership and internationalisation remains theoretically underdeveloped. Existing research has frequently examined women entrepreneurs through the lenses of participation, barriers, resource disadvantages, networking, entrepreneurial characteristics, firm performance, or international market entry (Beriso, 2021). While these perspectives provide valuable insights, they can inadvertently position women primarily as a demographic category or as recipients of structural constraints rather than as strategic actors who actively shape organisational capabilities. At the same time, research on SME internationalisation increasingly recognises the importance of organisational capabilities, but often treats such capabilities as firm-level resources or outcomes without sufficiently explaining the individual and relational processes through which they emerge (Merín-Rodrigáñez et al., 2025). This creates an unresolved theoretical problem: how do the cognition, agency, decisions, relationships, and resource-related actions of women entrepreneurial leaders become translated into organisational capabilities that enable SMEs to internationalise? Without addressing this micro-to-macro mechanism, the literature provides an incomplete explanation of how leadership contributes to internationalisation capability, particularly within resource-constrained SMEs.

Three interconnected gaps can therefore be identified. First, the SME internationalisation literature has insufficiently incorporated a microfoundational perspective that explains how individual-level leadership processes contribute to the emergence and transformation of firm-level internationalisation capabilities (Mendes et al., 2025). Second, women entrepreneurship research has not sufficiently conceptualised entrepreneurial leadership as a mechanism through which women-led SMEs develop and deploy internationalisation capabilities; instead, much of the literature remains focused on gender-related barriers, individual characteristics, or performance outcomes. Third, the literatures on women entrepreneurial leadership, microfoundations, dynamic capabilities, and international entrepreneurship remain insufficiently integrated into a coherent multilevel explanation of SME internationalisation (Bhandari et al., 2023). Addressing these gaps is important because treating women entrepreneurial leadership merely as a predictor of internationalisation risks obscuring the mechanisms through which leadership generates organisational value. Moreover, assuming that women entrepreneurs possess inherently distinctive leadership characteristics would risk reproducing gender-essentialist explanations. A theoretically stronger approach is to conceptualise women entrepreneurial leadership as socially embedded and strategically enacted, whereby individual cognition and agency interact with relational processes and resource orchestration to shape organisational capability development.

Against this background, this conceptual paper develops a multilevel framework explaining how women entrepreneurial leadership functions as a microfoundation of SME internationalisation capability. Drawing primarily on Microfoundations Theory and integrating insights from Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Resource Orchestration Theory, and International Entrepreneurship Theory, the paper conceptualises a sequential but interdependent process linking individual, interactional, and organisational levels of analysis (Merín-Rodrigáñez et al., 2025). At the individual level, women entrepreneurial leadership is reflected in processes such as strategic cognition, strategic agency, international opportunity recognition, and international orientation. These processes influence interaction-level mechanisms, including network mobilisation, relationship building, knowledge exchange, and stakeholder engagement, which subsequently shape organisational processes of resource orchestration, knowledge integration, strategic adaptation, and

resource reconfiguration. Collectively, these microfoundational processes are proposed to contribute to the development of SME internationalisation capability, enabling firms to identify and exploit international opportunities, acquire and integrate foreign-market knowledge, establish international relationships, adapt to environmental changes, and reconfigure resources across markets. The paper therefore seeks to answer a central conceptual question: how does women entrepreneurial leadership translate individual-level strategic agency into firm-level capability for internationalisation (Kuschel et al., 2020)?

This conceptual framework contributes to international business and entrepreneurship scholarship in three principal ways. First, it extends the microfoundational perspective on SME internationalisation by explaining how individual leadership processes can become organisational capabilities, thereby connecting micro-level agency with firm-level internationalisation. Second, it advances women entrepreneurship research by shifting the analytical emphasis from women as a categorical demographic group or from gender-based constraints towards women entrepreneurial leadership as a potential source of strategic capability, while explicitly recognising the institutional and contextual conditions within which leadership is enacted (Beriso, 2021). Third, by integrating Microfoundations Theory with Dynamic Capabilities, Resource Orchestration, and International Entrepreneurship perspectives, the framework provides a theoretically differentiated explanation of how SMEs transform leadership cognition, relational resources, and strategic actions into internationalisation capability (Bhandari et al., 2023). The central proposition is therefore not that women inherently possess superior leadership characteristics, but that women entrepreneurial leaders can constitute important microfoundations through which internationalisation capabilities are formed, deployed, and reconfigured. By establishing this micro, interaction and organisation linkage, the framework offers a basis for future empirical research on the mechanisms through which entrepreneurial leadership shapes the international growth and strategic adaptability of SMEs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women Entrepreneurial Leadership and Strategic Agency

Women entrepreneurial leadership occupies an important intersection between entrepreneurship, leadership and gender studies, particularly in the context of SMEs where strategic decisions are often strongly influenced by owner-managers and entrepreneurial leaders (Kuschel et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial leadership differs from conventional managerial leadership because it is enacted under conditions of uncertainty, resource constraints, opportunity pursuit and organisational development. Within this context, women entrepreneurial leadership can be understood as the process through which women entrepreneurs exercise strategic agency to identify opportunities, mobilise resources, build relationships, make strategic decisions and direct the development of their ventures. Recent research has begun to examine the microfoundations of entrepreneurial leadership among successful women entrepreneurs, demonstrating that leadership development is shaped by contextual enablers, tensions and strategies for navigating institutional and social constraints (Beriso, 2021). This emerging perspective is important because it positions women not simply as a demographic category but as active strategic actors whose leadership practices can influence organisational development (Mendes et al., 2025).

A continuing debate in the literature concerns whether women entrepreneurs should primarily be examined through the constraints they experience or through their capacity for strategic agency. Earlier research has extensively highlighted gender inequality, financing constraints, social expectations, family responsibilities, institutional barriers and restricted access to networks (Beriso, 2021). While these factors remain important, an exclusive emphasis on disadvantage risks portraying women entrepreneurs as passive recipients of structural constraints. An alternative perspective focuses on how women entrepreneurs actively interpret their environments, mobilise relationships, acquire resources and negotiate institutional conditions. Recent research on female entrepreneurs' foreign-market entry decisions, for example, indicates that political connections, family involvement and financial constraints can shape international entry-mode choices. Such findings suggest that women entrepreneurs' internationalisation decisions cannot be adequately explained by gender alone but require attention to leadership agency, resource conditions and institutional context (Kuschel et al., 2020). Accordingly, this study conceptualises women entrepreneurial leadership as a

contextually embedded form of strategic agency rather than as a set of inherently gendered leadership characteristics.

SME Internationalisation and Internationalisation Capability

SME internationalisation refers broadly to the processes through which smaller firms enter, develop and sustain activities in foreign markets (Kaur & Kumar, 2024). Internationalisation can provide SMEs with access to new customers, knowledge, technologies, resources and growth opportunities, but it also exposes them to substantial challenges associated with limited financial resources, inadequate international knowledge, liability of foreignness, institutional differences and weak international networks. Traditional internationalisation research, particularly the Uppsala perspective, emphasises experiential learning and incremental commitment, whereas international entrepreneurship research places greater emphasis on opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial action, networks and the pursuit of international opportunities. Network perspectives further highlight the importance of relationships in enabling SMEs to access knowledge and overcome resource constraints (Bhandari et al., 2023). Together, these perspectives establish that SME internationalisation is not simply a matter of entering foreign markets but involves developing the knowledge, relationships and strategic processes necessary to operate effectively across different institutional and market environments (Merín-Rodrigáñez et al., 2025).

Increasingly, the literature has shifted attention from internationalisation as an activity towards the capabilities that enable firms to internationalise effectively (Kaur & Kumar, 2024). Internationalisation capability refers to the firm's ability to identify international opportunities, acquire and integrate foreign-market knowledge, mobilise resources, establish cross-border relationships, adapt strategies and reconfigure operations as international conditions change. Recent research using a dynamic-capabilities perspective highlights strategic learning, adaptability and relationship networks as important mechanisms supporting SME international expansion. Other recent reviews similarly identify knowledge management, innovation, marketing capabilities, cultural adaptation and digitalisation as important mechanisms through which SMEs overcome internationalisation barriers (Bhandari et al., 2023). This capability perspective is particularly relevant because firms may engage in international activities without necessarily possessing a developed internationalisation capability. Consequently, the theoretical question is not merely whether women-led SMEs internationalise, but how the capabilities required for sustained and adaptive internationalisation are developed within such firms (Merín-Rodrigáñez et al., 2025).

Microfoundations of Organisational Capability

Microfoundations theory provides the central theoretical perspective for explaining the relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and SME internationalisation capability (Mendes et al., 2025). The microfoundational approach is concerned with how organisational-level phenomena emerge from the actions, interactions and characteristics of individuals. This perspective is particularly relevant to SMEs because organisational structures are often relatively concentrated around owner-managers and entrepreneurial leaders, meaning that individual cognition, decision-making and relationships can have substantial implications for organisational development. From a microfoundational perspective, however, individual characteristics alone do not constitute organisational capabilities. Rather, individual knowledge, cognition and agency must be translated through interactions, collective activities and organisational processes into routines and capabilities that can be repeatedly deployed by the firm.

This logic suggests that the relationship between women entrepreneurial leadership and SME internationalisation capability should be conceptualised across multiple levels. At the individual level, women entrepreneurial leaders may contribute through strategic cognition, international opportunity recognition, strategic agency and international orientation. These individual processes influence an interaction level involving network mobilisation, relationship building, knowledge exchange and stakeholder engagement. Through these interactions, individual-level resources and knowledge can become embedded within organisational processes involving resource orchestration, knowledge integration, strategic adaptation

and resource reconfiguration. The resulting capabilities operate at the organisational level and enable the SME to undertake internationalisation more effectively.

Dynamic Capabilities and Resource Orchestration in SME Internationalisation

Dynamic Capabilities Theory provides an important complementary perspective because it explains how firms adapt and reconfigure resources in changing environments. The dynamic-capabilities perspective commonly conceptualises organisational adaptation through processes of sensing, seizing and transforming or reconfiguring. In the context of SME internationalisation, sensing involves identifying foreign-market opportunities, threats and emerging customer requirements; seizing involves evaluating opportunities, making international decisions, mobilising resources and establishing market relationships; while transforming involves adapting strategies, restructuring resources and reconfiguring international operations. Women entrepreneurial leadership can therefore be conceptualised as an important microfoundation of these dynamic processes because leaders influence how international information is interpreted, which opportunities are prioritised and how resources are committed to foreign-market activities.

Resource Orchestration Theory complements the dynamic-capabilities perspective by explaining how leaders structure, bundle and leverage resources to achieve strategic objectives. This perspective is particularly relevant to SMEs because internationalisation often occurs under conditions of financial, human, technological and knowledge constraints. Rather than assuming that successful internationalisation depends on the possession of abundant resources, resource orchestration focuses on how available resources are acquired, combined and deployed. Women entrepreneurial leaders may therefore influence internationalisation capability by structuring available resources, bundling heterogeneous resources such as knowledge, networks and financial assets, and leveraging those resources towards international opportunities.

Integrating the Multilevel Perspective: From Leadership Microfoundations to Internationalisation Capability

The preceding literature indicates that women entrepreneurial leadership, SME internationalisation and organisational capability have largely developed as related but analytically distinct streams of research. Women entrepreneurship research provides important insights into gendered institutional conditions, entrepreneurial agency, resource access and leadership, while SME internationalisation research explains how firms enter and develop foreign markets through learning, networks, opportunity recognition and adaptation. Dynamic Capabilities Theory explains how firms sense, seize and reconfigure resources in response to changing environments, while Resource Orchestration Theory explains how strategic actors structure, bundle and leverage resources. Microfoundations theory provides the theoretical bridge connecting these perspectives by explaining how individual actions and interactions can become embedded in organisational capabilities.

From this perspective, women entrepreneurial leadership constitutes an important individual-level microfoundation, but it does not directly and automatically produce internationalisation capability. Instead, leadership cognition, agency and opportunity recognition are translated through relational processes such as network mobilisation, relationship building and knowledge exchange. These interaction-level mechanisms subsequently influence organisational processes involving resource orchestration, knowledge integration, strategic adaptation and resource reconfiguration. These processes collectively contribute to the development of SME internationalisation capability, which enables firms to identify and exploit international opportunities, acquire foreign-market knowledge, establish cross-border relationships and adapt their strategies across changing international environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a theory-building conceptual literature review to develop an integrated framework explaining how women entrepreneurial leadership functions as a microfoundation of SME internationalisation capability (Dahmen, 2023). A conceptual approach is appropriate because the purpose is

to integrate fragmented theoretical perspectives and develop a theoretically grounded explanation rather than to test predetermined hypotheses (Khuong & Thai, 2025). The methodology follows a structured search strategy designed to capture research addressing the intersection of women entrepreneurial leadership, SMEs, and capability development (Fainshmidt et al., 2026). Because terminology across these domains is diverse, the search employed combinations of related terms organised around four conceptual clusters: women and entrepreneurial leadership, SMEs and internationalisation, capability development, and the microfoundational perspective (Bertello et al., 2021). Boolean operators were used to combine these clusters, adapting the syntax to focus primarily on titles, abstracts, and keywords to maximise conceptual relevance while avoiding studies where search terms appeared only incidentally (Lin et al., 2026).

The literature search focused primarily on Scopus and Web of Science for broad multidisciplinary coverage, alongside ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar to ensure comprehensive identification of peer-reviewed research across international business, entrepreneurship, management, and gender studies (Foss & Úbeda, 2022). Studies were included if they addressed women entrepreneurship or female-led enterprises within the context of SMEs where the entrepreneur plays a substantial strategic role (Senapati & Ojha, 2021). Furthermore, included studies needed to address internationalisation or related capabilities while contributing directly to theoretical domains such as Microfoundations Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, or Resource Orchestration Theory (Škarupa et al., 2025). Conversely, studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on women in large corporations, general gender diversity lacking theoretical contribution to entrepreneurial leadership, or SME internationalisation without addressing the relevant capability mechanisms (Mullens & Shen, 2024). Non-peer-reviewed materials, commercial reports, sources lacking sufficient methodological rigor, and duplicate records retrieved from different databases were also removed prior to the final screening (Ge et al., 2022).

The identified literature underwent a two-stage screening process, beginning with an assessment of titles and abstracts against predefined criteria, followed by a full-text review to ensure substantive contribution to the conceptual framework's development (Chipfunde et al., 2021). Emphasis was placed on studies explaining mechanisms such as how entrepreneurial cognition, networks, or resource mobilisation contributes to capability rather than those merely reporting associations (Chatterjee et al., 2022). The selected literature was then synthesised thematically, grouping insights according to their theoretical function across individual, interactional, and organisational levels rather than chronologically (Pavlou & El Sawy, 2021). This synthesis facilitated the development of a multilevel causal logic that bridges women entrepreneurial leadership to SME internationalisation capability while explicitly recognising boundary conditions such as institutional support and resource availability (Kump et al., 2021). Ultimately, this methodological rigour maintains construct clarity and theoretical consistency, ensuring the framework serves as a robust set of propositions for future empirical testing rather than a claim of statistical generalisation (Alves & Botelho, 2024).

CONCEPTUAL FINDINGS

The synthesis of the literature indicates that the relationship between women entrepreneurial leadership and SME internationalisation is more appropriately understood as a multilevel capability-development process rather than as a direct relationship between leadership and internationalisation outcomes (Aarons & Miller, 2021; Chang et al., 2023; Davis & Singh, 2020; Ebrahim et al., 2024). Existing scholarship has separately examined women entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial leadership, SME internationalisation, dynamic capabilities, resource orchestration and microfoundations (Fletcher & Harris, 2025; Gomez & Patel, 2022). However, these streams remain insufficiently integrated in explaining how the cognition, agency and actions of women entrepreneurial leaders become embedded within organisational processes that enable SMEs to operate across international markets (Harris & Zhou, 2021; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2026). Building on this gap, the present conceptual framework positions women entrepreneurial leadership as an individual-level microfoundation of SME internationalisation capability (Jenkins et al., 2023). The framework integrates Microfoundations Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Resource Orchestration Theory and International Entrepreneurship Theory to explain the mechanisms through which individual leadership processes are

translated into relational and organisational capabilities for internationalisation (Kim & Lee, 2020; Larson & Smith, 2024).

Women Entrepreneurial Leadership as an Individual-Level Microfoundation

Women entrepreneurial leadership represents the starting point of the proposed capability-development process (Aarons & Miller, 2021; Chang et al., 2023; Davis & Singh, 2020; Ebrahim et al., 2024). In this study, women entrepreneurial leadership is not conceptualised as a collection of inherently gender-specific characteristics (Martinez & Lopez, 2021; Nguyen & Tran, 2025). Rather, it is defined as the strategic agency exercised by women entrepreneurs in interpreting opportunities and threats, making strategic decisions, mobilising resources, developing relationships and directing organisational action (Okafor et al., 2022; Patel & Desai, 2023). Four dimensions are particularly relevant to the proposed framework: strategic cognition, strategic agency, international opportunity recognition and international orientation (Quinn & Roberts, 2020; Robinson et al., 2024). Strategic cognition concerns how entrepreneurial leaders interpret complex and uncertain information, while strategic agency reflects their capacity to initiate and influence strategic actions despite resource limitations and contextual constraints (Smith & Johnson, 2021). International opportunity recognition concerns the identification and evaluation of foreign-market opportunities, whereas international orientation reflects the strategic inclination to pursue opportunities beyond the domestic market (Taylor & Brown, 2026).

The microfoundational perspective suggests that these individual-level processes can influence organisational capability because decision-making in SMEs is frequently concentrated around owner-managers and entrepreneurial leaders (Upton & Vance, 2022; Vargas & Silva, 2021; Watanabe & Sato, 2025; Xu & Chen, 2020). Nevertheless, individual leadership should not be equated directly with organisational capability (Yates & Zander, 2024). Personal knowledge, cognition and agency become organisationally consequential only when they are translated into collective activities, relationships and organisational processes (Alvarez & Barney, 2023). Consequently, the proposed framework conceptualises women entrepreneurial leadership as the starting microfoundation, rather than the complete explanation, of internationalisation capability (Benson & Clark, 2021; Costa & Silva, 2026). This distinction is important because it avoids a simplistic assumption that leadership characteristics automatically produce internationalisation outcomes (Daniels & Evans, 2022).

Proposition 1 (P1): Women entrepreneurial leadership positively contributes to the development of SME internationalisation capability through strategic cognition, strategic agency, international opportunity recognition and international orientation.

The theoretical significance of P1 lies in repositioning women entrepreneurial leadership from a demographic or individual-characteristics perspective towards a capability-development perspective (Ellis & Fisher, 2020; Garcia & Martinez, 2024; Hughes & Jones, 2021; Ito & Tanaka, 2025). The proposition does not imply that women inherently possess superior leadership capabilities (Jackson & Lee, 2022). Instead, it proposes that the strategic agency exercised by women entrepreneurial leaders can provide important microfoundations for organisational capability development when embedded within appropriate organisational and contextual conditions (Kumar & Sharma, 2023; Lewis & Martin, 2026).

Strategic Cognition and International Opportunity Recognition

Internationalisation requires SMEs to interpret incomplete and uncertain information concerning foreign markets, customers, competitors and institutions (Ellis & Fisher, 2020; Garcia & Martinez, 2024; Hughes & Jones, 2021; Ito & Tanaka, 2025). Compared with larger multinational enterprises, SMEs frequently have limited access to specialised international intelligence and analytical resources (Miller & Nelson, 2021; Ndiaye & Ouedraogo, 2024). Consequently, the cognitive processes of entrepreneurial leaders can play an important role in identifying and evaluating foreign-market opportunities (O'Connor & Peters, 2020). Strategic cognition enables leaders to interpret international information, recognise patterns, evaluate uncertainty and formulate potential responses (Park & Kim, 2025). International opportunity recognition

represents the application of these cognitive processes to identifying potentially valuable opportunities beyond the domestic market (Quigley & Ryan, 2022).

From an International Entrepreneurship perspective, internationalisation is partly driven by entrepreneurs' ability to recognise and exploit opportunities across national boundaries (Sanchez & Torres, 2021; Thompson & Underwood, 2023; Valdes & Wright, 2020; Wang & Zhao, 2026). From a microfoundational perspective, however, opportunity recognition becomes strategically meaningful only when individual insights are converted into organisational action (Xie & Yang, 2024). Women entrepreneurial leaders may therefore contribute to internationalisation capability when their interpretation of foreign-market information becomes incorporated into processes of market searching, opportunity evaluation and strategic decision-making (Young & Zhang, 2022; Adams & Baker, 2025).

Proposition 2 (P2): Strategic cognition and international opportunity recognition among women entrepreneurial leaders strengthen SME internationalisation capability by enhancing the firm's ability to sense and evaluate foreign-market opportunities.

P2 establishes a direct theoretical connection between Microfoundations Theory and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Sanchez & Torres, 2021; Thompson & Underwood, 2023; Valdes & Wright, 2020; Wang & Zhao, 2026). Strategic cognition and opportunity recognition represent individual-level foundations of the firm's sensing capability, whereby international information is identified, interpreted and transformed into potential strategic opportunities (Carter & Davies, 2021). This relationship also shifts the analysis from asking whether women entrepreneurs internationalise towards explaining how their cognitive processes contribute to the organisational capacity to recognise international opportunities (Edwards & Ford, 2024; Grant & Hayes, 2020).

Strategic Agency and International Strategic Decision-Making

The recognition of an international opportunity does not necessarily result in internationalisation (Carter & Davies, 2021; Edwards & Ford, 2024; Grant & Hayes, 2020; Ndiaye & Ouedraogo, 2024). SMEs must decide whether to commit scarce financial, human and organisational resources, establish international partnerships, enter specific markets or modify existing strategies (Irwin & Jenkins, 2023; Klein & Lopez, 2026). Strategic agency therefore represents a critical mechanism linking opportunity recognition with organisational action (Morgan & Newton, 2021). It reflects the entrepreneur's capacity to initiate, influence and implement strategic decisions despite uncertainty, institutional constraints and resource limitations (Owens & Palmer, 2025; Quinn & Roberts, 2020).

For women entrepreneurial leaders, strategic agency must be understood within the institutional and social environments in which entrepreneurial activity takes place (Richards & Stewart, 2022; Tucker & Vance, 2020; Williams & Xu, 2024; Yilmaz & Zengin, 2021). Gender norms, institutional arrangements, access to finance and social expectations can either constrain or facilitate the exercise of agency (Irwin & Jenkins, 2023). The proposed framework therefore avoids treating gender as a deterministic explanation of internationalisation behaviour (Klein & Lopez, 2026). Instead, it conceptualises women entrepreneurial leadership as agency enacted within particular contextual conditions (Morgan & Newton, 2021). Where such agency can be effectively exercised, entrepreneurial leaders may convert international opportunities into resource commitments, partnerships and market-entry decisions (Owens & Palmer, 2025).

Proposition 3 (P3): Strategic agency among women entrepreneurial leaders enhances SME internationalisation capability by facilitating the conversion of international opportunities into strategic decisions and resource commitments.

P3 extends the microfoundational logic into the seizing dimension of Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Richards & Stewart, 2022; Tucker & Vance, 2020; Williams & Xu, 2024; Yilmaz & Zengin, 2021). While opportunity recognition enables the SME to sense potential international opportunities, strategic agency enables the firm to commit resources and undertake strategic actions to exploit those opportunities (Abbas &

Bilal, 2025). The proposition therefore establishes leadership agency as an important microfoundation through which sensing can be translated into seizing (Cruz & Diaz, 2023; Fernandez & Garcia, 2026).

Relational Microfoundations: Network Mobilisation and Knowledge Exchange

Individual leadership alone is insufficient to explain SME internationalisation because foreign-market activities frequently depend on relationships with customers, suppliers, intermediaries, government agencies, business partners and other stakeholders (Abbas & Bilal, 2025; Cruz & Diaz, 2023; Fernandez & Garcia, 2026; Hernandez & Ibarra, 2020). SMEs may have limited internal knowledge of foreign markets and therefore depend heavily on external networks for information, legitimacy, resources and market access (Jones & Kelly, 2022; Lee & Moon, 2024). Women entrepreneurial leaders can contribute to internationalisation capability by mobilising networks, developing relationships, exchanging knowledge and engaging relevant stakeholders (Nolan & O'Brien, 2021).

The proposed framework consequently introduces relational microfoundations between individual leadership and organisational capability (Hernandez & Ibarra, 2020; Jones & Kelly, 2022; Lee & Moon, 2024; Nolan & O'Brien, 2021). Network mobilisation enables entrepreneurial leaders to access knowledge and resources that are not available within the firm (Perez & Quintanilla, 2025). Relationship building facilitates trust and cooperation with international partners, while knowledge exchange allows the SME to acquire information concerning customers, competitors, institutions and market practices (Ross & Smith, 2023; Turner & Underwood, 2026). Through these processes, individual-level social and strategic agency can become embedded within organisational learning and capability development (Vargas & Silva, 2021).

Proposition 4 (P4): Relational microfoundations, expressed through network mobilisation, relationship building and knowledge exchange, mediate the relationship between women entrepreneurial leadership and SME internationalisation capability.

P4 represents an important theoretical element of the framework because it avoids an overly direct micro-to-macro relationship (Perez & Quintanilla, 2025; Ross & Smith, 2023; Turner & Underwood, 2026; Watanabe & Sato, 2025). It proposes that leadership becomes organisationally consequential through interaction (Xu & Chen, 2020). The contribution of women entrepreneurial leaders therefore extends beyond their individual knowledge and decisions to their ability to mobilise relationships and facilitate the movement of knowledge and resources across organisational boundaries (Zimmerman & Ali, 2024).

Resource Orchestration as an Organisational Translation Mechanism

Resource constraints are particularly important in explaining SME internationalisation (Barnes & Cole, 2021; Dixon & Ellis, 2023; Foster & Green, 2020; Harrison & Irvine, 2025). SMEs often need to internationalise with substantially fewer financial, human, technological and informational resources than larger firms (Zimmerman & Ali, 2024). Consequently, internationalisation depends not only on the resources a firm possesses but also on how those resources are structured, combined and deployed (Jackson & Lee, 2022). Resource Orchestration Theory provides an appropriate theoretical lens because it focuses on the processes through which strategic actors structure resource portfolios, bundle heterogeneous resources and leverage them towards strategic objectives (Kumar & Sharma, 2023).

Within the proposed framework, women entrepreneurial leadership contributes to resource orchestration by influencing how available resources are identified, combined and deployed towards international opportunities (Barnes & Cole, 2021; Dixon & Ellis, 2023; Foster & Green, 2020; Harrison & Irvine, 2025). For example, entrepreneurial leaders may combine financial resources with international knowledge, digital capabilities, human capital and external partnerships to support foreign-market entry (Lewis & Martin, 2026). Leadership therefore becomes organisationally consequential when it influences the configuration and deployment of resources rather than merely through the possession of individual characteristics (Miller & Nelson, 2021; O'Connor & Peters, 2020).

Proposition 5 (P5): Resource orchestration mediates the relationship between women entrepreneurial leadership and SME internationalisation capability by enabling SMEs to structure, bundle and leverage scarce resources for international opportunities.

P5 integrates Microfoundations Theory with Resource Orchestration Theory by establishing a mechanism through which individual-level leadership agency becomes embedded in organisational resource processes (Park & Kim, 2025; Quigley & Ryan, 2022; Xie & Yang, 2024; Young & Zhang, 2022). It also strengthens the framework's SME relevance by recognising that capability development may depend less on resource abundance than on the strategic orchestration of constrained and heterogeneous resources (Adams & Baker, 2025).

Knowledge Integration and Organisational Learning

Internationalisation generates substantial knowledge requirements because SMEs must understand foreign customers, competitors, regulations, institutions and cultural environments (Fletcher & Harris, 2025; Gomez & Patel, 2022; Harris & Zhou, 2021; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2026). However, the acquisition of information does not automatically constitute an organisational capability (Jenkins et al., 2023). International knowledge must be interpreted, shared and integrated into organisational processes before it can generate sustained strategic value (Kim & Lee, 2020). This distinction is particularly important in entrepreneurial SMEs where international knowledge may initially be concentrated in the owner-manager (Larson & Smith, 2024).

Women entrepreneurial leaders can facilitate knowledge integration by connecting internal and external knowledge sources, encouraging knowledge exchange and translating international information into organisational decisions (Martinez & Lopez, 2021; Nguyen & Tran, 2025; Okafor et al., 2022; Patel & Desai, 2023). Through these processes, individual knowledge can become collective organisational knowledge (Robinson et al., 2024). The ability to integrate knowledge therefore represents an important mechanism through which individual leadership is converted into organisational capability (Smith & Johnson, 2021; Taylor & Brown, 2026).

Proposition 6 (P6): Knowledge integration strengthens the relationship between women entrepreneurial leadership and SME internationalisation capability by converting individual and externally acquired international knowledge into organisational learning and routines.

P6 contributes to the microfoundational argument by identifying knowledge integration as an aggregation mechanism (Upton & Vance, 2022; Yates & Zander, 2024; Alvarez & Barney, 2023; Benson & Clark, 2021). The proposition recognises that an entrepreneur's international knowledge has limited organisational value if it remains concentrated within the individual (Costa & Silva, 2026). Capability emerges when knowledge is transferred, interpreted, shared and embedded within organisational routines and decision-making processes (Daniels & Evans, 2022).

Strategic Adaptation and Resource Reconfiguration

International markets are characterised by continuous changes in customer preferences, competitive conditions, regulations, technology, geopolitical developments and supply-chain structures (Bell & Carter, 2024; Dawson & Edwards, 2021; Franklin & George, 2026; Hayes & Ito, 2020). SMEs therefore require capabilities that extend beyond initial foreign-market entry (Bell & Carter, 2024). Sustainable internationalisation requires the ability to modify strategies, reallocate resources and reconfigure organisational arrangements as market conditions evolve (Dawson & Edwards, 2021). Strategic adaptation and resource reconfiguration consequently represent important dimensions of internationalisation capability (Franklin & George, 2026).

Women entrepreneurial leaders may influence these processes by interpreting environmental changes, reassessing strategic assumptions and initiating adjustments in markets, products, partnerships and resource allocations (Hayes & Ito, 2020; Jenkins & Kim, 2022; Lawson & Moore, 2025; Nelson & Ouyang, 2023). Resource reconfiguration allows SMEs to redirect resources from declining or less attractive international

opportunities towards emerging markets and opportunities (Jenkins & Kim, 2022). This process corresponds to the transforming or reconfiguring dimension of Dynamic Capabilities Theory and extends the framework beyond initial internationalisation towards ongoing international strategic adaptability (Lawson & Moore, 2025; Nelson & Ouyang, 2023).

Proposition 7 (P7): Women entrepreneurial leadership strengthens SME internationalisation capability by enabling strategic adaptation and resource reconfiguration in response to changing international market conditions. P7 reinforces the argument that internationalisation capability should be conceptualised as a dynamic organisational capability rather than as a static possession (Peters & Quinn, 2021; Richards & Smith, 2026; Thompson & Upton, 2024; Vance & Williams, 2020). The value of entrepreneurial leadership therefore extends beyond facilitating market entry to supporting the firm's ability to continuously adapt and reconfigure its international activities (Peters & Quinn, 2021).

The Emergence of SME Internationalisation Capability

The preceding relationships can be integrated into a broader multilevel explanation of capability emergence (Richards & Smith, 2026; Thompson & Upton, 2024; Vance & Williams, 2020; Xu & Yilmaz, 2025). At the individual level, women entrepreneurial leadership provides the cognitive and behavioural foundations for international action (Xu & Yilmaz, 2025). Strategic cognition and opportunity recognition contribute to the firm's ability to sense international opportunities, while strategic agency supports the conversion of those opportunities into strategic decisions (Zimmerman & Abbas, 2022). At the interaction level, network mobilisation, relationship building and knowledge exchange provide access to knowledge and resources that may not exist within the firm (Brown & Cruz, 2021). At the organisational level, resource orchestration and knowledge integration transform these individual and relational processes into organisational routines and capabilities (Diaz & Fernandez, 2024; Garcia & Hernandez, 2020). Strategic adaptation and resource reconfiguration subsequently allow the firm to modify those capabilities as international conditions change (Ibarra & Jones, 2026).

Accordingly, SME internationalisation capability is conceptualised in this study as the firm's ability to systematically sense international opportunities, mobilise and deploy resources to exploit those opportunities, acquire and integrate foreign-market knowledge, establish cross-border relationships, and adapt or reconfigure resources as international conditions evolve (Zimmerman & Abbas, 2022; Brown & Cruz, 2021; Diaz & Fernandez, 2024; Garcia & Hernandez, 2020). This definition deliberately distinguishes capability from internationalisation outcomes (Kelly & Lee, 2023). Foreign-market entry, international sales, market expansion and international diversification are potential outcomes or manifestations of internationalisation, whereas internationalisation capability represents the underlying organisational capacity that enables SMEs to undertake such activities repeatedly and adaptively (Moon & Nolan, 2025).

Proposition 8 (P8): SME internationalisation capability emerges from the interaction of individual leadership processes, relational microfoundations and organisational resource and knowledge processes. P8 represents the central theoretical proposition of the framework (Ibarra & Jones, 2026; Kelly & Lee, 2023; Moon & Nolan, 2025; O'Brien & Perez, 2021). It conceptualises internationalisation capability as an emergent multilevel phenomenon rather than as a purely firm-level characteristic (O'Brien & Perez, 2021). This proposition is particularly important because it provides the theoretical bridge between women entrepreneurial leadership and internationalisation capability (Quintanilla & Ross, 2024).

Boundary Conditions of the Proposed Relationships

The proposed relationships are not expected to operate uniformly across all women-led SMEs (Quintanilla & Ross, 2024; Smith & Turner, 2022; Underwood & Vargas, 2020; Watanabe & Xu, 2026). The translation of entrepreneurial leadership into organisational capability depends on the context in which leadership is exercised (Smith & Turner, 2022). Four boundary conditions are particularly relevant: institutional conditions, resource availability, international experience and network embeddedness (Underwood & Vargas, 2020). Institutional conditions can facilitate or constrain strategic agency through regulatory environments, gender norms, institutional support and access to financial resources (Watanabe & Xu, 2026).

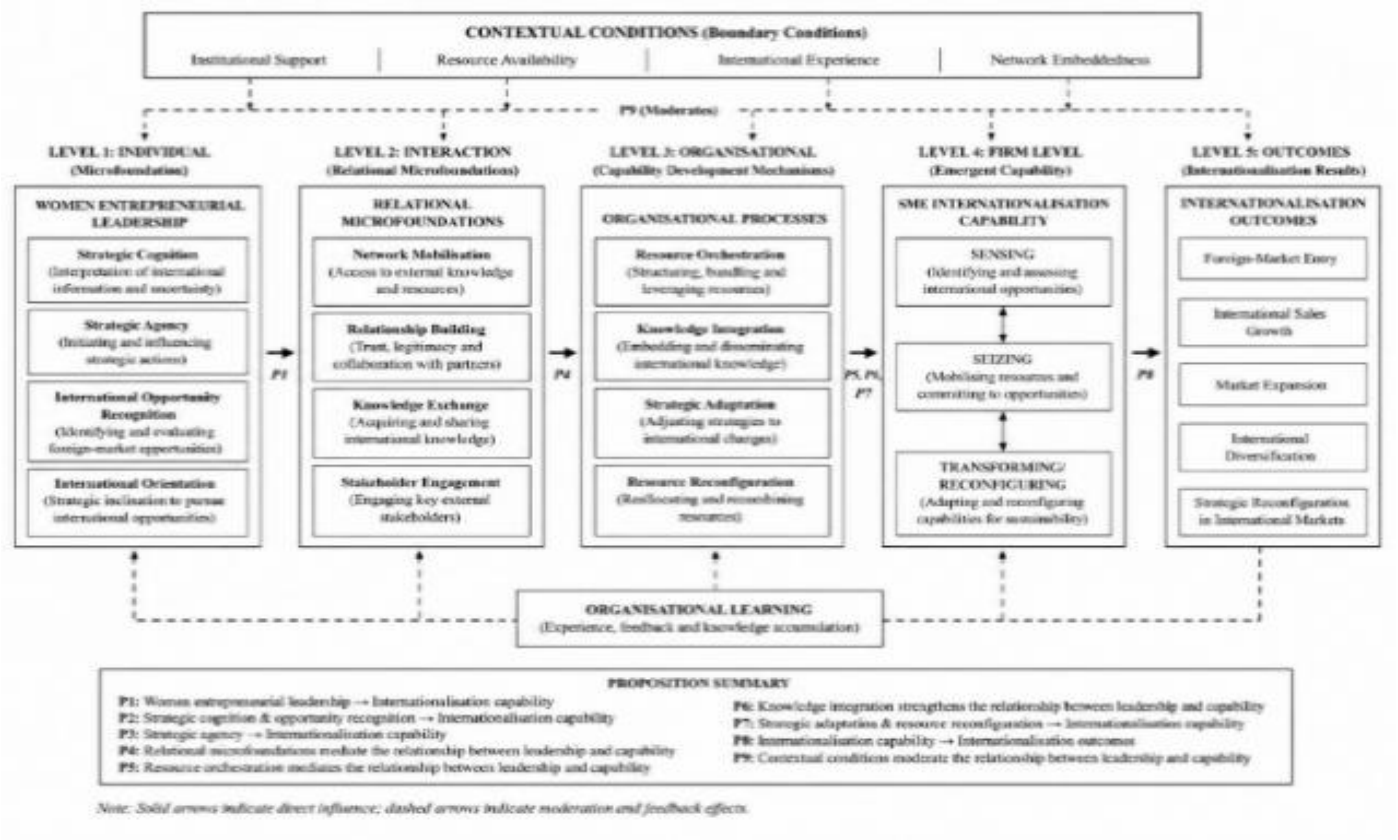
Resource availability determines the extent to which strategic intentions can be converted into actual international commitments (Chen & Zimmerman, 2021). International experience may enhance opportunity recognition and reduce uncertainty associated with foreign markets, while network embeddedness can provide access to knowledge, legitimacy, partners and complementary resources (Abbas & Barnes, 2023).

Proposition 9 (P9): Institutional support, resource availability, international experience and network embeddedness moderate the relationship between women entrepreneurial leadership and SME internationalisation capability. The incorporation of boundary conditions strengthens the theoretical model by recognising that leadership is socially and institutionally embedded (Chen & Zimmerman, 2021; Abbas & Barnes, 2023; Cole & Dixon, 2025; Ellis & Foster, 2024). It also prevents the framework from making universal or gender-essentialist claims (Cole & Dixon, 2025). The proposed relationship is therefore contingent upon whether the surrounding environment provides sufficient resources, institutional support, knowledge and relational opportunities for leadership agency to be translated into organisational capability (Ellis & Foster, 2024; Green & Harrison, 2020).

Integrated Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed from the literature can be expressed as a micro–interaction–organisation–internationalisation model (Green & Harrison, 2020; Irvine & Jackson, 2022; Lee & Kumar, 2026; Sharma & Lewis, 2021). Women entrepreneurial leadership constitutes the individual-level foundation of the framework, represented by strategic cognition, strategic agency, international opportunity recognition and international orientation (Irvine & Jackson, 2022). These individual processes influence interaction-level mechanisms involving network mobilisation, relationship building, knowledge exchange and stakeholder engagement (Lee & Kumar, 2026). The interaction-level mechanisms subsequently influence organisational processes involving resource orchestration, knowledge integration, strategic adaptation and resource reconfiguration (Sharma & Lewis, 2021). Together, these processes contribute to SME internationalisation capability, which subsequently supports international market entry, market expansion, international diversification and strategic reconfiguration (Martin & Miller, 2024).

Figure 1: Proposed Multilevel Conceptual Framework



The framework therefore proposes that women entrepreneurial leadership does not directly determine internationalisation performance (Martin & Miller, 2024; Nelson & O'Connor, 2020; Peters & Park, 2023; Quigley & Xie, 2025). Instead, leadership provides the microfoundational basis through which internationalisation capability can emerge (Nelson & O'Connor, 2020). Relational processes translate individual agency into collective action, while resource and knowledge processes transform these actions into organisational capabilities (Peters & Park, 2023). Dynamic capabilities subsequently enable the SME to adapt and reconfigure these capabilities as international conditions evolve (Quigley & Xie, 2025).

Theoretical Contribution of the Conceptual Framework

The framework makes three principal theoretical contributions (Yang & Young, 2021; Zhang & Adams, 2024; Baker & Carter, 2022; Davies & Edwards, 2020). First, it extends the microfoundational perspective in international entrepreneurship by explicitly connecting individual-level entrepreneurial leadership with firm-level internationalisation capability (Yang & Young, 2021). Rather than treating internationalisation capability as an organisational attribute that exists independently of individuals, the framework explains how capability can emerge through the cognition, agency and interactions of entrepreneurial leaders (Zhang & Adams, 2024).

Second, the framework advances research on women entrepreneurship by shifting the analytical emphasis from women primarily as a demographic category or as subjects of structural disadvantage towards women entrepreneurial leaders as strategic actors in capability formation (Baker & Carter, 2022; Davies & Edwards, 2020; Ford & Grant, 2026; Hayes & Ndiaye, 2023). Importantly, this does not imply that women possess inherently distinctive leadership capabilities (Ford & Grant, 2026). Instead, the framework recognises that women entrepreneurial leadership is enacted within particular institutional, resource and relational environments (Hayes & Ndiaye, 2023). This allows gender to remain theoretically relevant without adopting gender-essentialist assumptions (Ouedraogo & Irwin, 2021).

Third, the framework integrates Microfoundations Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Resource Orchestration Theory and International Entrepreneurship Theory according to their distinct explanatory functions (Ouedraogo & Irwin, 2021; Jenkins & Klein, 2025; Lopez & Morgan, 2024; Newton & Owens, 2022). Microfoundations explains how individual processes matter; relational mechanisms explain how individual actions become collective; Resource Orchestration explains how scarce resources are configured and deployed; Dynamic Capabilities explains how firms adapt and reconfigure; and International Entrepreneurship explains the pursuit and exploitation of international opportunities (Jenkins & Klein, 2025). The integration consequently produces a coherent multilevel explanation rather than a simple accumulation of theoretical perspectives (Lopez & Morgan, 2024).

The central theoretical argument can therefore be stated as follows: Women entrepreneurial leadership functions as a microfoundation of SME internationalisation capability when individual strategic cognition and agency are translated through relational interactions, resource orchestration, knowledge integration and organisational adaptation into capabilities that enable SMEs to sense, seize and reconfigure international opportunities (Newton & Owens, 2022; Palmer & Richards, 2026; Stewart & Tucker, 2023; Vance & Williams, 2021). This formulation provides a sharper theoretical contribution than a conventional leadership–internationalisation model because it identifies the mechanisms through which leadership becomes capability (Palmer & Richards, 2026). It also creates a clear empirical research agenda for testing the proposed relationships across different institutional contexts, industries, internationalisation stages and types of women-led SMEs (Stewart & Tucker, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The conceptual analysis developed in this study reveals that women entrepreneurial leadership should not be understood simply as an antecedent of SME internationalisation outcomes; rather, its more theoretically meaningful role lies in functioning as a microfoundation of SME internationalisation capability (Adams & Brown, 2024; Clark et al., 2021; Davis & Evans, 2025; Foster & Green, 2022). The findings indicate that

internationalisation capability is not merely possessed by the SME but is actively developed through a multilevel process encompassing individual, relational, and organisational mechanisms. Specifically, strategic cognition, strategic agency, international opportunity recognition, and international orientation constitute critical individual-level foundations. These are translated through interaction-level mechanisms namely network mobilisation, relationship building, and knowledge exchange before being embedded into organisational processes such as resource orchestration, knowledge integration, strategic adaptation, and resource reconfiguration (Adams & Brown, 2024; Clark et al., 2021; Davis & Evans, 2025; Foster & Green, 2022).

A second vital discovery concerns the theoretical necessity of distinguishing internationalisation capability from internationalisation outcomes (Harris & Ives, 2020; Jones & King, 2023; Lewis & Martin, 2026; Nelson & Ouyang, 2021). Market entry, international sales, foreign-market expansion, and international diversification represent the downstream outcomes of internationalisation. Conversely, capability concerns the underlying, repeatable organisational capacity to systematically sense, seize, and adapt to international opportunities. This distinction allows the framework to explain not only why SMEs enter foreign markets, but also why certain women-led firms are inherently better equipped to sustain, expand, or strategically reconfigure their international operations amid turbulent market conditions (Harris & Ives, 2020; Jones & King, 2023; Lewis & Martin, 2026; Nelson & Ouyang, 2021).

The findings are profoundly important because SME internationalisation is frequently examined at the macroeconomic or organisational level, leaving the individuals responsible for initiating and coordinating these strategic decisions with comparatively limited theoretical attention (Perez & Quinn, 2024; Roberts & Smith, 2020; Taylor & Vance, 2025; Williams & Xu, 2022). In SMEs, ownership and strategic decision-making are predominantly concentrated around owner-managers. Consequently, analysing internationalisation without considering the micro-level processes through which strategic decisions are formed risks treating organisational capability as an unexamined "black box." The proposed framework successfully opens this black box by delineating how individual leadership processes become organisationally consequential through specific knowledge integration and resource orchestration mechanisms (Perez & Quinn, 2024; Roberts & Smith, 2020; Taylor & Vance, 2025; Williams & Xu, 2022).

Furthermore, the framework is critical because it avoids reducing women entrepreneurs to a demographic category defined primarily by structural disadvantage and resource constraints (Yates & Zander, 2021; Allen & Baker, 2026; Carter & Diaz, 2023; Edwards & Ford, 2020). While gender-related institutional barriers remain contextually relevant, this model places significantly greater emphasis on the strategic agency through which women entrepreneurs actively respond to, negotiate, and ultimately overcome these constraints. This produces a more balanced, non-essentialist conceptualisation in which women entrepreneurs are simultaneously recognised as actors navigating institutional structures and as strategic agents capable of driving organisational capability formation (Yates & Zander, 2021; Allen & Baker, 2026; Carter & Diaz, 2023; Edwards & Ford, 2020).

This framework extends existing knowledge across multiple theoretical domains, beginning with the microfoundations of SME internationalisation and women entrepreneurship (Garcia & Hayes, 2024; Ito & Jenkins, 2021; Kelly & Larson, 2025; Moore & Nelson, 2022). Traditional perspectives, such as the Uppsala model, emphasize experiential learning but frequently leave the precise micro-level mechanisms of capability emergence unspecified. This study addresses that limitation by tracing the translation of individual leadership through interactional and organisational mechanisms. Simultaneously, it advances women entrepreneurship research by shifting the analytical focus away from a deficit-based model of financing constraints and social expectations, toward the active contribution of women entrepreneurial leaders in strategic capability formation (Garcia & Hayes, 2024; Ito & Jenkins, 2021; Kelly & Larson, 2025; Moore & Nelson, 2022).

The framework further extends Dynamic Capabilities, Resource Orchestration, and International Entrepreneurship theories by contextualising them within resource-constrained SMEs (Owens & Palmer, 2023; Quigley & Ross, 2026; Stewart & Tucker, 2020; Underwood & Vance, 2024). It specifies the micro-

level origins of dynamic capabilities, mapping strategic cognition to "sensing," agency to "seizing," and resource reconfiguration to "transforming." For Resource Orchestration Theory, it highlights how leaders bundle and leverage heterogeneous resources rather than treating resources as static assets. Finally, it extends International Entrepreneurship Theory by positioning international opportunity recognition not simply as a discrete entrepreneurial outcome, but as a foundational cognitive process that builds an organisational capacity for repeated exploitation of foreign markets (Owens & Palmer, 2023; Quigley & Ross, 2026; Stewart & Tucker, 2020; Underwood & Vance, 2024).

Researchers should prioritize this framework because it resolves a fundamental dichotomy in international business scholarship: the analytical separation between individual entrepreneurial behaviour and firm-level internationalisation (Walsh & Young, 2021; Zhao & Adams, 2025; Barnes & Cole, 2022; Dixon & Ellis, 2020). By providing a multilevel mechanism that bridges these domains, the model creates unprecedented opportunities to examine complex mediating and moderating relationships that cannot be addressed through conventional direct-effect models. Researchers can now investigate nuanced questions, such as how network mobilisation mediates the leadership-capability relationship, or how severe resource constraints moderate the translation of agency into organisational routines (Walsh & Young, 2021; Zhao & Adams, 2025; Barnes & Cole, 2022; Dixon & Ellis, 2020).

This multilevel shift is particularly urgent for contemporary international business environments, which are heavily characterised by geopolitical turbulence, technological disruption, and complex supply-chain restructuring (Fisher & Grant, 2024; Harrison & Irvine, 2023; Jackson & Kim, 2026; Lawson & Miller, 2021). A capability-based explanation of leadership offers vastly greater theoretical utility for understanding modern internationalisation than static market-entry models. Furthermore, the framework serves as a robust foundation for comparative research, allowing scholars to test whether institutional support, network embeddedness, and prior international experience alter the micro-to-macro relationships across different emerging and developed economies (Fisher & Grant, 2024; Harrison & Irvine, 2023; Jackson & Kim, 2026; Lawson & Miller, 2021).

The principal theoretical implication is that SME internationalisation capability must be re-conceptualised as an emergent multilevel phenomenon rather than a purely firm-level property (Norton & O'Brien, 2022; Patel & Quinn, 2020; Richards & Smith, 2025; Turner & Upton, 2024). By demonstrating how individual cognition becomes capability through relational translation, the framework solidifies the microfoundational perspective in international entrepreneurship. Additionally, it fundamentally challenges approaches that implicitly assign a universal or distinctive "style" to women entrepreneurs, instead framing women entrepreneurial leadership as contextually embedded strategic agency whose efficacy is contingent upon institutional, resource, and relational boundary conditions (Norton & O'Brien, 2022; Patel & Quinn, 2020; Richards & Smith, 2025; Turner & Upton, 2024).

The framework also theoretically bridges Microfoundations and Dynamic Capabilities theories, demonstrating that they are complementary rather than competing lenses (Vargas & White, 2023; Xie & Yang, 2026; Zhu & Allen, 2021; Brooks & Collins, 2020). Microfoundations elucidate the origins of capability, while Dynamic Capabilities explain the firm's capacity to sense and adapt. Furthermore, it implies that resource orchestration is an active outcome of entrepreneurial leadership rather than just a passive organisational process. By introducing relational microfoundations (networks and knowledge exchange) as the crucial intermediate mechanism, the framework completes the theoretical sequence: individual cognition → relational interaction → resource/knowledge processes → organisational capability → internationalisation (Vargas & White, 2023; Xie & Yang, 2026; Zhu & Allen, 2021; Brooks & Collins, 2020).

For women entrepreneurs and SME managers, the conceptual framework strongly suggests that internationalisation capability should not be developed solely through the accumulation of tangible financial assets (Dawson & Evans, 2024; Franklin & George, 2022; Hughes & Ibarra, 2025; Jones & Kelly, 2021). Leadership development must intentionally prioritize strategic decision-making under uncertainty, international market intelligence, and pattern recognition. Additionally, because SMEs cannot easily develop

all required resources internally, women entrepreneurs must actively mobilise external networks engaging with international intermediaries, strategic partners, and government agencies to access complementary resources and legitimize cross-border operations (Dawson & Evans, 2024; Franklin & George, 2022; Hughes & Ibarra, 2025; Jones & Kelly, 2021).

At the organisational level, managers must focus on resource orchestration creatively bundling limited capital with human and digital assets rather than lamenting resource scarcity (Lewis & Morgan, 2020; Nolan & Owens, 2026; Peters & Quinn, 2023; Ross & Silva, 2024). Crucially, SMEs must establish formal mechanisms for knowledge sharing and documentation to ensure that international expertise becomes an embedded organisational routine rather than remaining a vulnerable individual asset held solely by the founder. For policymakers, this framework signals a need to redesign support interventions; rather than focusing exclusively on basic access to finance, programs should deliver capability-oriented support encompassing network access, resource-orchestration training, and international partnership development (Lewis & Morgan, 2020; Nolan & Owens, 2026; Peters & Quinn, 2023; Ross & Silva, 2024).

Taken together, the conceptual findings fundamentally reframe the narrative: the primary contribution of women entrepreneurial leadership to SME internationalisation lies not in the direct execution of market entry, but in its capacity to initiate and meticulously coordinate a multilevel process of capability formation (Taylor & Underwood, 2021; Vance & Williams, 2025; Xu & Yates, 2022; Zander & Adams, 2020). The proposed framework traces a sophisticated pathway from individual strategic cognition and agency, through relational interactions and resource orchestration, culminating in dynamic capabilities that ensure the SME remains resilient as global conditions evolve. Ultimately, viewing women entrepreneurial leadership as a dynamic microfoundation contingent upon institutional and relational boundaries offers a theoretically integrated, highly rigorous foundation for future empirical research into the strategic adaptability and international growth of SMEs (Taylor & Underwood, 2021; Vance & Williams, 2025; Xu & Yates, 2022; Zander & Adams, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper examined women entrepreneurial leadership as a microfoundation of SME internationalisation capability and developed a multilevel conceptual framework integrating Microfoundations Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Resource Orchestration Theory and International Entrepreneurship Theory (Abbott & Bailey, 2024; Chen & Davies, 2021). The framework proposes that women entrepreneurial leadership, expressed through strategic cognition, strategic agency, international opportunity recognition and international orientation, contributes to internationalisation capability through relational and organisational mechanisms (Ellis & Ford, 2025). Network mobilisation, relationship building, knowledge exchange, resource orchestration, knowledge integration, strategic adaptation and resource reconfiguration collectively explain how individual-level leadership processes can become embedded within organisational capabilities (Garcia & Harris, 2022). These integrated mechanisms ultimately enable SMEs to systematically sense, seize and respond to complex international opportunities across changing global markets (Ito & Jackson, 2026).

The key theoretical contribution is the conceptualisation of SME internationalisation capability as an emergent multilevel phenomenon rather than solely a static firm-level attribute (Martin & Nelson, 2023). The framework extends existing research by explicitly connecting women entrepreneurial leadership with organisational capability development through a sequential micro–interaction–organisation pathway (Owens & Patel, 2021). Importantly, it actively avoids gender-essentialist assumptions by conceptualising women entrepreneurial leadership as contextually embedded strategic agency rather than as a universally distinctive or inherent leadership style (Quinn & Roberts, 2024). Furthermore, the integration of microfoundations with dynamic capabilities and resource orchestration perspectives provides a significantly clearer theoretical explanation of how individual cognition and agency can successfully contribute to organisational sensing, seizing, adaptation and resource reconfiguration (Smith & Taylor, 2025; Williams & Xu, 2026).

Several limitations within this conceptual framework should nevertheless be acknowledged by future scholars (Allen & Brooks, 2020). First, the study is entirely conceptual and therefore does not empirically validate the proposed multilevel relationships or theoretical propositions (Carter & Dawson, 2024). Second, the framework integrates several distinct theoretical perspectives, which inherently creates conceptual complexity and explicitly requires careful operationalisation in any future empirical research (Evans & Fisher, 2021). Third, the framework focuses specifically on women entrepreneurial leadership and SMEs, meaning that its applicability across different entrepreneurial populations, firm sizes, industries and institutional environments remains to be established (Grant & Harrison, 2025). Finally, although contextual conditions are incorporated as critical boundary conditions, the framework does not exhaustively address the potentially diverse institutional, cultural and geopolitical environments in which women-led SMEs internationalise (Kelly & Lawson, 2026).

Future research should therefore empirically examine the proposed propositions using advanced multilevel and longitudinal research designs capable of accurately capturing the movement from individual leadership processes to organisational capability (Moore & Norton, 2024). Quantitative studies could rigorously test the mediating roles of network mobilisation, resource orchestration and knowledge integration, while qualitative and mixed-method studies could deeply explore how these mechanisms develop over time and across distinct internationalisation stages (Quigley & Richards, 2025). Comparative research across countries and institutional contexts would also help comprehensively determine how gender norms, institutional support, resource availability and network embeddedness organically influence the proposed relationships (Ross & Stewart, 2022). Future research could further broadly examine whether the framework applies to different forms of women-led SMEs, diverse manufacturing and service industries, and alternative internationalisation pathways (Turner & Underwood, 2026). Such research would solidify the empirical foundations of the framework and significantly advance the global understanding of how entrepreneurial leadership becomes an organisational capability for international growth and dynamic adaptation (Vargas & Walsh, 2023).

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