

APPLYING A FEMINIST CARE ETHIC TO THE GENDER-BASED HURDLES OF WOMEN TOURISM ENTREPRENEURS IN RURAL INDIA: INSIGHTS FROM BOLPUR-SANTINIKETAN

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Abstract

Women entrepreneurs in rural India, especially in West Bengal, are increasingly contributing to the tourism economy. The state leads the country with 23.4% of women-owned Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), reflecting a progressive approach to empowerment. In rural areas, women are utilising local resources and cultural heritage to establish tourism-related businesses such as homestays, guided tours, and handicraft enterprises. This research directly examines how the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Bolpur-Santiniketan supports women entrepreneurs through gender equity initiatives in confronting gender-based obstacles. The study is based on a conceptual framework from feminist theory and the ethic of care. This perspective argues that the region's entrepreneurial culture, while strongly rooted in transgenerational know-how, is simultaneously constrained by pervasive patriarchal structures and deep social vulnerability. Methodologically, we employed a qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs and stakeholders. The data was analysed through a feminist lens to explore the lived experiences within this ecosystem. Our findings analyse and reveal three main gender equity issues: (i) 'Entrepreneurship and the Motherhood Penalty'; (ii) 'The Gender Entrepreneurship Binary: Balancing Pursuit and Nurturing'; and (iii) 'Social Conditioning and Gender Norms: Reinforcing Gender Inequities.' The analysis shows these are direct results of systemic biases and social inequality, critically limiting business growth and personal agency. Based on our findings, we highlight specific gender biases and suggest pathways to promote equity. In conclusion, this study presents a theoretical framework to understand and address these inequalities comprehensively and to strengthen the success of women entrepreneurs. This adds to feminist scholarship and offers policymakers practical, actionable guidance to cultivate a more equitable and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Keywords: Social vulnerability; Gender; Social inequality; Women entrepreneurs; Equitable

APLICANDO UMA ÉTICA DO CUIDADO FEMINISTA AOS OBSTÁCULOS DE GÊNERO DAS MULHERES EMPREENDEDORAS NO TURISMO RURAL DA ÍNDIA: PERSPECTIVAS DE BOLPUR-SANTINIKETAN

Resumo

Mulheres empreendedoras nas zonas rurais da Índia, particularmente em Bengala Ocidental, estão a contribuir cada vez mais para a economia do turismo. Bengala Ocidental lidera a nação com 23,4% das Micro, Pequenas e Médias Empresas (MPMEs) detidas por mulheres. Nas áreas rurais, as mulheres aproveitam recursos locais e o patrimônio cultural para estabelecer negócios, como estadias em casas de família e empresas de artesanato. Este estudo investiga como o ecossistema empreendedor em Bolpur-Santiniketan apoia as mulheres que enfrentam obstáculos baseados no gênero. Fundamentado na teoria feminista e na ética do cuidado, argumenta que a cultura empreendedora da região, embora enraizada no saber-fazer transgeracional, é limitada por estruturas patriarcais e vulnerabilidade social. Empregou-se uma abordagem qualitativa, com entrevistas analisadas por meio de uma lente feminista. As descobertas revelam três preocupações primárias: (i) 'Empreender e a Penalização da Maternidade'; (ii) 'O Binário do Empreendedorismo de Gênero: Equilibrar a Ambição e o Cuidado'; e (iii) 'Condicionamento Social e Normas de Gênero'. A análise demonstra que estas são manifestações de preconceitos sistêmicos, que limitam o crescimento e a agência pessoal. O estudo propõe um quadro teórico para abordar estas desigualdades, contribuindo para a bolsa de estudos sobre empreendedorismo feminista e fornecendo orientação para políticas que promovam um ecossistema mais equitativo.

Palavras-chave: Vulnerabilidade social; Gênero; Desigualdade social; Mulheres empreendedoras; Equitativo.

APLICANDO UNA ÉTICA DEL CUIDADO FEMINISTA A LOS OBSTÁCULOS DE GÉNERO DE LAS MUJERES EMPREENDEDORAS EN EL TURISMO DE LA INDIA RURAL: PERSPECTIVAS DESDE BOLPUR-SANTINIKETAN

Resumen

Las mujeres emprendedoras en la India rural, en particular en Bengala Occidental, están contribuyendo cada vez más a la economía del turismo. Bengala Occidental lidera la nación con un 23,4% de las micro, pequeñas y medianas empresas (MIPYMES) propiedad de mujeres. En las áreas rurales, las mujeres aprovechan los recursos locales y el patrimonio cultural para establecer negocios como alojamientos en casas de familia y empresas de artesanía. Este estudio investiga cómo el ecosistema emprendedor de Bolpur-Santiniketan apoya a las mujeres que enfrentan obstáculos de género. Fundamentado en la teoría feminista y la ética del cuidado, argumenta que la cultura emprendedora de la región, aunque arraigada en el saber hacer transgeneracional, está limitada por estructuras patriarcales y vulnerabilidad social. Se empleó un enfoque cualitativo, con entrevistas analizadas desde una lente feminista. Los hallazgos revelan tres preocupaciones primarias: (i) 'Emprender y la penalización de la maternidad'; (ii) 'La binaria del emprendimiento de género: equilibrar la ambición y el cuidado'; y (iii) 'Condicionamiento social y normas de género'. El análisis demuestra que estas son manifestaciones de sesgos sistémicos que limitan el crecimiento y la agencia personal. El estudio propone un marco teórico para abordar estas desigualdades, contribuyendo a los estudios sobre emprendimiento feminista y proporcionando orientación para políticas que fomenten un ecosistema más equitativo.

Palabras clave: Vulnerabilidad social; Gênero; Desigualdad social; Mujeres empreendedoras; Equitativo.

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1 INTRODUCTION

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, women's participation in entrepreneurial activities in Asia averages 9-10%, with significant variation across countries (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023). India is among the countries with the most significant gender gap in its entrepreneurial ecosystem, with a men-to-women ratio of less than 50% (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023). Women entrepreneurs in tourism sector in India have a miniscale representation of 14%.

This underrepresentation is a symptom of profound and multi-layered systemic barriers confronting women entrepreneurs across India. Scholarly research has systematically documented a landscape where women's business pursuits are constrained by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that limit their autonomy and mobility (de Jong and Figueroa-Domecq, 2022), and a crushing, disproportionate burden of unpaid care work that directly competes with their commercial activities (Eswaran, Ramaswami and Wadhwa., 2013; Rakshit and Bardhan, 2024).

Furthermore, women consistently face higher obstacles than men in accessing critical formal credit and business networks (Khera, 2018). These challenges are often navigated through collective strategies, such as the self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives documented in other Indian contexts, which provide alternative support systems in the absence of institutional backing (Datta and Gailey, 2012). While these studies outlined a national pattern of gendered constraint, their implications are acutely intensified in specific sectors, such as, tourism.

The issue of equity participation was also endorsed to be critical as researchers found that gender-neutral destination image were perceived to be more acceptable by the visitors (Baksi and Sanyal, 2023). The branding of intangible cultural heritage was also found to support gender neutrality and thereby emphasize the equitable participation of women entrepreneurs in the tourism business (Baksi and Sanyal, 2024).

The rural tourism and handicraft economy, characterized by informality, seasonal income, and the commodification of cultural heritage, not only mirrors these generic barriers but often exacerbates them. In cultural hubs like Bolpur-Santiniketan, where women's skilled artistry has been the cornerstone of the tourist appeal, their transition from invisible labourers to recognized entrepreneurs is stifled by this very nexus of social, political, and economic hurdles.

This study, therefore, investigates how these widely documented structural inequalities manifest within, and are contested by, women in the unique gendered entrepreneurial ecosystem of Bolpur-Santiniketan's tourism sector.

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Goal 5 on Gender Equality, advocates for practical solutions worldwide. Our efforts align with Target 5.5 and also contribute to Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth, specifically Target 8.3, which emphasizes policies supporting job creation, enterprise growth, and entrepreneurship.

There is a lack of research on the roles of women entrepreneurs in tourism and the challenges they encounter

(Khoo, Yang, Tan, Alonso-Vazquez, Ricaurte-Quijano, Pécot and Barahona-Canales, 2023; Freund, Ramírez García, Boluk, Canut-Casalló and López-Planas, 2023). Regrettably, contemporary practices in the tourism sector exacerbate gender disparities, with women often confined to low-paying, precarious jobs, facing wage gaps (de Jong and Figueroa-Domecq, 2022; UNWTO, 2019), and being underrepresented in senior positions.

Creating a supportive environment is crucial for the success of women entrepreneurs, including investment in human and financial capital, providing growth opportunities, and implementing innovative institutional and infrastructural measures (Isakova and Stroila, 2025). Equitable access to financial resources and the promotion of practices that support women's businesses are essential (Isakova and Stroila, 2025). However, the prevailing culture often upholds opaque rules, practices, and norms, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that hinder women business owners. These structural barriers can be alleviated through initiatives such as incubators, accelerators, and business networks committed to supporting women entrepreneurs (GEM, 2023).

Bolpur-Santiniketan, situated in the Birbhum district of West Bengal, India, is a vibrant centre of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), owing largely to its indigenous habitat and the enduring tradition of craftwork and folk art practiced across generations. The Ministry of Culture, Government of India, has recognized West Bengal for its rich ICH, including traditional practices such as 'Deoal Chitra & Alpana,' 'Manosa Gaan,' 'Chaaau Dance,' 'Durga Puja,' 'Kushan Gann,' and 'Sowa-Rigpa' (knowledge of healing science).

Among these, 'Deoal Chitra & Alpana,' a traditional art form of the Santhal community, has gained prominence in the tourism landscape of Bolpur-Santiniketan and beyond, while crafts such as dyeing, stitching, and woodwork have translated into tangible tourism products. Folk songs and dances also enrich the visitor experience, forming an integral part of the tourism offerings.

Festivals and fairs such as Poush Mela and Basontatsav predominantly showcase these tangible aspects of cultural heritage. Despite the richness of cultural heritage, the adoption of technology and digital tools remains limited, with only a few individual efforts in places like Sonajhuri Haat having a digital presence, leaving many vulnerable to disruptions, as seen during the pandemic.

2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

We construct the scholarly foundation for the study by synthesizing the extensive literature on the gendered nature of entrepreneurship and its specific manifestations within the global tourism sector (Kamberidou, 2020; Henry et al., 2023; Brush et al., 2019).

This section also engages in a critical dialogue with non-hegemonic scholarship, drawing particularly on feminist and political-economy perspectives from India and Latin America to challenge universalist narratives and situate the analysis within a broader context of postcolonial power dynamics (Pritchard, 2018; Ruiz-Martínez, Kuschel, and Pastor, 2021).

Finally, it presents our integrated, multi-dimensional theoretical framework, which positions the feminist ethic of

care as the central lens, critically substantiated by the analytical power of intersectionality and social capital theory (Gilligan, 1982; Crenshaw, 1989; Putnam, 2000).

Entrepreneurship is widely characterized as a challenging pathway, though, scholars consistently documented the pathway to be discriminatory with gender-specific obstacles for women. While all entrepreneurs face hurdles in securing capital, managing time, and building support networks, empirical evidence confirms that women encounter more formidable, structurally embedded barriers (Kamberidou, 2020; Kyrgidou, Mylonas, Petridou, and Vacharoglou, 2021).

Evidences from empirical studies conducted in the South American countries also suggested structural inequities exists towards achieving gender equality considering lower level of women's labour force participation in service sector (Hernandez-Medina and Velasco, 2024). These challenges are not merely additive but are often interconnected, creating a cumulative disadvantage (Brush et al., 2019).

Fuentes (2014) noted that, though economic growth in Latin American countries has surged, it has widened the gender gap to new heights and further stated that women in Latin America are excluded from the global value chains. Gabrielli, Medaglia, and Santos (2023) conducted an intersectional analysis and found that income as a transmission and perpetuation mechanism of lower access of women to get involved in tourism business. Loor and Lucas (2023) observed that the participation of community actors (irrespective of gender) holds the key to sustainable community-based tourism.

A substantial body of research identified a constellation of factors, including gendered differences in educational and professional backgrounds, pronounced socially-conditioned risk-aversion attitudes, and, most significantly, the pervasive influence of societal norms and stereotypes that question women's leadership and business acumen (Stewart, Wright, Smith, Roberts and Russell, 2021; Ahl and Marlow, 2012).

Within the tourism sector, these gendered dynamics are thrown into sharp relief. The industry, while being a major employer of women globally, often mirrors and magnifies broader societal inequalities (Figueroa-Domecq, De Jong, and Williams, 2020). The prevailing employment landscape itself acts as a barrier.

Women constitute over half of the tourism workforce (UNWTO, 2019), yet they are disproportionately concentrated in low-level, poorly compensated, and precariously positioned with limited scope for upward mobility (Freund et al., 2021). A persistent gender pay gap compounds this precariousness. Consequently, commencing an entrepreneurial venture, for the women, often means starting from a position of financial inequity, thereby, making access to capital a universal challenge (Inkumsah, 2024).

In India, this scenario is further complicated by the country's unique socio-economic fabric and caste and class-based stratifications. Studies on women's entrepreneurship in India confirm that patriarchal norms and a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work severely constrain business growth (Kabeer, 2020; Abdulla and Albattat, 2023). Research specific to Indian tourism underscores these findings,

revealing that women are often confined to informal & under-paid roles and face significant hurdles in accessing credit and market networks (Rajamani, 2022). This highlights a critical gap between policy rhetoric and ground-level reality (Rani and Sundaram, 2023; Khera, 2018), a problem often rooted in the informal nature of their work and the broader institutional environment (North, 1990).

Beyond the economic sphere, the societal organization of care presents a second, formidable barrier. The expectation that women will shoulder the primary responsibility for domestic duties and childcare, what Lin (2016) term the "care economy," fundamentally restricts their temporal and spatial mobility. Care duties can limit engagement in networking events, client meetings, and business travel, which frequently occur beyond conventional working hours. These places women entrepreneurs at a systematic disadvantage in sectors like tourism that demand flexibility. This "motherhood penalty" (childcare) is a well-documented phenomenon that directly impacts venture growth and sustainability.

A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics requires a deliberate move beyond Eurocentric, hegemonic perspectives that often universalize the experience of entrepreneurship (Pritchard, 2018; Welter, 2011). Critical tourism scholarship from Latin American context provides a nuanced analysis grounded in the region's specific histories of colonialism, social inequality and neoliberal reform.

Feminist political economy analyses from this region reveal a persistent and troubling gap between participatory rhetoric and equitable practices. Studies of community-based tourism (CBT) in Brazil and other Latin American areas consistently demonstrate that while women's labour is the bedrock of CBT initiatives, their contributions towards performing essential work in hospitality, artisan production and cultural interpretation remain largely informal, undervalued and systematically excluded from decision-making processes (Abreu, Walkowski, Perinotto, and Fonseca, 2024; Kaefer, 2022; Duffy, Mowatt, Cnacellor and Cárdenas, 2012).

This critical scholarship argues that without feminist-informed policies that directly confront and seek to transform patriarchal power relations, tourism development can paradoxically reinforce traditional gender norms and roles by adding a "triple burden" of creation, procreation and community management onto women without corresponding augmentation in power and/or autonomy (Karim, Kwong, Shrivastava, and Tamvada, 2023).

This perspective, also reflected in analyses of tourism in other South American contexts (Ruiz-Martínez, Kuschel, and Pastor, 2021; Powers, and Magnoni, 2010), is not merely an additive one; but, fundamentally deconstructive. This guides our study of women entrepreneurs of Bolpur-Santiniketan to be critically vigilant, ensuring we scrutinize not just the quantitative presence of women entrepreneurs in the specific geographical region, but also the qualitative nature of their participation, the distribution of power within the spatial entrepreneurial ecosystem and the potential for their labour to be co-opted within the structures that perpetuate their subordination.

2.1 Theoretical framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework to adequately analyse the multi-scalar and intersecting realities faced by women tourism entrepreneurs in rural India. This framework involves deliberate braiding of complementary lenses that together provide a more holistic and critical analytical tool.

Our theoretical lens has feminist ethic of care at its core. Being originated in the work of Gilligan (1982) and developed by scholars like Bourgault (2022), Larrabee (2016, Levesque (2013) etc., it provides a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant, patriarchal discourses of entrepreneurship that prioritize competition, individualism, and profit-maximization. An ethic of care fundamentally reorients our understanding of morality and successful business practice towards relationships, responsibility and responsiveness to specific needs within a network of interdependence (Tronto, 1993, 1998).

In the context of tourism entrepreneurship, it allows us to perceive vision-driven leadership styles that are empathetic, collaborative, and driven by a purpose that extends beyond financial gain to include community well-being and social impact (Panse and Boluk, 2024). Given Pritchard's (2018) concerns about the limited adoption of feminist perspectives and an ethic of care in tourism scholarship, it is crucial to employ these lenses.

Our analysis contributes to this scholarly discussion, addressing the gap identified by Pritchard (2018) and building upon existing exceptions in the literature (Higgins-Desbiolles, Monga, Gun, and Were, 2024; Panse and Boluk, 2024; Jamal and Camargo, 2014). It evokes the critical question: How would the support systems, policies, and metrics of success within Bolpur-Santiniketan's entrepreneurial ecosystem change if an ethic of care were placed at its center?

Recent work by Hernández-González and Espeso-Molinero, 2025 and Kalisch and Cole (2023), highlighted the intersection of feminist care ethics and community-based tourism, suggesting that women's entrepreneurship is not only a tool for economic empowerment but also a means of fostering collective community well-being.

Additionally, Rahmania, Kertamuda, Wulandari, and Marfu (2025) emphasized the importance of embedding care ethics into tourism policies to promote inclusive growth and gender parity. These evolving perspectives contributed to understanding the vital role women play in sustaining tourism economies through relational, empathetic, and socially responsible practices.

However, a singular focus on gender through a care-focused lens risks homogenization of "woman" by erasing critical internal differentiations. Therefore, the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins and Bilge, 2020) was incorporated to reinforce the framework. It posits that social identities and power systems based on gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and religion are mutually constitutive and creates intersecting and unique experiences of both privilege and oppression.

In the Indian context, this is paramount (Bouakaz and Khalid, 2025; Banerjee and Ghosh, 2018). The barriers encountered by an illiterate, tribal woman selling handicrafts at a local *haat* (market) are qualitatively different from those

faced by an upper-caste educated woman operating a boutique homestay. Her experience is shaped by the intersection of her gender with her tribal identity, class position, and educational status (Baksi and Sanyal, 2023; Deshpande and Khanna, 2021; Xaxa, 2014). An intersectional lens compels us to disaggregate the data and acknowledge that the "gender-based hurdles" are not uniform but are uniquely configured for different women.

Finally, to understand how women strategically navigate this complex and stratified social landscape, we turn to Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital, available through, and derived from a network of relationships, is a critical asset for entrepreneurs who often lack formal financial capital (Granovetter, 1973).

Our understanding distinguishes between bonding social capital, which refers to the strong, trusting ties between similar individuals (e.g., within a self-help group or kin network) that provide emotional support and mutual insurance, and bridging social capital, which encompasses weaker, cross-cutting ties to individuals in different social spheres (e.g., government officials, NGO workers) that can provide access to new information, markets, and resources (Deshpande and Khanna, 2021).

The deliberate cultivation, leveraging, or blockage of these different forms of capital is a key mechanism through which women entrepreneurs either overcome or are further constrained by the structural barriers they face, operating within a specific institutional context (Simarasl, Tabesh, Munyon and Marzban, 2024) that can be evaluated through the lens of development as freedom (Sen, 2001).

This theoretical triangulation allowed us to: a) align the relational and care-based economies that women often create and sustain (ethic of Care); b) critically differentiate their experiences and the specific nature of their barriers based on complex, intersecting social positions (Intersectionality); and c) mechanistically analyse the strategic networking and resource mobilization tactics they employ to navigate, resist, and persist within the gendered entrepreneurial ecosystem (social capital).

2.2 Gaps in research

(i) Theoretical Gap:

There has been limited Integration of care ethics into tourism entrepreneurship. While the literature drew upon feminist ethics of care (O'Riordan, Daly, Loughnane, Kelleher, and Edwards, 2023; Gilligan, 1982), there was limited exploration of this framework in the context of tourism entrepreneurship (Panse and Boluk, 2024; Kalisch and Cole, 2023). Existing studies (Panse and Boluk, 2024) focused on broader theoretical engagement but failed to provide comprehensive frameworks that would bridge feminist care ethics with practical tourism entrepreneurship challenges on gender platform.

(ii) Methodological gap:

Much of the existing studies used quantitative surveys and economic reports (UNWTO, 2020). This quantitative focus often overlooked the nuanced, lived experiences of

women entrepreneurs, which could be better captured through qualitative methods, and/or participatory research.

(iii) Data (Contextual/ Representation) gap:

Although the literature acknowledges gender disparities, there has been a notable absence of data on women from minority, rural, or indigenous backgrounds engaged in tourism entrepreneurship (Chhabra, Luu, and Gupta, 2025).

3 METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was to centre the experiences of women within the tourism entrepreneurship ecosystem in Bolpur-Santiniketan, West Bengal, India, and specifically aims to comprehend the gendered pattern of the entrepreneurial environment and identify potential support systems beneficial for women in tourism entrepreneurship.

Additionally, we analysed how our findings contribute to the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 and 8. The research site, Bolpur-Santiniketan, was selected as a purposeful, criterion-based case (Patton, 2015). The area has a visible and active presence of women entrepreneurs in handicrafts, homestays, and cultural tours, making it an information-rich case for studying gendered entrepreneurship. It is a recognized hub of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), where the practice and knowhow of traditional crafts and folk arts form the backbone of the tourism economy.

Further, the decision to focus on the entrepreneurial landscape in Bolpur-Santiniketan was driven by the lack of research addressing the gendered experiences of rural-based women entrepreneurs, particularly those operating within the tourism sector. This spatial-gap has not adequately captured the diverse and complex realities faced by women entrepreneurs. Our approach was guided by a feminist ethic of care, in conjunction with intersectionality and social capital theory.

We used a qualitative research design anchored in a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) is concerned with understanding the essence of a phenomenon from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Creswell, 2013). Given that our research aims to comprehend the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs navigating a gendered ecosystem. This approach is justified because it captures the richness and depth of the research participants' individual and collective realities.

At the micro-level, the study aligns with hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 2016; Heidegger, 1962), which not only describes lived experience but also interprets the meaning of those experiences within their social, cultural, and historical contexts (Van Manen, 2016). This was a deliberate choice, as the challenges faced by the women entrepreneurs, such as the role stereotyping, social conditioning and digital inequality, are not merely individual obstacles but are deeply embedded in the patriarchal structures and cultural norms of the region. Our use of a

feminist ethic of care, intersectionality and social capital formation as a triangulated guiding lens further necessitated this interpretive stance, enabling us to critically analyse the data and uncover the power dynamics and systemic biases inherent in their narratives. To achieve this goal, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews, following the frameworks outlined by Cantner, Cunningham, Lehmann, & Menter, (2021). and Cavallo, Colombelli, D'Amico, and Paolucci (2023).

Our purposive sample size (maximum variation purposive sampling) was limited to 25 women entrepreneurs (operating in Bolpur-Santiniketan) due to data saturation and information redundancy encountered with every schedule administered beyond the 25th participant, up to the 40th participant. The interview questions were developed based on a review of existing literature and identification of the primary obstacles encountered by female entrepreneurs. The schedule was validated for ambiguity, relevance, bias etc. by an expert panel.

The inter-rater reliability was computed for the universal agreement (UA) (1=UA and 0=Non UA). The item level content validation index (ICVI) was 0.89 and the scale level content validation index (SCVI) was 0.93, both considered to be significant (Polit and Beck, 2006). Interviews were conducted physically between January and March 2024. The duration of interviews ranged from 50 to 75 minutes, and they were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English with participants' consent. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms during the coding process.

The researchers also maintained detailed observational (field) notes in a structured field journal. These notes documented non-verbal cues, the physical context of the businesses (e.g., workshop location, market stall setup), interactions with family members, responses to the probing questions and the general atmosphere of the entrepreneurial spaces. Secondary documents, such as the West Bengal State Tourism Policy, annual reports of MSME, and the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) India reports, were analysed. These documents provided the macro-level policy context and helped to identify the gaps between policy rhetoric and the ground-level realities described by the entrepreneurs. Multiple data sources (data triangulation) were considered to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings.

A comprehensive audit trail was maintained throughout the research process which included: (a) records of all raw data files; (b) reflective memos, coding logics and theme emergence and (c) meeting notes documenting the point of differences and arguments put forward by the researchers regarding coding schemes. This ensured that the analytical frame was logical, transparent, and open to review and revision.

4 RESULTS ANALYSIS

The profile of the research participants are represented in Table-1.

Table-1: Profile of Research Participants

Sl. No.	Name of the Woman Entrepreneur	Name of the Venture	Type of products sold	Whether having manufacturing unit	No. of Employees/ Associates	Avg. Daily Tourist Visits	Avg Monthly Revenue (INR)	Average Monthly Profit (INR)
1	Tumpa Khatun	Tumpa Handicraft	Kantha Stitch Saree (women garments)	Yes	12	60	100000	20000
2	Kunti Shaw	Kunti Handicraft	Bamboo products	Yes	2	50	50000	10000
3	Chaya Sestu	Chaya Handicraft	Kantha Stitch Saree	Yes	12	60	200000	50000
4	Aparna Mondal	Aparna Kantha Stitch	Kantha Stitch Saree	Yes	5	60	25000	10000
5	Annapurna Das	Annapurna Handicraft	Handicrafts/ Bamboo products	No	3	20	1000	500
6	Sarda Shaw	Sarda Handicraft	Bamboo & Plastic products	No	7	10	1500	500
7	Sarati Das	Sarati Handicraft	Bamboo & Plastic products	Yes	3	15	15000	8000
8	Akhi Mandal	Akhi Handicraft	Kantha and Khadi products	Yes	7	20	20000	7000
9	Anima Bibi	Santipuri Leather	Leather crafts, Bags	Yes	5	60	20000	5000
10	Kakoli Hazra	Not specified	Cotton, Khadi bags	Yes	7	50	40000	20000
11	Susmita Biswas	Not specified	Handmade jewellery	No	7	100	40000	15000
12	Mamtaj Begum	Baharunnesa Kantha Stitch	Khadi, Kantha stitch	Yes	25	100	100000	40000
13	Natasha Khatun	Natasha Handicraft	Khadi, Kantha stitch	yes	25	150	400000	25000
14	Phulkali Bibi	Not specified	Kanta Stitch	No	0	60	15000	5000
15	Reshma Khatun	Not specified	Bamboo photo frames	No	0	60	10000	3000
16	Rekha Ghosh	Loknath Handicraft	Kantha stitch	Yes	200	100	500000	200000
17	Rakhia Bibi	Rakhia Handicraft	Cotton & Khadi products	No	5	100	100000	3000
18	Rekshana Bibi	Rekshana Jewellery	Handmade jewellery, Kantha stitch	No	4	70	20000	10000

19	Sakhira Khatun	Not specified	Jewellery	No	11	60	20000	5000
20	Jyotika Das	Arju Handicraft	Bed-sheets and related products	Yes	20	50	30000	5000
21	Mausumi Ghosh	Santhakuti Silk	Saree, Dupatta, Kantha Stitch	Yes	300	100	50000	20000
22	Meera Patra	Not specified	Jewellery	No	0	100	10000	5000
23	Uma Singh	Not specified	Handloom products	Yes	100	200	40000	10000
24	Mamtaj Khatun	Mamtaj Kantha Stitch	Kantha stitch products	Yes	200	500	200000	20000
25	Jharna Das	Not specified	Kantha stitch products	Yes	7	100	20000	4000

The researchers utilized hermeneutic phenomenological techniques to direct their analysis (Van Manen, 2016). Probability of interpretive bias was mitigated through constant dialogue between the researchers while deciding and freezing coding scheme. Furthermore, the process of transcribing the interviews to fit into the linguistic requirements was done carefully to preserve the nuanced meaning of participants' narratives, acknowledging that some cultural specificity may be inevitably altered in the process (Charmaz, 2011).

Throughout the data analysis process, the team diligently recorded memos and held regular meetings to discuss their analysis and memos, which facilitated the formation of preliminary analytical categories. Continuous communication and analysis within the researchers contributed to refining these categories (Charmaz, 2011). The observational (field) notes supported in developing the preliminary analytical categories and contributed to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences, aligning with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach that guided the study.

This approach represents a comprehensive analytical process, aligning with Creswell's (2013) recommendation for a systematic approach to data analysis. Our analysis was conducted through the lens of an ethic of care, intersectionality and social capital focusing on key considerations necessary for fostering inclusive environments within the entrepreneurial ecosystem in

Bolpur-Santiniketan, with potential implications for inclusivity in broader contexts.

The coding scheme was inductive and it deployed evocative coding, in-vivo coding and descriptive coding (Saldana, 2021, Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014) to compress the highly abstract subjective data into meaningful and interpretative unit of analysis. We deployed MaxQda 2020 for analysing our 1st cycle codes and develop the categories based on the groundedness and density scores. The initial code-system (open coding) yielded 264 codes which were categorised into 162 pattern codes (Table-2). To develop the categories we assessed the code co-occurrence and conducted a thorough code-document analysis. The critical data segments retrieved through synchronised code-pooling were examined for further implications.

The analysis identified four primary themes (Table-2). The first, labelled "Entrepreneurship and the Motherhood Penalty," delves into the complexities of caregiving responsibilities and the hurdles encountered by female entrepreneurs. The second theme, "The Gender Entrepreneurship Binary," sheds light on a patriarchal ecosystem that frequently excludes women. The third theme, "Social Conditioning and Gender Norms: Reinforcing Gender Inequities," illustrates how commonly accepted sexist language, prevailing educational biases, and the existence of a glass ceiling perpetuate obstacles for women entrepreneurs. The fourth and the last theme "Digital disparities and Scope for digital Leverage" clustered all the pattern codes evoking the digital divide and scope of digital intervention.

Table-2: Theme extraction based on 2nd Cycle (Pattern) Coding

Code System	Memo	Frequency
Pattern Coding & Themes		162
<i>Theme-1: Entrepreneurship and Motherhood Penalty</i>		

normed behaviour (motherhood)	Women's leadership styles were characterized as empathetic, driven by purpose, and rooted in values. They were seen as more cautious than men, showing a thoughtful approach to their work and a strong focus on creating social impact	11
lack of networking		7
stereotyping dualist role	The belief that motherhood may hinder productivity compels women entrepreneurs to choose between starting a business and having a family. Additionally, the absence of shared responsibility for household duties and childcare, which predominantly falls on women, forces them to opt for a sacrifice.	5
skewed social constructions		10
family obligations	Motherhood acts as an obstacle not only because of social norms and the absence of shared responsibility, but also due to assumptions that are inherently discriminatory. For instance, all our participants noted that men are not questioned about their family commitments during pitches, while women are. This creates a link between responsibility and family planning, highlighting traditional masculine views of success and profit at any cost.	7
imposed isolation		6
co-responsibilities		4
Theme 2: The Gender entrepreneurship Binary		
resource dominance		3
leadership contrast	The gender divide reinforces an unconscious bias and, in certain cases, has led some women to adopt male behaviors (masculine femininity) in an effort to resemble their successful male counterparts more closely.	7
norm based gender divide		15
discriminatory favouritism	This gender division leaves minorities at the margins	8
authoritative demeanor	Men dominate in decisions about fund allocations, which influences how entrepreneurs seek funding and reinforces the patriarchal system that benefits men.	8
space dominance		7
bias barriers		8
male mannerisms		3
Theme 3: Social conditioning and Gender norms: Reinforcing Gender Inequalities		
masculine norms		8
unconscious bias	As a result of this social conditioning, women encounter the so-called "glass ceiling," encompassing the taboos, biases, and prejudices that society enforces, limiting women to certain roles (stereotyped). This makes it more challenging for women to earn respect from investors and to view themselves as equal participants in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.	11

sexist society	The existing entrepreneurial ecosystem affects the morale of women, particularly young women, leading them to impose restrictions on themselves. The data revealed a prevalent self-doubt, primarily concerning the feasibility of their ideas. In a male-dominated environment, female entrepreneurs often felt vulnerable due to the assumption that "men trust men."	13
unconscious biases	Inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem mandates supporting diversity at the core of its framework	11
glass ceiling		10
Theme 4: Digital disparities and scope for digital leverage		
digital market access	women entrepreneurs of the area are yet to leverage the full potential of digital platforms. They need training and infrastructural support (device, network etc.). Men have better access to devices. Men have better knowledge of using digital platforms which are not shared with the women.	15
digital literacy and training		13
digital infrastructure access		9
lack of digital voice and visibility	low visibility on the web compared to that of the men entrepreneurs.	8
online community and digital networking	missing out on peer-to-peer connection and facing constraints to reach out to remote markets. Men entrepreneurs are well connected on the digital platforms.	11
digital archiving	limited creation of digital repositories of craft production. Culture and heritage representation on the digital platform is still limited.	4

4.1 Entrepreneurial and Motherhood Penalty

This theme postulated that "motherhood" operates as a significant, multifaceted demand structure within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, constraining women's business pursuits through a combination of social norms, discriminatory assumptions, and the absence of shared domestic responsibilities. Women's leadership, often characterized by empathy and a strong social focus, has been systematically marginalized by the "stereotyping dualist role" (of entrepreneur and primary caregiver) in conformity with the social norms. As one participant, Sudha Bhagat (anonymised), articulated (transcribed),

".....it seems that the ideal entrepreneur must forget about family... So, of course, it would be more difficult for women to make this sacrifice and not keep up with our family plans or family obligations....."

This societal pressure forces an untenable choice between business ambition and family life. The burden is exacerbated by a pervasive "lack of networking" opportunities, as caregiving duties often preclude participation in important events. Another participant, Sunneta (anonymized), highlighted this exclusion, stating (transcribed),

".....the most important deals happen after sunset, over dinner. As a woman, and a mother, it is socially unacceptable for me to be out at that time... we are systematically excluded from them....."

Furthermore, the data also exposed "inherently discriminatory" investor behavior, where "family obligations" become a unique line of questioning for women. Mismi (anonymized) observed this double standard firsthand, noting (transcribed),

".....when I present my business plan, the questions are often about 'how will you manage this with your children?' I have never seen my male colleague being asked if his family responsibilities will distract him....."

This systemic bias was summarized by a participant's poignant rhetorical question, which remained unanswered in the current ecosystem:

".....why does fatherhood not pose a barrier for male entrepreneurs?....."

The implications are profound, pointing to the need for policies that dismantle these gendered assumptions, promote co-responsibility in care work, and create more flexible, inclusive networking and funding structures that do not penalize women for their socially assigned roles.

4.2 The Gender Entrepreneurship Division: Balancing Pursuit and Nurturing

This theme explored gendered leadership styles, revealing that, rather than appreciating and valuing these differences, our data indicated that they are often viewed negatively. We used various adjectives to describe female leadership styles such as empathetic, purpose-driven, and value-centred. Women were seen as more cautious, demonstrating care in their work and a focus on creating social impact. For instance, one informant stated,

".....they bring caring attitudes into the tourism business, recognizing diverse interests within their communities....."

(Doel Burman, Entrepreneur). Our data clearly indicated a difference in the value orientation between male and female leaders. Moreover, the behavior of women and men was acknowledged in the data as playing a crucial role

in securing funding. For instance, Laura (University Fund) noted that "men have a deeper voice, are more authoritative, and are seen as more representative in entrepreneurship." The authoritative demeanour of some male entrepreneurs, reflected in the depth of their voices, appeared to confer an advantage. Another female informant highlighted the contrasting ways male and female entrepreneurs conduct themselves and occupy space in a room, which may implicitly disadvantage women when seeking funds. Some transcripts revealed that (transcribed linguistically):

'.....we initiate our business endeavours differently because our inherent differences shape our approach, including our manner of seeking funding. Even in communication, there are distinct differences; when listening to a man, his stance tends to be more fixed, often with legs apart and chest out as he articulates his objectives without hesitation. Conversely, a woman typically presents herself differently, and even her attire can sometimes constrain her..... (Doel Burman, Entrepreneur)

Beyond acknowledging the contrasting behavior of men and women, our findings revealed differing expectations based on gender. Specifically, women entrepreneurs often feel pressured in areas where they are perceived to be less proficient. For instance, Kunti Shaw (anonymized) noted that (transcribed linguistically):

'.....investors, who are typically men, tend to display less empathy toward female entrepreneurs and ask different types of questions. Women are frequently queried about their commitment, while men are queried about financial projections. Consequently, the responses vary based on the nature of the questions posed.....'

Motherhood penalty was also reflected in participant's voice as Paroma Mitra (anonymized) observed (transcribed linguistically):

'..... when I present my business plan, the questions are often about 'how will you manage this with your children?' I have never seen my male colleague being asked if his family responsibilities will distract him. The focus for him is always on the numbers, for me, it's on my ability to commit.....'

Our data uncovered that the gender divide perpetuates unconscious biases, leading some women to adopt male mannerisms in an attempt to emulate their successful male counterparts. Anima Bibi expressed how some women feel compelled to mirror the style of men to achieve success. This sentiment was echoed by another female entrepreneur who observed that adopting a more masculine appearance may be deemed necessary to be taken seriously in certain contexts. Our data highlighted the pressure on women to surpass, outperform, or surpass their male counterparts in presenting themselves.

4.3 Social Conditioning and Gender Norms: Perpetuating Gender Disparities

The data revealed indications of a gender-biased environment shaped by societal norms ingrained from childhood, where boys and girls are treated differently and expected to adhere to societal standards. These gender norms are acquired through observation of others' behavior, contributing to the cultivation of cultural biases. Within this

environment, biases influence how women seek funding and how they are perceived by investors. Such social conditioning is entrenched in a sexist society where stereotypes may impede women's success. These unconscious biases affect the perspectives of both women and men.

Kakoli Hazra (entrepreneur) highlighted the role of the entrepreneurial system in supporting innovative ideas, emphasizing how gendered understandings are reflected in entrepreneurs' attire choices. Additionally, the notion that women can be "just as good as men" perpetuates the patriarchal ecosystem, which inherently favours men and erects biased barriers for women.

The data also indicated that the current ecosystem adversely impacts the confidence of women, particularly young women, who often impose limitations on themselves. Self-doubt, primarily regarding the feasibility of their ideas, was evident in the data. In a predominantly male ecosystem, female entrepreneurs felt vulnerable because there was an assumption that "men trust men." A significant concern shared among our participants was the lack of female role models in positions of authority.

Susmita Biswas (anonymized), an entrepreneur, emphasized the importance of role models in empowering women to pursue entrepreneurship, highlighting the scarcity of such examples due to the limited representation of women in leadership roles and decision-making positions. Meera (anonymized), a tourism entrepreneur reflected the same (transcribed linguistically):

'.....we see men running most of the shops, handling the money, and speaking in the business meetings. It subconsciously tells you that this is a man's world. Having a successful woman to look up to would make this path feel less lonely and more possible.....'

4.4 Balancing Duality In Socially Constructed Roles

Our research uncovered that motherhood poses a significant obstacle along the entrepreneurial journey for women. Participants identified motherhood as burdensome primarily due to two factors: societal stereotypes regarding childcare and shared responsibility, and the prevailing values within the ecosystem that equate success with extensive work hours. As articulated by Sudha Bhagat (woman entrepreneur) (transcribed linguistically):

'.....it seems that the ideal entrepreneur must forget about family, lock themselves up for years, not talk to anyone and just dedicate themselves in doing business. So, of course, it would be more difficult for women to make this sacrifice and not keep up with our family plans or family obligations.....'

Motherhood emerges as a barrier not solely due to societal constructs or the absence of shared responsibility, but as an ingrained assumption that is directly discriminatory. For instance, our interviewees unanimously agreed that men are not queried about family commitments during their pitches, whereas women routinely face such inquiries. Consequently, the burden of responsibility becomes intertwined with family planning, reinforcing conventional masculine ideals of success and profit maximization at any cost. The presumption that motherhood could impede

productivity compels female entrepreneurs to confront the dilemma of choosing between family and business ventures. Moreover, due to the lack of shared responsibility and the continued expectation for women to primarily manage household chores and childcare, women are compelled to weigh the sacrifices they must make.

Our data revealed that motherhood acts as a hindrance to entrepreneurship, as investors prefer to see professionals who are entirely dedicated to ensuring the success of the invested capital. A pertinent question arises: why does fatherhood not pose a barrier for male entrepreneurs? If caregiving responsibilities are not evenly shared, with women bearing the primary burden, they remain tethered to caregiving obligations, thus impacting their career prospects and achievements.

For example, our research highlighted the difficulty women face in participating in networking events. Networking is recognized as a fundamental activity for establishing connections and relationships with investors; however, our informants observed that women are often excluded from such opportunities due to their caregiving commitments. The issue of networking also reflected in participant's views, such as Sunneta (anonymized) stated ((transcribed linguistically):

'.....the most important deals happen after sunset, over dinner. As a woman, and a mother, it is socially unacceptable for me to be out at that time. Those informal networks are where trust is built, and we are systematically excluded from them.....'

4.5 Digital disparities and Scope for digital Leverage

Our analysis revealed a stark theme of digital disparities that highlighted a significant, untapped potential for digital leverage. While digital platforms offer a transformative pathway to market access and visibility, women entrepreneurs in Bolpur-Santiniketan are systematically disadvantaged in their ability to utilize these platforms. A pronounced gendered digital divide is evident, where men have superior access to devices, data, and digital knowledge. This inequity translated directly into a digital visibility gap which was evident from markedly lower presence of women-led enterprises on the web compared to those run by men. The issue gets further complicated as the digital infrastructure in most of the unorganized market places of Bolpur-Santiniketan where the women entrepreneurs operate, are found to be technically poor. The lack of mobility of the women entrepreneurs, too, restricts them from availing better network coverage. Preeti (anonymized), an entrepreneur dealing with *Kantha Stitch* products, lamented,

".....my brother handles all the online bookings for our family business. He says it's too complicated for me to

learn. I see his phone buzzing with orders from across the country, while I wait for customers to walk into our physical shop....."

This lack of agency and visibility is compounded by a digital cultural loss. There has been limited creation of digital repositories (archives) that document craft processes, meaning the rich cultural heritage and intangible skills possessed by these women remain largely invisible online. Komal (anonymized), noted,

".....the tourists love to see how the Kantha stitch is done, but we have no way to show them online before they arrive. The stories behind our art are lost....."

Missing out on networking was also reflected as one participant shared that:

".....I see other business owners (who are mostly men) coordinating and getting bulk orders through their WhatsApp groups. I am not in any such group. We women are working alone, we don't have that network to support each other online....."

Consequently, the current digital ecosystem does not merely reflect existing gender inequalities but actively amplifies them. However, this disparity also points to a clear scope for policy intervention. With targeted training, infrastructural support, and initiatives focused on building digital skills and archiving cultural heritage, there is immense potential to leverage technology as a powerful tool for equity, enabling women to claim their space in the digital economy and ensure their cultural contributions are recognized and valued.

We also explored the organic network to assess the thematic relationships. The 'Networking' feature of Atlas.ti 24 was used for the purpose. Fig.1 captures the thematic network. Evidences were obtained to establish a qualitative causal model involving 'social conditioning & gender norms'; and 'motherhood penalty' impacting 'gender entrepreneurship division'. The 'digital disparities' was found to be associated with 'social conditioning & gender norms' with overlapping and co-occurring code-categories. 'Digital disparities' were also attributed to 'motherhood penalty' as role-stereotyping emerged as controller for digital divide. The causality and the association between the themes further lends explanation to the implications of care ethics in neutralizing the antecedent effects of 'social conditioning & gender norms'; and 'motherhood penalty', which aggravates gendered 'digital disparities', towards balancing 'gender entrepreneurship division'. The care ethics targets to develop responses to gender barriers and amplify equity responses and should be embedded in the tourism policy framework to ensure equity participation across the gender continuum and leverage the digital scope to its full potential.

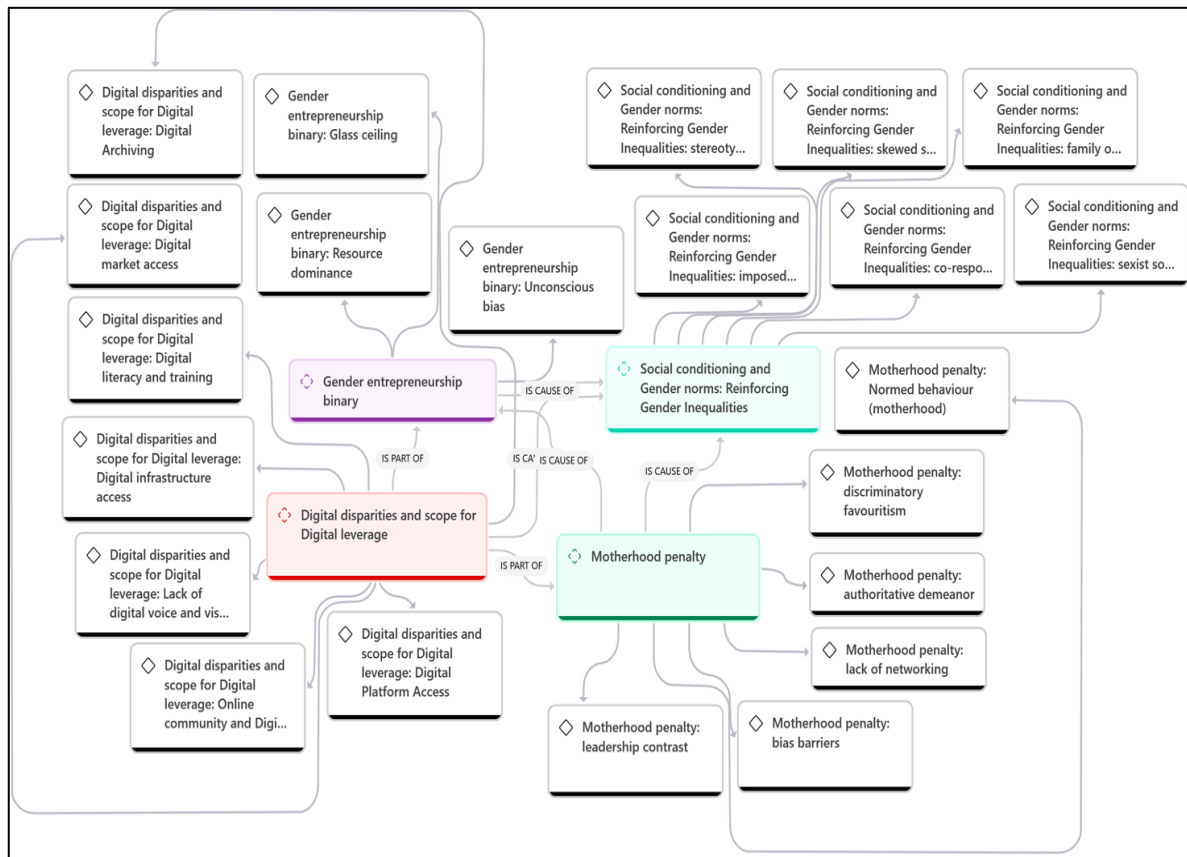


Fig.1: Thematic network depicting the relationships between the themes extracted.

4.6 Discussion of the Data

Our research underscores the pivotal role of women in advancing sustainable development and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the tourism sector. However, it is crucial to emphasize that this responsibility should not fall solely on women. Through the lens of a feminist ethic of care, we recognize the significance of fostering relationality as a mutually beneficial strategy for overcoming barriers. Achieving gender equity necessitates the participation of all genders and structural changes within societal institutions (Doto and Slongo, 2020).

Our investigation, informed by a feminist ethic of care perspective, sheds light on the persistent assumption that the male experience represents the norm in supporting and financing tourism entrepreneurs in Bolpur-Santiniketan. Despite progress, gender disparities persist within the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Bolpur-Santiniketan. Male investors outnumber their female counterparts, and female entrepreneurs face different lines of questioning compared to men, while gendered leadership styles are often viewed negatively.

Consequently, women may experience insecurities and feel compelled to surpass expectations to earn recognition. Implicit biases in favour of male entrepreneurs in securing capital were evident in our findings, aligning with previous research (Kwapisz and Hechavarría, 2018). These biases, coupled with entrenched traditional masculine attitudes, shape our perceptions of successful entrepreneurs (Ahl and Marlow 2012).

Moreover, our data highlighted how social conditioning perpetuates gender inequities within the tourism entrepreneurial space. While some male venture capitalists expressed support for female entrepreneurs, disparaging language and other unconscious biases contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequities. Employing an ethic of care, including listening to and valuing the voices of women entrepreneurs, is essential to ensuring they receive the support they need to thrive. It's imperative to distinguish between diversity and inclusion; merely funding more women entrepreneurs without addressing underlying biases or implementing supportive policies may not foster true inclusivity.

Our analysis identified opportunities to enhance existing policies and involve women in policy formulation to better support women entrepreneurs in rural tourism sector, particularly in the context of Bolpur-Santiniketan and in broader context involving similar spatial characteristics in India. The findings implicate policy requirements at the local government and Panchayat levels regarding gender-sensitive business incubation, digital equity programmes to address the gendered digital gap, and the reframing of access guidelines to ensure financial inclusion.

At the state and national level too there is a scope to integrate 'care infrastructure' into tourism policy and adopt specific policies on women-led tourism clusters. There is a requirement to imbibe gender and unconscious bias training for officers in financial institutions (eg. banks, MSMEs etc.) and state tourism boards.

Critical examination of discourses that reinforce gender inequities in entrepreneurship is essential, especially given

the influence of traditional masculine norms on our perceptions of success. While tourism entrepreneurship is often touted as empowering for women, it's crucial to expand our conceptualizations beyond mere income generation to encompass diverse perspectives on entrepreneurship. Our study contributes to the broader discourse on feminist perspectives in tourism scholarship, emphasizing the importance of reframing conceptualizations of entrepreneurship for women.

Moving forward, stakeholder collaboration is imperative for developing inclusive tourism models and advancing sustainable development goals. This collaboration should span across various levels, from local to global, with a focus on prioritizing both people and the planet (UN, 2022). Despite our study's limitations, such as its focus on Bolpur-Santiniketan, it provides valuable insights for future research. Further qualitative exploration in different regional contexts, as well as examining the perspectives of corporate women considering entrepreneurship, would enrich our understanding of constraints and opportunities within entrepreneurial ecosystems.

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. As noted in the methodology, the primary constraint are the limited sample size (owing to data saturation) and its specific geographical focus on Bolpur-Santiniketan, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The experiences documented here are deeply embedded in West Bengal's socio-cultural fabric and may not be directly applicable to other Indian states or international contexts with different gender norms and institutional structures.

The reliance on self-reported data in interviews may also introduce social desirability bias. These limitations present clear avenues for future inquiry. Research in other rural tourism destinations in India, such as Odisha, Kerala, Rajasthan, or Himachal Pradesh, would allow for valuable comparative analysis. Furthermore, investigating the perspectives of other actors of the ecosystem, such as male entrepreneurs, investors, and government officials, would provide a more holistic understanding of the power dynamics at play.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study highlighted the transformative potential of women entrepreneurs within the tourism ecosystem of Bolpur-Santiniketan. The study was grounded in an integrated theoretical framework of feminist care ethics, intersectionality, and social capital. Our findings directly address the theoretical gap identified in the literature by demonstrating how a care ethic, when reinforced with insights from intersectional and social capital analyses, provides a powerful lens for understanding the multi-scalar realities of women's entrepreneurship. It moves beyond abstract theoretical engagement to show how care-based values manifest in empathetic leadership, community well-being, and relational economies, thereby offering a concrete alternative to patriarchal, profit-centric entrepreneurial models.

The journeys of the women in this study revealed that sustainable and gender-inclusive progress cannot rest solely

on individual resilience. While our findings celebrated the agency of women who are actively "crossing the hurdles" through innovative, community-driven strategies, such as leveraging self-help groups (SHGs) for bonding social capital and strategically exploring digital platforms to create bridging capital, we must temper this optimism with a critical acknowledgment of systemic constraints.

The method gap we identified, which our qualitative approach sought to fill, was pivotal in uncovering these nuanced, agentic strategies. However, these very narratives also revealed the profound depth of the structural barriers they navigated. Therefore, it was important to identify the grassroots networks and individual agencies that operate within and against the deeply entrenched patriarchal structure and institutional inertia.

The issues of 'digital disparities', 'motherhood penalty' and 'gender entrepreneurship binary' documented in our study evoked from prevailing socio-cultural norms and institutional practices. However, the concern raised by feminist political economy scholarship regarding the potential for women's labour to be co-opted within the structures that perpetuate their subordination remains a real risk.

Consequently, the study acknowledged that while women's grassroots networks could be a formidable force for navigation and resistance, they were often a response to compromised institutional support and inadequate to dismantle systemic inequities. There could be significant resistance to change from existing power hierarchies, and the policy rhetoric does not always translate into on-the-ground reality, as highlighted by our data gap on minority and rural women's experiences.

The insights from the study necessitates a multi-level interventions in the form of an 'Inclusive Tourism Model' predicated on the core principles of care ethics. It would involve:

- (a) Policy Integration: Embedding a feminist ethic of care into tourism policy at state and national levels to promote "care infrastructure" (e.g., childcare support), gender-sensitive business incubation, and specific policies for women-led tourism clusters.
- (b) Structural Reforms: Implementing gender and unconscious bias training for officers in financial institutions and tourism boards to address the institutional inertia that perpetuates the gaps in access to capital and markets.
- (c) Digital Equity: Launching targeted digital equity programmes to address the gendered digital divide, providing not just access but also training and support to ensure women can leverage technology for market access, visibility, and cultural archiving.

We found this study contributing to the feminist scholarship by providing a grounded, theoretical framework that bridged care ethics with the practical challenges of tourism entrepreneurship. It demonstrated that women's agency is a critical catalyst for change, but it must be met with concerted structural and institutional transformation. By amplifying women's voices and recognizing their contributions beyond economic metrics, and, combining it

with advocacy for policies that dismantle the barriers they face, the tourism sector in Bolpur-Santiniketan and similar contexts could truly evolve into a equitable and gender-responsive platform for women entrepreneurs. Future research should continue to explore the intersectionality of these experiences across diverse regional contexts and examine the efficacy of policy interventions informed by this care-centered, integrated framework.

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CRediT author statement

Term	Definition	Author 1	A2
Conceptualization	Ideas; formulation or evolution of overarching research goals and aims	✓	✓
Methodology	Development or design of methodology; creation of models	✓	✓
Software	Programming, software development; designing computer programs; implementation of the computer code and supporting algorithms; testing of existing code components	✓	✓
Validation	Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/ reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs	✓	✓
Formal analysis	Application of statistical, mathematical, computational, or other formal techniques to analyse or synthesize study data	✓	✓
Investigation	Conducting a research and investigation process, specifically performing the experiments, or data/evidence collection	✓	✓
Resources	Provision of study materials, reagents, materials, patients, laboratory samples, animals, instrumentation, computing resources, or other analysis tools	✓	✓
Data Curation	Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data (including software code, where it is necessary for interpreting the data itself) for initial use and later reuse	✓	✓
Writing - Original Draft	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically writing the initial draft (including substantive translation)	✓	✓
Writing - Review & Editing	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work by those from the original research group, specifically critical review, commentary or revision – including pre- or post-publication stages	✓	✓
Visualization	Preparation, creation and/or presentation of the published work, specifically visualization/ data presentation	✓	✓
Supervision	Oversight and leadership responsibility for the research activity planning and execution, including mentorship external to the core team	✓	✓
Project administration	Management and coordination responsibility for the research activity planning and execution	✓	✓
Funding acquisition	Acquisition of the financial support for the project leading to this publication	✓	✓

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