

# Unshackling the Feet: A Narrative Synthesis of Women's Empowerment and Entrepreneurship Through Kabeer's Triadic Framework

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## ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment has transitioned from a localized feminist discourse to a cornerstone of international development policy. This paper presents a narrative literature review examining the role of entrepreneurship as a catalyst for empowerment, anchored in Naila Kabeer's triadic framework of resources, agency, and achievements. Despite the potential for financial autonomy, women entrepreneurs especially in developing economies remain limited by "shackled feet," a metaphor for the systemic gendered structures of constraint that dictate resource access and mobility. By synthesizing empirical evidence from diverse contexts, the review explores how material, human, and social resources enable the exercise of agency, ultimately leading to transformative achievements that challenge patriarchal power. The analysis highlights the tension between necessity-driven survivalist ventures and accumulation-oriented enterprises, emphasizing that sustainable empowerment necessitates shifting from individualistic "magic bullets" to collective agency and integrated social reforms.

**Keywords:** Women's Empowerment; Entrepreneurship; Agency; Gendered Structures of Constraint; Narrative Literature Review

## INTRODUCTION

The discourse surrounding women's empowerment has transitioned from the peripheries of international development to the core of global economic and social policy. At the heart of this evolution is the recognition that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but also a prerequisite for sustainable development and inclusive economic growth (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025). Over the last four decades, empowerment has been conceptualized as a multidimensional process through which individuals who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability (Henderson & Ross, 2025). In this context, entrepreneurship has emerged as a primary mechanism for facilitating this transformation, offering women a gateway to financial independence, self-reliance, and increased decision-making power within both the private and public spheres (Ojediran & Anderson, 2020).

Naila Kabeer's seminal work provides the most robust theoretical anchor for understanding this process. Her framework, which emphasizes the interplay between resources, agency, and achievements, moves beyond the simplistic notion of economic participation to address the deeper, structural foundations of power (Kabeer, 1999). For the woman entrepreneur, particularly in the Global South, the act of starting and managing a business is never a purely economic endeavour; it is a social process embedded in gendered structures of constraint (Ojediran & Anderson, 2020). These structures, composed of societal rules, norms, and identities, dictate the terms on which women access capital, negotiate household responsibilities, and project their voices in the marketplace (Rahman et al., 2024).

Despite the proliferation of microfinance and small-enterprise support programs aimed at "empowering" women, the results have been decidedly mixed (Huis et al., 2017). While some women successfully leverage entrepreneurial activity to achieve transformative changes in their lives, many others remain trapped in "necessity-driven" or survivalist enterprises that inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities (Kabeer, 2017). This report seeks to navigate these complexities by synthesizing the narrative literature on female entrepreneurship through Kabeer's triadic model. It explores how the acquisition of resources (the preconditions) enables the exercise of agency (the process), ultimately leading to measurable achievements (the outcomes) that can challenge and dismantle patriarchal power structures (Kabeer, 1999).

### **Aim of the Paper**

The primary aim of this research paper is to provide an exhaustive, expert-level synthesis of the existing literature on women's empowerment through the lens of Naila Kabeer's theoretical framework, specifically from the perspective of entrepreneurship. The paper intends to bridge the gap between individualistic economic theories of choice and feminist concerns regarding structural constraints. By examining empirical evidence from diverse geographic contexts including Indonesia, eSwatini, India, Brazil, Egypt, and Bangladesh, this analysis seeks to identify the mechanisms through which entrepreneurial activity translates into transformative empowerment.

Furthermore, the paper aims to critically evaluate the "entrepreneurial myth" of individual emancipation by highlighting the systemic biases within the global entrepreneurship ecosystem. It explores the tension between "push" and "pull" motivations, the role of collective agency ("power with"), and the feedback loops where entrepreneurial achievements serve as new resources for future empowerment cycles. Ultimately, the paper provides a comprehensive foundation for policymakers and practitioners to design more effective, context-sensitive interventions that move beyond mere financial inclusion to achieve genuine gender justice.

### **Problem Statement**

The central problem addressed by this research is the persistent "mobility gap" and the "shackled feet" phenomenon that continues to limit the transformative potential of female entrepreneurship despite decades of investment in women's economic programs (Kabeer, 2017). While women represent the fastest-growing category of entrepreneurs globally, they remain significantly more likely than men to operate in the informal sector, in "female-typed" industries with low returns, and under conditions of extreme resource scarcity (Ojediran & Anderson, 2020). This concentration in overcrowded, low-value segments of the occupational structure is not a result of individual deficiency but of "gendered structures of constraint" that perpetuate discrimination and inequality (Parwez & Patel, 2022).

Many current empowerment programs suffer from an overly narrow focus on "resources" (such as access to microcredit) without adequately addressing the "agency" required to use those resources effectively or the "achievements" that women actually value (Kabeer, 1999). For instance, providing a woman with a loan may increase her financial participation, but if she lacks the agency to control the use of that loan within her household, or if the social norms in her community penalize her for being an independent earner, the intervention may lead to increased conflict or debt rather than empowerment (Huq, 2023). Furthermore, the mainstream entrepreneurship discourse remains heavily influenced by masculinized assumptions of success focusing on revenue growth and risk-taking, which often fail to align with the diverse motivations and "relatedness-based" identities of women entrepreneurs (CGIAR, 2017).

There is also a significant "time poverty" problem, where women's entrepreneurial efforts are added to their existing, unequal burden of domestic labour (Ogundare et al., 2026). Without a redistribution of reproductive responsibilities, entrepreneurship can become a source of exhaustion rather than liberation (Couva et al., 2024). Consequently, there is a critical need for a theoretical synthesis that accounts for these intersections of gender, class, and context, providing a more nuanced understanding of how to transform entrepreneurship from a survival strategy into a tool for systemic social change (Kabeer, 1999).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on women's empowerment and entrepreneurship is vast and multidisciplinary, encompassing economics, sociology, psychology, and development studies (Huq, 2023). A comprehensive review reveals several key themes that shape the current understanding of the subject.

### The Evolution of Empowerment Narratives

The concept of empowerment was initially championed by critical feminists and grassroots organizations in the West, which has raised important questions about its translation across different cultures, which is a process referred to as "vernacularization" (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2024). While the global narrative often emphasizes individual rights and political participation, local narratives in places like Myanmar or rural India may prioritize household stability, collective efficacy, and the fulfillment of relational roles (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2024). This tension suggests that empowerment is not a Western "import" but a dynamic process that must be understood within its specific socio-spatial context (Henderson & Ross, 2025).

Kabeer (1999) fundamentally redefined this discourse by linking power to choice. She argued that disempowerment is the denial of choice, and empowerment is the process by which those previously denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire it (Huis, Hansen, Otten, & Lensink, 2017). This requires three conditions: the presence of alternatives (resources), the capacity to choose (agency), and the achievement of valued outcomes (Kabeer, 1999). This framework has become the "gold standard" for development agencies, moving the focus from what women have (resources) to what they can do and be (capabilities) National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2025).

### Entrepreneurship: Push, Pull, and the Informal Sector

The literature conceptualizes women's entrepreneurial entry along a continuum shaped by "push" (necessity-driven) and "pull" (opportunity-driven) motivations. In developing economies, women's entrepreneurship is predominantly push-driven, reflecting structural constraints such as limited formal employment opportunities, gender-discriminatory labour markets, and the need to reconcile income generation with unpaid domestic responsibilities (Arifin & Rachma, 2018; Parwez & Patel, 2022). Under these conditions, entrepreneurship often functions less as a strategic choice and more as a survival mechanism embedded within informal economic structures.

In contrast, in developed contexts, entrepreneurial entry is more frequently associated with pull factors, including the pursuit of autonomy, innovation, and self-actualization (Jha, Makkad & Mittal, 2018). However, this binary distinction is increasingly challenged by empirical evidence demonstrating that even in emerging economies, such as Brazil and Egypt, women's entrepreneurial participation remains heavily constrained by socio-cultural norms and institutional barriers. These conditions blur the push-pull dichotomy, revealing that what appears as opportunity-driven entrepreneurship may, in fact, be shaped by latent structural pressures (Jha, Makkad & Mittal, 2018).

Moreover, the predominance of women in the informal sector introduces a critical limitation to empowerment outcomes. While informality lowers entry barriers, it simultaneously restricts access to legal protections, financial services, and growth-oriented infrastructure (Henderson & Ross, 2025). Consequently, women's entrepreneurial activities tend to cluster along a "continuum of work," where enterprises at the survivalist end typically small-scale, home-based, and precarious offer limited transformative potential. In contrast, movement toward the accumulation end, characterized by formalization, scalability, and profitability, is more strongly

associated with substantive empowerment outcomes (Kabeer, 2017). This demonstrates that the quality and context of entrepreneurship rather than participation alone are decisive in determining its empowering effects.

### **The Impact of Microfinance and Credit**

Microfinance has frequently been framed as a “magic bullet” for women’s empowerment, premised on the assumption that access to financial capital can catalyze agency and foster economic independence (Huis et al., 2017). This perspective aligns with resource-based approaches, which position credit as a critical enabling factor for entrepreneurial entry. However, the empirical evidence presents a more nuanced and often contradictory picture. While microfinance interventions have contributed to incremental improvements in women’s income levels and social status, their capacity to generate transformative, large-scale socio-economic change remains limited (Richard, Muldoon & Lee, 2025). This limitation can be understood by examining the disconnect between resource provision and control over resources. In many contexts, deeply embedded patriarchal norms and intra-household power dynamics restrict women’s ability to exercise authority over financial capital. As a result, loans intended for women may be appropriated or controlled by male household members, undermining the intended empowerment outcomes (Kabeer, 2011). Moreover, women’s entrepreneurial activities are often concentrated in gender-segregated, low-return sectors, where market saturation constrains profitability and limits upward mobility, as evidenced in studies from Sri Lanka (Kabeer, 2017). These insights reinforce a central tenet of Kabeer’s framework: resources alone are insufficient to produce empowerment unless accompanied by changes in the social relations that govern access, control, and use of those resources (Kabeer, 1999). In this sense, microfinance interventions that prioritize financial inclusion without addressing structural inequalities risk producing instrumental rather than transformative outcomes, highlighting the need for more integrated approaches that simultaneously enhance agency and challenge existing power relations.

### **Gendered Structures of Constraint and Systemic Bias**

Recent scholarship has shifted the focus from individual “deficiencies” in women entrepreneurs to systemic biases within the entrepreneurship ecosystem (CGIAR, 2017). The traditional image of the “entrepreneur” is heavily masculinized, associated with traits like risk-taking, competitiveness, and aggressive growth—qualities that many social role theories argue are not suited to women (CGIAR, 2017). When women do not conform to these masculine norms, they are often seen as “under-performing,” and policy solutions frequently focus on “fixing” women through confidence-boosting or better networking rather than addressing the institutional barriers themselves (CGIAR, 2017). The theoretical perspectives presented in Table 1 illustrate the multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary foundations of women’s entrepreneurship and empowerment. Rather than offering competing explanations, these frameworks collectively highlight that women’s entrepreneurial outcomes are shaped by the interaction of structural, individual, social, and discursive factors. From a structural standpoint, feminist economics emphasizes that women’s entrepreneurship cannot be understood in isolation from broader systems of gender inequality. It foregrounds the need for institutional and policy-level changes to address disparities in access to labour markets, assets, and economic opportunities. This perspective shifts the analytical focus away from individual capability toward systemic redistribution of resources and power. In contrast, human capital theory centres on the role of individual attributes, particularly education, skills, and training, as key drivers of entrepreneurial success. While this perspective highlights important determinants of productivity and performance, it tends to assume that equal access to skills will translate into equal outcomes, thereby underestimating structural and socio-cultural constraints that may limit the application of these capabilities.

Bridging these perspectives, social capital theory underscores the importance of relational resources, such as networks, mentorship, and group participation. This approach aligns closely with emerging evidence on collective agency, demonstrating that women’s access to support systems can mitigate structural barriers and enhance both business performance and empowerment outcomes.

Finally, poststructural feminist perspectives provide a critical lens by interrogating the dominant assumptions embedded within entrepreneurship itself. By exposing how the concept of the “entrepreneur” is often constructed around masculinized norms—such as competitiveness and profit maximization—this framework challenges the

neutrality of existing models and reveals how women may be systematically disadvantaged or misrepresented within them.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that women's entrepreneurship is not solely an economic activity but a socially embedded and structurally conditioned process. Empowerment outcomes emerge not from any single factor, but from the dynamic interplay between resources, capabilities, networks, and power relations. This synthesis reinforces the relevance of Kabeer's triadic framework, which integrates these dimensions by linking resource access, agency, and achievements within a broader socio-institutional context.

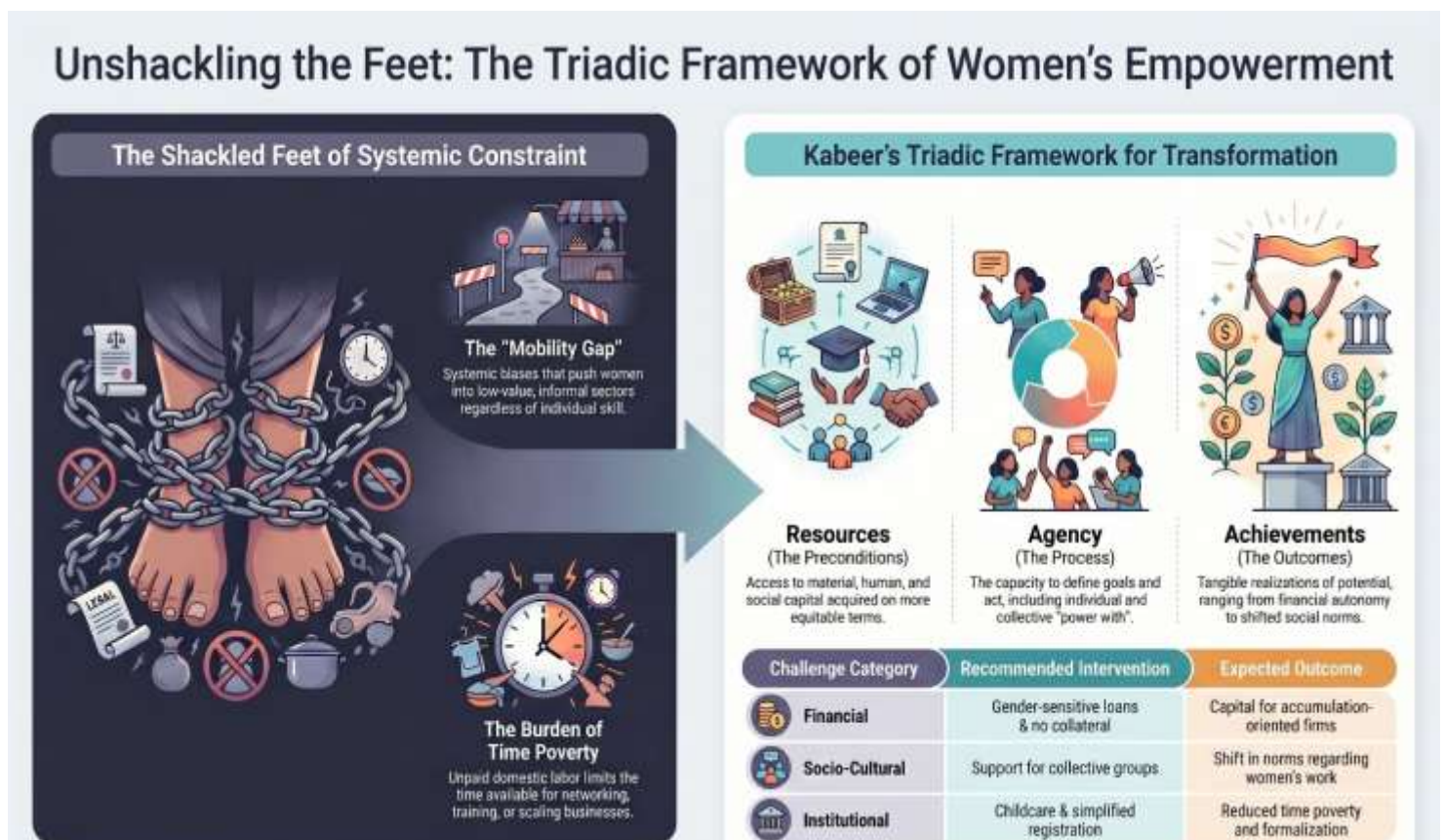
Table 1: Theoretical frameworks intersecting with women's empowerment (CGIAR, 2017)

| Theoretical Perspective | Core Assumption on Women's Entrepreneurship                                             | Reference                 |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Feminist Economics      | Emphasizes structural changes to address gender inequalities in labor and resources.    | Parpart and Kabeer (2010) |
| Human Capital Theory    | Focuses on education and skill development as the keys to entrepreneurial success.      | Parpart and Kabeer (2010) |
| Social Capital Theory   | Highlights the importance of networks, mentorship, and participation in organizations.  | Ogundare et al. (2026)    |
| Poststructural Feminism | Critiques the masculinized construction of the "entrepreneur" and the focus on revenue. | CGIAR (2017)              |

### Conceptual Framework: The Triadic Model of Empowerment

The conceptual framework for this study is derived directly from Kabeer's (1999, 2001) multidimensional model. Empowerment is viewed as a dynamic, non-linear process involving three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency, and achievement (Kabeer, 1999). Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 1. The Triadic Framework of Women's Empowerment



## Resources (Preconditions)

Resources are the inputs or preconditions that enable individuals to make strategic choices (Kabeer, 1999a). They are distributed through various institutions, such as the family, the market, and the state (Kabeer, 1999). In the realm of entrepreneurship, these resources include:

- **Material Resources:** Access to financial capital, land, equipment, and digital tools (Ogundare et al., 2026).
- **Human Resources:** Formal education, vocational training, business acumen, and self-efficacy (Ogundare et al., 2026).
- **Social Resources:** Membership in business associations, access to peer networks, and the presence of role models outside the family (Ogundare et al., 2026).

Crucially, Kabeer emphasizes that empowerment involves a change in the terms on which resources are acquired, not just an increase in access (Kabeer, 1999a). If a woman's access to resources remains dependent on a male relative, her capacity for strategic choice remains limited (Kabeer, 1999).

## Agency (Process)

Agency is the heart of the empowerment process, representing the ability to define goals and act upon them (Huis et al., 2017). It encompasses more than just "decision-making"; it includes the meaning, motivation, and purpose that individuals bring to their actions, Kabeer (1999) identifies several forms of agency relevant to entrepreneurship:

- **Active Agency:** Purposeful behaviour aimed at transforming one's life (Kabeer, 1999).
- **Transformative Agency:** The capacity to challenge patriarchal power relations and analyze the structures of constraint (Kabeer, 1999).
- **Collective Agency ("Power With"):** The capacity for women to organize together to achieve shared goals and demand social justice (Ajoque & Gihan, 2019).
- **Hidden Agency:** The use of "deception, manipulation, or subversion" as a survival strategy when overt resistance is too dangerous (Kabeer, 1999a).

## Achievements (Outcomes)

Achievements are the tangible and intangible outcomes of the agency-resource interaction (Kabeer, 1999). They represent the realization of a person's potential to live the life they value (Huis et al., 2026). In entrepreneurship, these include:

- **Economic Achievements:** Financial autonomy, income generation, and property ownership (Ogundare, Adetutu, Ejibunmi, Adewale, Adebuseye, & Ogundare, 2026).
- **Psychological Achievements:** Increased self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of "power within" (Ogundare et al., 2026).
- **Relational Achievements:** Improved bargaining power in the household, more equitable division of domestic labor, and participation in community leadership (Ogundare et al., 2026).
- **Structural Achievements:** Changes in social norms, reduced gender gaps in the labor market, and increased representation in political or civic bodies (Huis et al., 2017).

## The Feedback Loop

The framework assumes a "feedback loop" where achievements in one cycle become resources for the next (Ogundare et al., 2026). For example, the "achievement" of business profitability provides new "material resources" (capital) and "human resources" (experience), which in turn enhance the entrepreneur's "agency" to expand her market reach or challenge a restrictive cultural norm, leading to further, more transformative



"achievements" (Kabeer, 1999).

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a **narrative literature review** methodology using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). Unlike a systematic review, which follows a rigid protocol to answer a narrow question, a narrative review provides a comprehensive and critical synthesis of the theoretical and empirical literature to provide a broad perspective on a complex topic (Richard, Muldoon & Lee, 2025). This approach is particularly suited for empowerment research, which is multidimensional, context-specific, and involves significant qualitative nuances (Kabeer, 1999a).

### Search Strategy and Source Selection

The search for literature was conducted across major academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, as well as grey literature from international development organizations like the CGIAR, the World Bank, and the Sida (Couva et al., 2024). Key search terms included "women empowerment," "Naila Kabeer," "resources agency achievements," "female entrepreneurship," and "gendered structures of constraint" (Richard, Muldoon & Lee, 2025).

Sources were selected based on their relevance to Kabeer's framework and their focus on the entrepreneurial perspective. The review prioritized studies that offered:

- Theoretical reflections on the measurement and conceptualization of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999).
- Empirical case studies from the Global South (e.g., Indonesia, eSwatini, Bangladesh, India) (Ogundare et al., 2026).
- Systematic reviews of challenges and success factors in female entrepreneurship (Cardella et al., 2020).
- Policy-oriented research on the links between economic growth and gender equality (Kabeer, 2017).

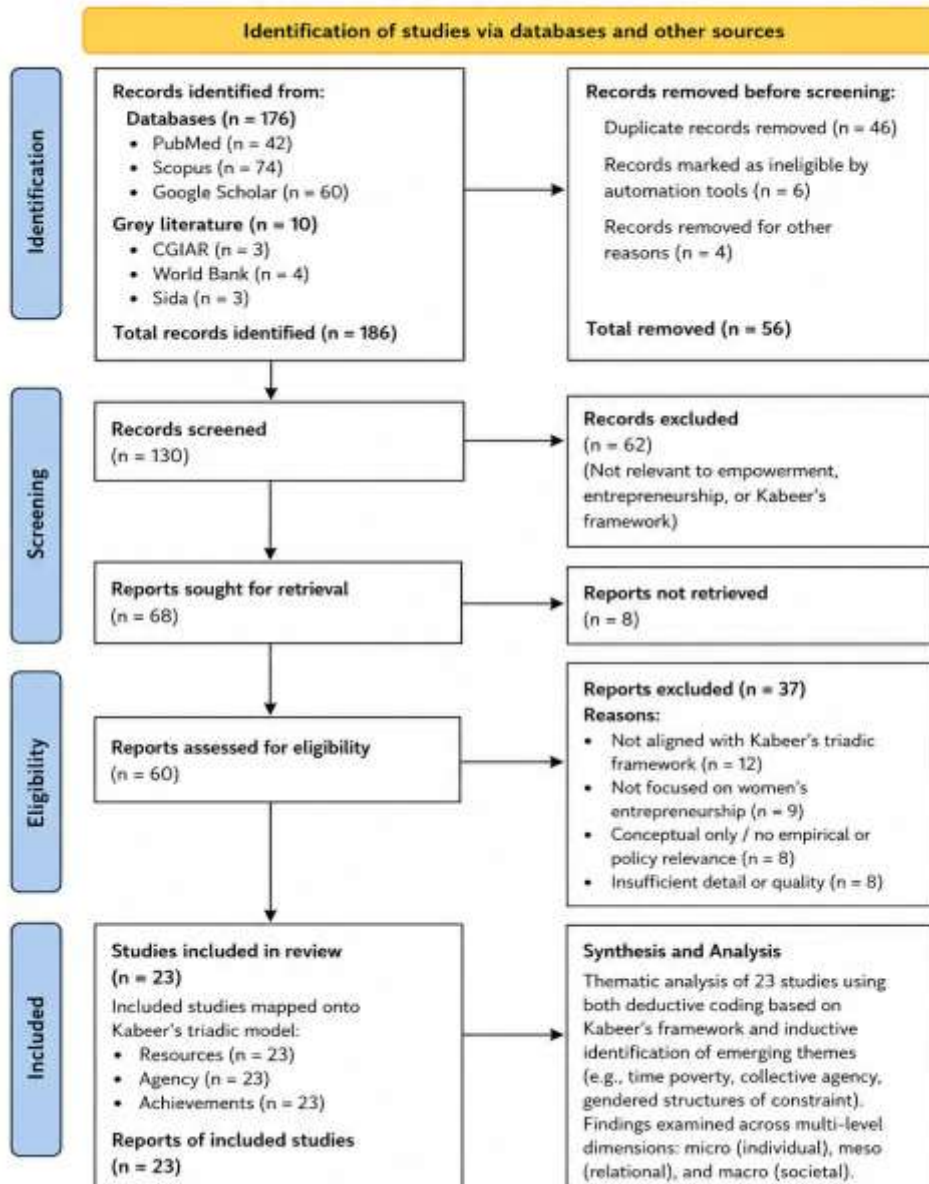
### Data Extraction and Synthesis

The selected articles were analyzed using thematic analysis. Information was extracted regarding the definitions of empowerment used, the specific entrepreneurial context (formal vs. informal), the barriers identified, and the reported outcomes (Henderson & Ross, 2025). The synthesis process involved mapping these findings onto Kabeer's triadic model to identify causal relationships and emerging themes (Ogundare et al., 2026). Special attention was paid to the "multi-level" nature of empowerment, how individual (micro), relational (meso), and societal (macro) dimensions interact (Huis et al., 2017).

After screening 186 studies, 23 were retained. Thematic analysis combined deductive coding based on Kabeer's framework with inductive identification of emerging themes such as time poverty and collective agency. Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA protocol utilized in the study.

## PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for the Scoping/Review Protocol

### Kabeer's Empowerment Framework and Women's Entrepreneurship



Note. Flow diagram adapted from Page et al. (2021) PRISMA 2020 statement.

## Results: Entrepreneurship as a Mechanism for Empowerment

The synthesis of empirical data reveals how Kabeer's three dimensions manifest in the lives of women entrepreneurs across different regions.

### Theme 1: Resources as the Foundation for Business Entry

The literature consistently demonstrates that women's entrepreneurial entry is fundamentally shaped by the nature and accessibility of resources, rather than individual choice alone. In many developing contexts, structural inequalities restrict women's access to formal material resources such as bank credit, largely due to the absence of collateral, land ownership, and formal financial inclusion. As a result, women's entrepreneurial activities are often built upon substitute resource pathways, relying heavily on human capital developed through informal learning and social capital embedded in family networks and community-based groups (e.g., self-help groups) (Kabeer, 2017; Ogundare et al., 2026; Henderson & Ross, 2025).

Importantly, resource constraints are not merely financial but are deeply intertwined with socio-cultural barriers. Evidence from systematic reviews indicates that while access to capital remains a primary challenge, factors



such as gender discrimination, role conflict, and restrictive social norms play an equally significant role in shaping women's ability to mobilize and utilize resources effectively. This suggests that resource deficits are embedded within broader power structures rather than existing as isolated economic barriers.

Moreover, the role of education as a form of human capital reveals additional complexity. Although educational attainment among women in rural and underserved regions is often limited in quality and continuity, even partial or informal education can have enduring effects by enhancing women's capacity to navigate entrepreneurial pathways and adapt to constraints. This underscores that empowerment is not solely dependent on the quantity of resources, but on how these resources are socially mediated and strategically utilized (Kabeer, 1999b).

## **Theme 2: Agency and the Transformation of Choice**

Entrepreneurship functions as a critical pathway through which women develop and exercise agency, particularly by enabling them to engage with and, in some cases, challenge existing power structures. Empirical evidence suggests that entrepreneurial activity enhances women's "voice," defined as the capacity to articulate preferences and make strategic life decisions, as observed among informal entrepreneurs in contexts such as eSwatini (Henderson & Ross, 2025). This highlights that agency is not merely about participation in economic activity, but about the expansion of meaningful choice and self-determination.

A key insight emerging from the literature is the distinction between individual and collective forms of agency, which vary in both their expression and impact. At the individual level, women entrepreneurs may experience increased autonomy in household decision-making, such as controlling expenditures or contributing to family welfare, as evidenced in Indonesia (Ogundare et al., 2026). However, findings consistently indicate that collective agency, particularly through mechanisms such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs), exerts a stronger and more sustained influence on empowerment outcomes. In the Indian context, participation in collective structures has been shown to significantly enhance women's mobility, confidence, and social visibility.

Beyond these forms, the concept of transformative agency underscores the potential for entrepreneurship to catalyze broader social change. This occurs when women leverage economic gains to renegotiate gender roles and reshape intergenerational opportunities. For instance, by employing other women or investing in their daughters' education to expand future life choices (Kabeer, 1999).

Table 2 illustrates the multi-dimensional nature of entrepreneurial agency, highlighting that agency extends beyond individual decision-making to encompass relational, social, and collective dimensions. The identified forms bargaining power, mobility, voice, and collective action ("power with") demonstrate that empowerment is expressed through both personal autonomy and social interaction.

At the household level, bargaining power reflects women's ability to negotiate income use and labour distribution, leading to greater autonomy in critical areas such as reproductive and health-related decisions. This indicates that economic participation can translate into intra-household power shifts, although these outcomes remain contingent on existing social norms.

Similarly, mobility represents a foundational dimension of agency, as the ability to move freely enables access to markets, networks, and opportunities. Increased mobility not only enhances business visibility and customer reach but also signifies a break from spatial restrictions traditionally imposed on women, thereby expanding their public participation.

The dimension of voice captures women's willingness and ability to express perspectives that challenge established social expectations. This form of agency is particularly significant as it reflects a transition from passive participation to active negotiation of social norms, positioning entrepreneurship as a platform for redefining gender roles.

Importantly, the inclusion of "power with" underscores the critical role of collective agency in amplifying empowerment outcomes. Participation in cooperatives or associations provides access to shared knowledge,

mutual support, and reduced operational costs, illustrating that empowerment is not solely an individual process but is strengthened through collective organization and solidarity.

Taken together, these dimensions demonstrate that agency operates across multiple, interconnected levels: individual, relational, and collective. While individual gains such as increased bargaining power and mobility are important, the presence of collective structures significantly enhances the depth and sustainability of empowerment outcomes. This synthesis reinforces the argument that meaningful empowerment requires not only individual capability but also supportive social environments that enable the exercise of agency in transformative ways

Table 2: Manifestations of agency in women's entrepreneurship (Ogundare et al., 2026)

| Dimensions of Entrepreneurial Agency | Description in Literature                                             | Key Result                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bargaining Power</b>              | Negotiation within the household regarding income and labor.          | Greater autonomy in reproductive and health decisions.     |
| <b>Mobility</b>                      | The ability to move freely to access markets and networks.            | Expanded customer base and increased visibility.           |
| <b>Voice</b>                         | Willingness to express attitudes that differ from the community norm. | Challenge to traditional gender-based expectations.        |
| <b>Power With</b>                    | Participating in cooperatives or business associations.               | Access to shared information, solidarity, and lower costs. |

### Theme 3: Achievements and the Continuum of Empowerment

Entrepreneurial achievements among women span a broad spectrum, ranging from basic economic survival to more transformative forms of structural change, reflecting the non-linear nature of empowerment (Kabeer, 2017). At the individual and relational levels, participation in entrepreneurship can generate tangible gains such as improved income stability, psychological confidence, and enhanced decision-making authority. For instance, evidence from Nigeria indicates that women engaged in professional associations experience higher levels of business sustainability and psychological empowerment, suggesting that institutional embeddedness strengthens outcome quality (Ogundare et al., 2026). Similarly, in Indonesia, entrepreneurial success has been shown to translate into intergenerational benefits, with women exercising greater influence over their children's education by demonstrating how economic gains can be converted into long-term family welfare outcomes (Feng et al., 2023).

However, these positive outcomes are often constrained by the structural realities of the informal economy. Consistent with the "continuum of work" perspective, many women's enterprises remain concentrated at the survivalist end, where achievements are largely limited to modest income generation and reduced dependency on male partners (Ojediran & Anderson, 2020). While such gains are significant, they rarely amount to full economic emancipation, as businesses often lack the scale, profitability, and institutional support required for sustained upward mobility (Ogundare et al., 2026).

Crucially, the literature suggests that transformative achievements are contingent upon broader structural engagement beyond individual enterprise activity. Higher-level empowerment outcomes, such as shifts in gender norms, increased political participation, and greater representation in decision-making spaces, are more likely when entrepreneurship is embedded within supportive institutional and societal frameworks (Huis et al., 2017).

Taken together, these findings indicate that while entrepreneurship can generate meaningful improvements in women's lives, its transformative potential depends on the extent to which individual gains are translated into structural change. This reinforces the argument that empowerment is not measured solely by economic outcomes but by the extent to which women can leverage these outcomes to reshape the conditions that constrain their choices.

## Discussion: The Complexity of the Empowerment Journey

The results indicate that while entrepreneurship offers a promising pathway to empowerment, the journey is fraught with contradictions and "femininity penalties" (Larson, 2025).

### The Entrepreneurial Myth vs. Structural Constraints

The literature offers a critical counter-narrative to the neoliberal "entrepreneurial myth," which assumes that women can achieve emancipation through a singular act of economic participation. This perspective presupposes a linear progression whereby access to resources, such as microfinance, automatically translates into agency and, subsequently, empowerment outcomes. However, empirical and theoretical accounts consistently challenge this assumption, demonstrating that such a model overlooks the deeply entrenched cultural and structural constraints that shape women's choices and opportunities (Ojediran & Anderson, 2020; Henderson & Ross, 2025).

In practice, cultural norms particularly patriarchal ideologies often constitute the most persistent barriers, regulating not only women's access to resources but also their capacity to exercise agency. As a result, entrepreneurial engagement does not produce immediate transformation; rather, it is a gradual, negotiated process in which agency evolves incrementally within existing power structures. This underscores that empowerment is not a singular outcome but a long-term, iterative process of contestation and adaptation (Ojediran & Anderson, 2020).

Evidence from contexts such as India and Pakistan further illustrates how gendered expectations shape entrepreneurial experiences. Women operating within these environments frequently encounter a "masculinity norm," where the traits associated with entrepreneurial success are perceived as incompatible with their socially prescribed roles as wives and mothers (Huq, 2023). Consequently, women's empowerment is often contingent upon maintaining relational harmony within the household, leading to a "relational" or "connective" form of agency that prioritizes negotiation over confrontation (Kabeer, 2011).

In such contexts, agency does not necessarily manifest through overt resistance but through subtle, adaptive strategies, including negotiation, accommodation, and, at times, covert forms of decision-making (Kabeer, 1999a). These forms of "hidden" or "negotiated" agency reflect the ways in which women navigate restrictive environments while minimizing social backlash.

### Time Poverty and the Double Burden

An important emerging theme in the literature is the constraining effect of "time poverty" on women's entrepreneurial empowerment. Women are disproportionately burdened with unpaid care responsibilities, positioning them as the primary "bearers of gender" within household structures while simultaneously engaging in income-generating activities (Parwez & Patel, 2022; Ogundare et al., 2026). This dual responsibility significantly restricts the time and energy available for critical entrepreneurial activities such as business expansion, skills development, and network building, thereby limiting the potential for scaling and long-term sustainability.

The implications of time poverty extend beyond economic outcomes to affect both agency and well-being. While entrepreneurship may reduce financial dependency, it often intensifies role conflict when productive and reproductive responsibilities remain unevenly distributed. As a result, the expected empowerment gains can be undermined by stress, fatigue, and constrained decision-making capacity. However, the literature also indicates that when women are able to effectively balance these competing demands either through supportive household arrangements or external support systems they report higher levels of satisfaction and perceived empowerment (Huq, 2023).

These findings suggest that empowerment through entrepreneurship cannot be fully understood without considering the temporal and relational constraints shaping women's daily lives. Time poverty thus emerges as a critical structural barrier, highlighting the need to move beyond economic interventions toward integrated approaches that address unpaid care work and redistribute domestic responsibilities. In this sense, meaningful

empowerment depends not only on access to opportunities but on the availability of time and autonomy to pursue them.

### **Collective Agency as the Missing Link**

Kabeer's later work underscores a critical limitation in empowerment processes: improvements at the individual level do not necessarily translate into structural transformation (Kabeer, 2017). While entrepreneurship may enhance personal agency, it often leaves intact the broader systems of inequality that constrain women's opportunities. This has led to increasing emphasis on collective agency, or "power with," as a pivotal mechanism for achieving more sustained and systemic change (Ajoqué & Gihan, 2019).

The literature demonstrates that when women organize into groups such as cooperatives, associations, or self-help networks, they are better equipped to navigate and resist gendered and exclusionary environments. Collective structures not only provide social support but also enhance bargaining power, enabling women to engage more effectively with markets, institutions, and policy frameworks (Siddaway et al., 2019). At this level, agency shifts from individual coping strategies to collective negotiation and advocacy, allowing women to challenge entrenched inequalities.

Empirical evidence further indicates that collective action offers a strategic advantage in securing improved market conditions, property rights, and social protections, outcomes that are difficult to achieve through individual efforts alone (Couva et al., 2024). This highlights that empowerment is fundamentally a relational and political process, requiring coordinated action to reshape the structures that govern access to resources and opportunities.

These insights suggest that the future of empowerment interventions lies not in fostering individual resilience alone, but in developing "collective capabilities" that enable women to act together in transforming the conditions of their marginalization (Kabeer, 2017). In this sense, sustainable empowerment emerges from the intersection of individual agency and collective action, reinforcing the importance of group-based approaches in achieving long-term structural change.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The synthesis of Kabeer's framework and entrepreneurial evidence leads to several critical implications for policymakers and development practitioners.

#### **Moving Beyond "Business Case" Instrumentalism**

Policy advocacy often relies on "claimed synergies" between gender equality and economic growth to gain support from mainstream agencies (Kabeer, 1999b). While this "instrumentalist" approach is effective for securing funding, it risks reducing women to tools for "fertility decline" or "family welfare" rather than treating their empowerment as an end in itself (Ammundsen, 2024). Policymakers should balance these goals with a focus on the "intrinsic value" of empowerment—justice, autonomy, and rights (Ammundsen, 2024).

#### **Addressing the "Middle" of the Continuum**

Current interventions are often polarized between microfinance for the very poor (survivalists) and venture capital for the elite (Kabeer, 2017). There is a "missing middle" of women entrepreneurs who have the potential for accumulation but lack the "material resources" (like land-based collateral) and "social resources" (networks) to scale (Ogundare et al., 2026). Targeted support for these women such as formalizing their business identities and providing access to larger, gender-sensitive credit schemes, could drive significant economic reallocation (Parwez & Patel, 2022).

### **Integrated Social Policy**

Empowerment through entrepreneurship cannot be achieved through economic policy alone. It requires

integrated social policy to redistribute the "reproductive responsibilities" (Couva et al., 2024). This includes:

- Providing affordable and reliable care facilities for children and the elderly (Couva et al., 2024).
- Promoting labor-saving technologies for domestic work (Couva et al., 2024).
- Implementing legal reforms to equalize property and inheritance rights (Ogundare et al., 2026).
- Strengthening the caring role of fathers to reduce the "double burden" on women (Couva et al., 2024).

### Redefining Success in Entrepreneurial Curricula

Entrepreneurship educators should integrate feminist theory into their curricula to challenge the "male norm" (CGIAR, 2017). Success should be measured not just by revenue, but by "alternative measures" such as quality of life, personal meaning, and the impact on women's "life opportunities".<sup>12</sup> Incorporating experiential learning that features women role models in non-traditional sectors can help break down gender stereotypes from an early stage (CGIAR, 2017).

Table 3: Strategic policy recommendations based on the triadic framework (Couva et al., 2024)

| Challenge Category     | Recommended Policy Intervention                                | Expected Outcome                                       |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Financial</b>       | Gender-sensitive loans & removal of collateral requirements.   | Increased capital for accumulation-oriented firms.     |
| <b>Socio-Cultural</b>  | Public awareness campaigns & support for collective groups.    | Shift in norms regarding women's work and status.      |
| <b>Infrastructural</b> | Investment in utilities and digital tools for home-based work. | Improved efficiency and market access for rural women. |
| <b>Institutional</b>   | Simplified business registration & childcare services.         | Reduced "time poverty" and increased formalization.    |

## CONCLUSION

This narrative literature review has demonstrated that Naila Kabeer's theoretical framework provides an indispensable lens for analyzing the complex relationship between women's empowerment and entrepreneurship. By conceptualizing empowerment as the dynamic interaction of resources, agency, and achievements, we move beyond the simplistic "access to credit" model to a more holistic understanding of power and choice. Entrepreneurship, when positioned correctly, serves as a powerful mechanism for women to acquire the "human, social, and material resources" needed to exercise "active and transformative agency" (Kabeer, 1999). However, the findings also highlight that entrepreneurship is not a "magic bullet." For many women, particularly in the informal sectors of the Global South, it remains a survival strategy constrained by "shackled feet" the systemic biases, time poverty, and socio-cultural norms that define their "gendered structures of constraint" (Kabeer, 2017). True empowerment requires more than individual effort; it requires "collective agency" and a fundamental restructuring of the "social relationships that govern access" to opportunities (Kabeer, 1999).

The future of women's empowerment lies in a "pluralist" approach that recognizes the diverse motivations of women and values their "connective notions of selfhood" while simultaneously fighting for their rights as individual citizens (Kabeer, 1999a). Policies must move beyond the "business case" for empowerment and address the underlying causes of inequality redistributing the care economy, equalizing property rights, and dismantling the masculine norms of the entrepreneurship ecosystem (CGIAR, 2017). Only then can entrepreneurship fulfil its potential as a vehicle for genuine emancipation and social justice, ensuring that the "achievements" of women entrepreneurs lead to a world where "strategic life choices" are no longer a privilege of the few, but a right for all.

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