2024-11-29

Exploring women entrepreneurial leadership in Ireland: a comparative study of drivers, perceptions, and government support

Exploring Women Entrepreneurial Leadership in Ireland: A Comparative Study of Drivers, Perceptions, and Government Support

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Abstract

This study delves into the role of women's entrepreneurship in Ireland, employing a demand-constraint-choice framework to analyze motivations and factors influencing entrepreneurial ventures. Qualitative research using semi-structured interviews provides a comparative analysis of motivations, perceptions, and experiences across Ireland's cultural and economic contexts. Findings highlight the influence of cultural factors on entrepreneurial choices, the importance of government support, and the need for proactive intervention for gender-inclusive economic development. The study's insights extend beyond Ireland, contributing to global strategies for empowering women in entrepreneurship, making it valuable for policymakers, researchers, and entrepreneurs seeking to understand women's entrepreneurial leadership.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship, Demand-Constraint-Choice Framework, Ireland, International Entrepreneurship, Gender Equality.

I. Introduction

Entrepreneurship drives economic development, creates employment opportunities, fosters innovation, and contributes to economic growth (Ayentimi, 2020). This study investigates the concept of entrepreneurial leadership and its multifaceted nature, emphasizing the significance of context-specific interactions that shape women's entrepreneurial ventures (Goncalves, 2013; Gunawan & Cahayani, 2022). Women's motivations for engaging in entrepreneurship vary widely, influenced by factors such as poverty, gender roles, and societal expectations (Rosca et al., 2020). In advanced economies like Ireland, women entrepreneurs are often driven by aspirations of self-actualization and professional achievement, in contrast to the economic necessity that drives entrepreneurship in emerging economies (Hechavarria et al., 2019; Agarwal et al., 2020). However, women entrepreneurs in Ireland face challenges such as gender bias and limited access to resources, which can impact their entrepreneurial endeavors (Džananović & Tandir, 2020).

This study aims to deepen the understanding of women entrepreneurs' motivations and challenges in Ireland, mainly focusing on their leadership dynamics and the need for gender-inclusive policies and programs to support their ventures (Wells, 2021; Bullough et al., 2022). Further research is essential to address gender bias and inequality in entrepreneurship and to evaluate the effectiveness of gender-inclusive initiatives (Aidis et al., 2022; Aparicio et al., 2022; Gaweł & Mroczek-Dąbrowska, 2022). Understanding the unique challenges and motivations of women entrepreneurs in Ireland can contribute to developing tailored support systems and policies that foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in entrepreneurship.

II. Literature Review - Women Entrepreneurs: Motivation, Context, and Challenges

Women entrepreneurs drive economic growth through businesses (Arshad et al., 2021). Their decision to start a business is influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, categorized as pull (intrinsic) and push (extrinsic) motivations (Cho et al., 2019). While pull factors include the desire for achievement and independence, push factors arise from a lack of opportunity or necessity (Cho et al., 2019; Temirbekova, 2019).

Motivations for entrepreneurship vary based on geographical and cultural contexts, with studies highlighting differences between advanced economies like Australia and Canada and emerging economies like Afghanistan, China, Kazahkstan, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, and Latin American nations (Sabri & Thomas, 2019; Wafeq et al., 2019; Cukier & Hassannezhad Chavoushi, 2020; Newsome, 2020; Ruiz-Martínez et al., 2021; Tashpulatova, 2021; Franzke et al., 2022; Smagulova & Goncalves, 2023).

Women entrepreneurs face gender disparities in entrepreneurship, with men having greater chances of becoming entrepreneurs (Goncalves, 2015b; Brush et al., 2020; Ferrín, 2023; Mohammed et al., 2023). However, women are more likely to pursue social and economic missions (Siebold et al., 2019; Żur, 2021). In advanced economies like Ireland, women entrepreneurs seek self-employment for independence and personal fulfillment, but they still face gender gaps in labor participation (Coleman et al., 2019; Coleman, 2020; Hart, 2021; Ogunjemilusi et al., 2021).

Context plays a crucial role in shaping women's decisions to pursue entrepreneurship. In dual-earner gender regimes, women are more inclined to pursue entrepreneurship driven by opportunities. Women turn to self-employment out of necessity in contexts with high unemployment due to economic crises (Goncalves, 2015b; Ferrín, 2023; Mohammed et al., 2023).

Entrepreneurial women in Ireland receive informal support from their relatives, friends, and family members, indicating a positive societal attitude toward entrepreneurship (Coleman et al., 2019; Coleman, 2020; Hart, 2021; Ogunjemilusi et al., 2021). Several drivers promote women's entrepreneurship in Ireland, including access to finance, a cultural shift in attitudes, education and training, government support, and networking opportunities (Coleman et al., 2019; Adewuyi, 2021; Costin et al., 2021; Sendra-Pons et al., 2022).

Overall, women's entrepreneurship in advanced economies requires further substantive research, especially in understanding the context as a critical dimension of analysis (White et al., 2021). While challenges exist, women entrepreneurs exhibit passion, ambition, self-confidence, perseverance, and determination that contribute to their success (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

Several drivers have been identified as promoting women's entrepreneurship in Ireland (Coleman et al., 2019; Adewuyi, 2021; Costin et al., 2021; Sendra-Pons et al., 2022):

- **Access to finance**: There have been increased funding opportunities and access to finance for women entrepreneurs, including venture capital, angel investors, and crowdfunding platforms, especially in the wake of the digitalization of business (Henry et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022).
- **Cultural shift**: There has been a shift in attitudes towards women in business in Ireland, with more recognition of the value of women's contributions to the economy and society. This cultural shift has increased support for women entrepreneurs and their businesses (Cassidy, 2019; Coleman, 2020; O'Connor, 2020).
- **Education and training:** There are various educational and training programs available to women entrepreneurs in Ireland, including business courses, workshops, and seminars, that provide essential skills, knowledge management, and sharing required for business success (Goncalves, 2012ab; Li et al., 2020b; O'Neill & O'Gorman, 2020; Toledo et al., 2020).
- **Government support:** The Irish government has implemented several initiatives to promote entrepreneurship among women, such as providing funding, mentoring, training programs, and gender disparities, specifically tailored for women entrepreneurs, including the disabled community (Coleman et al., 2019; Cooney, 2022; Dowd, 2021; Henry et al., 2022).
- **Networking opportunities**: The availability of networking opportunities and support systems, such as women's business groups and mentorship programs, help to foster connections and provide guidance for women entrepreneurs (Coleman et al., 2019; Stephens et al., 2021).

Overall, the drivers for women entrepreneurship in Ireland are a combination of specific entrepreneurial capabilities such as education, managerial experiences, and teamwork and leadership, which strongly influence enterprise-financial growth. These entrepreneurs' capabilities are leveraged to maximize financial gain rather than employment growth. In addition, other factors are at play in the success of such women-led enterprises, such as government support, changing cultural attitudes, increased access to resources, and a growing economy (Costin et al., 2021; Sendra-Pons et al., 2022). Meanwhile, several related challenges are often counteracted in practice by individual characteristics such as passion, ambition, self-confidence, perseverance, and determination that women entrepreneurs tend to exhibit to survive and thrive (Chatterjee et al., 2022).

Currently, there is still a lack of substantive in-depth evidence on entrepreneurial women in advanced economies, who manifest an elite disposition and are driven by innovation and opportunity (White et al., 2021) as the main focus of the literature is on women entrepreneurship that is

community-based or conducted through disadvantaged groups. However, the literature has identified several commonalities between women entrepreneurs, such as risk aversion, inability to access substantive finances, lack of motivation, education, desire to start a business, capacity to access support for decision-making, and effective use of networks (Llados-Masllorens & Ruiz-Dotras, 2021; Nyanga & Chindanya, 2021). In this context, research on women entrepreneurship in advanced economies could offer important insights into this body of literature by emphasizing the context as an essential dimension of analysis.

II.1. Intersection of Gender, Entrepreneurship, and Leadership

The intersection of entrepreneurship and leadership has influenced gender examination in entrepreneurship research. A perception of male traits associated with successful entrepreneurship leads to an incomplete understanding of gender in this context. However, there is an emerging narrative of successful women leaders and entrepreneurs, possibly in response to the 2008 recession and the neoliberal context positioning women as central to economic recovery.

Some researchers argue for alternative entrepreneurship structures and distinct gender forms, necessitating contextual approaches that consider geographical and historical factors. These contexts encompass non-privileged, underrepresented, and disadvantaged backgrounds, requiring a nuanced understanding of gender and entrepreneurship. A social constructionist strategy to conceptualize leadership emphasizes the context in analyzing women's entrepreneurial leadership.

Studies have highlighted gender differences in transformational leadership style, which is crucial for effective organizations. Women leaders exhibit attributes aligning with entrepreneurial leadership, contributing to positive organizational climates, innovation, teamwork, and continuous learning.

Flexibility is crucial for women entrepreneurs and leaders managing family commitments, often relying on network support. More research is needed to understand gender relations within specific contexts.

II.1.1. Individual Determinants in Women's Entrepreneurial Leadership

The literature emphasizes the gendered nature of leadership roles, illustrating how cultural expectations influence women leaders and entrepreneurs (Bishu & Headley, 2020; Teixeira et al., 2021; Bullough et al., 2022). While individual-level characteristics are essential for entrepreneurship, little is known about how individuals become influential leaders, with context playing a vital role in shaping effective leadership perceptions (Martin & Slepian, 2021).

In entrepreneurial activities, individual-level characteristics are primary determinants, yet research lacks insight into how individuals become influential leaders (Kruse et al., 2021; Rigtering & Behrens, 2021). Gender is increasingly recognized as a crucial determinant of leadership and entrepreneurship, emphasizing the need to consider context in understanding effective leadership (Bendell et al., 2019; Arshad et al., 2021; Shen & Joseph, 2021).

Further investigation is needed to understand how individuals interact with the context to develop leadership in entrepreneurial activities in the age of digital transformations (Schiuma et al., 2022). Demands and constraints shape leadership roles, impacting individuals' perceptions and choices (Su et al., 2021). Stewart (1982) argued that demands and constraints influence role-holder capabilities and perceptions, defining the discretionary nature of their role.

Leadership perception is complex and influenced by attitudinal dimensions and social context (Branson & Marra, 2019). Role discretion is driven by the incumbent's ability to influence responsibilities, boundaries, and accountabilities. Researchers highlight the need for integrative models that address leadership effectiveness, particularly for women entrepreneurs, considering the complex interactions of contextual and individual determinants (Samimi et al., 2022).

II.1.2. Contextual Challenges and Opportunities for Women Entrepreneurs in Ireland

Entrepreneurship in Ireland has experienced fluctuations over decades, marked by periods of economic growth and decline (O'Gorman, 2015; Negra & McIntyre, 2020; Flannery, 2021; Armie, 2022; Ó Gráda & O'Rourke, 2022). Small businesses constitute a significant portion of Ireland's non-financial business economy, employing 70.1% of the workforce (European Commission, 2019). Despite Ireland's ranking as the eighth most entrepreneurial country globally and the fourth in Europe, small businesses decreased by 3.8% from 2020 to 2021 (Statista, 2021; GEM, 2022/22). To support entrepreneurial growth, the Irish government doubled its investment in high-potential start-ups (HPSU) to €27 million in 2022 (Enterprise Ireland, 2023).

Ireland boasts a robust support ecosystem for small businesses, including 31 Local Enterprise Offices and 170 government supports (Enterprise Ireland, 2023). Business Incubation Centers (BICs) funded by Enterprise Ireland are essential in supporting start-ups, although they face challenges in ensuring long-term sustainability (Hausberg & Korreck, 2020).

Women entrepreneurs in Ireland encounter barriers in securing financial capital, including gender biases in investment decisions and less favorable lending terms (Coleman et al., 2019; Hendriks, 2019; Hwang et al., 2019; Cowling et al., 2020; Villaseca et al., 2020). These barriers hinder enterprise growth and job creation, highlighting the importance of gender equality in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Neumeyer et al., 2019ab; Igwe et al., 2020; Kamberidou, 2020).

Policy rhetoric regarding women entrepreneurs in Ireland often reflects neo-liberal and liberal feminist perspectives, focusing on addressing perceived deficiencies in women's capabilities and businesses (Orser et al., 2019; Ozkazanc-Pan & Muntean, 2021; Braun, 2022). However, researchers emphasize the need to consider infrastructure challenges and societal perceptions of women's roles in entrepreneurship development (Junussova & Beimisheva, 2021; Xie et al., 2021; Zhailaubayeva, 2021; Bilal, 2022; Bullough et al., 2022).

Despite traditional perceptions of women's societal roles, women in Ireland have played significant roles in starting and running small businesses, often involving family connections and support (Onyusheva & Meyer, 2020; Crummy & Devine, 2023), which points to Ireland's favorable cultural climate for entrepreneurship (Kulanov et al., 2020; Wendt et al., 2021).

II.2. Stewart's Model of Role Demands, Constraints, and Choices

Rosemary Stewart's (1982) Demand-Constraint Choice (DCC) model provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing managerial roles by examining the interplay between role demands and constraints and the choices made. The model categorizes role-holder choices as discretional or prescribed based on their perception of role demands and constraints. Demands represent a managerial role's core tasks and responsibilities, while constraints are internal and external factors that limit the role-holder's actions. The model suggests that role behavior reflects how individuals respond to these demands and constraints, and their choices determine their leadership effectiveness. Stewart identifies three essential choices: highlighting job factors, delegating tasks, and managing

job boundaries. The DCC model applies to leadership at micro, meso, and macro levels and emphasizes the importance of considering context in leadership effectiveness, a view supported by Morais et al. (2019).

II.3. Women-Led Entrepreneurism in Ireland

According to GEM (2021/22), entrepreneurship among young Irish adults aged 18 to 64 has risen significantly, with stable rates of new business owners and early-stage entrepreneurs from 2019 to 2021. However, there has been a rise in business closures, exceptionally high compared to other countries. Despite this, the number of people aspiring to start a new business in the next three years remains high, while employment growth aspirations have declined. Notably, 58% of entrepreneurs focus solely on the Irish market. Women's participation in early-stage entrepreneurship has increased, narrowing the gender gap to a ratio of 1.2 to 1.

Additionally, more men aim for high growth compared to women, and female new business owners in Ireland are more focused on consumer services and less involved in high-medium tech sectors, preferring the domestic market. There has been a significant increase in informal investors in Ireland, indicating a favorable environment for entrepreneurship. Over three in five Irish entrepreneurs aim to minimize their business's environmental impact, while over half aim to maximize its social impact (GEM, 2022/22). The start-up activity rate in Ireland in 2021 was 12.4%, similar to pre-COVID levels in 2019, ranking higher than many EU countries but lower than Latvia and the Netherlands (GEM, 2021/22; Vārpiņa et al., 2023).

	Aspiring entrepreneurs	**Aspiring entrepreneurs (excluding those already active)**	**Nascent entrepreneurs**	**New business owners**	**Early Stage Entrepreneurs (TEA)**	**Owner-managers**
	% of adults	% of adults	% of adults	% of adults	% of adults	% of adults
Ireland	**20.1**	**15.2**	**8.1**	**4.9**	**12.5**	**6.9**
European comparator countries						
Croatia	27.9	21.7	9.0	3.7	12.4	4.0
Cyprus	17.3	15.1	5.0	3.7	8.4	8.6
Finland	11.8	9.7	5.0	3.1	7.9	8.9
France	16.9	14.5	5.8	2.0	7.7	3.6
Germany	8.6	5.8	4.3	2.7	6.9	4.9
Greece	10.9	9.6	3.2	2.4	5.5	14.7
Hungary	10.7	8.1	5.3	4.9	9.7	8.4
Italy	11.1	9.4	2.4	2.5	4.8	4.5
Latvia	24.6	17.9	9.6	6.0	15.1	9.9
Luxembourg	17.7	13.2	5.5	2.3	7.3	3.6
Netherlands	22.5	17.6	9.3	5.2	14.2	6.4
Norway	5.7	4.9	2.0	1.1	3.1	3.5
Poland	3.7	2.8	1.1	0.9	2.0	11.1
Romania	14.9	9.7	4.5	5.3	9.7	4.1
Slovakia	7.9	5.3	4.2	2.2	6.4	6.5
Slovenia	16.1	15.4	3.4	3.4	6.7	8.5
Spain	9.0	7.7	2.9	2.6	5.5	7.2
Sweden	15.0	13.1	6.1	3.1	9.0	4.3
Switzerland	18.4	13.4	6.6	3.3	9.8	7.1
United Kingdom	12.1	9.3	8.9	3.9	12.6	5.3
Average (European)	***14.4***	***11.4***	***5.3***	***3.3***	***8.4***	***6.8***
International comparator countries						
Canada	22.5	13.4	10.2	11.1	20.1	8.2
Israel	19.9	17.5	6.1	3.6	9.6	3.3
United States	20.5	14.8	10.7	6.0	16.5	8.8

Figure 1 – Ireland's entrepreneurial activity compared to European countries, the U.S., Canada, and Israel. (SOURCE: GEM, 2022).

Irish culture strongly supports entrepreneurship, with over 80% of the population being successful entrepreneurs (GEM, 2022). In 2021, 67% of the population viewed entrepreneurship as a favorable career choice, up from 55% in 2018, indicating increasing support. Ireland ranks above the EU average and slightly ahead of the US in societal support for entrepreneurship (Fackelmann & De Concini, 2020; GEM, 2022/22). Primary reasons for entrepreneurship include wealth accumulation (59%), making a difference (58%), and job scarcity (56%). The percentage citing job scarcity increased significantly from 41% in 2019, possibly due to the pandemic. Irish entrepreneurs rank fourth in Europe for wealth accumulation and fifth for making a difference (GEM, 2022/22). Conversely, entrepreneurs in prosperous countries like Norway, Sweden, and Luxembourg are less concerned about job scarcity, with Slovakia showing the highest concern at 90% (GEM, 2022/22).

Navigating the Path: Challenges of Women Entrepreneurs in Ireland

The current startup funding system places women entrepreneurs at a disadvantage despite evidence that women-led startups generate more revenue per dollar investment than men (Abouzahr et al., 2018). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim for gender equality and the empowerment of women by 2030 (Boluk et al., 2019; Adeola, 2020). However, women entrepreneurs in Europe, including Ireland, face challenges in accessing funding (Coleman et al., 2019; Fackelmann & De Concini, 2020). The new European Commission has made gender smart investing a priority, aiming to create policies and financing instruments that support female entrepreneurs (European Commission, 2019). Despite progress, biases against women persist in research and innovation, impacting their success (European Commission, 2019).

In Ireland, women's early-stage entrepreneurial activity has risen, with rates increasing from 7.5% in 2018 to 11.3% in 2021, narrowing the gender gap to 1.2:1 (Sendra-Pons et al., 2022). This trend contrasts with many other countries where men still dominate early-stage entrepreneurship. However, women-led businesses in Ireland face financing challenges (GEM, 2022).

	EARLY STAGE ENTREPRENEURS			OWNER-MANAGERS OF ESTABLISHED BUSINESSES		
	Rate for men	Rate for women	Rate as a ratio Men:Women	Rate for men	Rate for women	Rate as a ratio Men:Women
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Ireland	**13.7**	**11.3**	**1.2 : 1**	**9.1**	**4.8**	**1.9 : 1**
European comparator countries						
Croatia	15.5	9.2	1.7 : 1	5.2	2.9	1.8 : 1
Cyprus	10.8	6.1	1.8 : 1	10.6	6.7	1.6 : 1
Finland	9.4	6.4	1.5 : 1	11.4	6.3	1.8 : 1
France	8.4	7.1	1.2 : 1	4.3	2.9	1.5 : 1
Germany	8.4	5.3	1.6 : 1	6.8	3.0	2.3 : 1
Greece	6.5	4.6	1.4 : 1	17.0	12.4	1.4 : 1
Hungary	12.1	7.5	1.6 : 1	11.1	5.7	2.0 : 1
Italy	6.2	3.5	1.8 : 1	6.1	2.9	2.1 : 1
Latvia	18.2	12.0	1.5 : 1	13.5	6.3	2.2 : 1
Luxembourg	9.3	5.1	1.8 : 1	3.1	4.1	0.8 : 1
Netherlands	15.5	13.0	1.2 : 1	8.8	4.0	2.2 : 1
Norway	4.4	1.8	2.5 : 1	4.9	2.1	2.4 : 1
Poland	2.4	1.6	1.4 : 1	11.5	10.6	1.1 : 1
Romania	9.8	9.6	1.0 : 1	4.0	4.2	0.9 : 1
Slovakia	7.8	5.0	1.6 : 1	8.4	4.6	1.8 : 1
Slovenia	7.2	6.1	1.2 : 1	10.5	6.4	1.6 : 1
Spain	5.4	5.6	1.0 : 1	8.3	6.0	1.4 : 1
Sweden	11.8	6.0	2.0 : 1	5.1	3.5	1.4 : 1
Switzerland	12.3	7.2	1.7 : 1	9.0	5.1	1.8 : 1
United Kingdom	14.2	10.9	1.3 : 1	7.3	3.3	2.2 : 1
Average (European)	***10.0***	***6.9***	***1.4 : 1***	***8.4***	***5.1***	***1.6 : 1***
International comparator countries						
Canada	24.4	15.8	1.5 : 1	9.7	6.6	1.5 : 1
Israel	10.4	8.7	1.2 : 1	4.1	2.6	1.6 : 1
United States	17.8	15.2	1.2 : 1	10.1	7.6	1.3 : 1

Figure 2 – Gender gap comparison of women entrepreneurs in Ireland. (SOURCE: GEM, 2022).

Bankers and investors increasingly view opening access to financing for women entrepreneurs as an ethical imperative and a driver of economic growth. Women currently lead only one-third of the world's formal small enterprises, with significant potential for expansion, particularly in Africa (Goncalves, 2015b). Investing in women has been shown to have high returns on investment (ROI) (Goncalves, 2015a; Fackelmann & De Concini, 2020), making it economically prudent to ensure equal opportunities for women entrepreneurs, especially in technology and innovation, where they face significant barriers.

Irish women entrepreneurs focus more on the consumer services sector (64%) compared to men (46%) (Stephens et al., 2021). In 2021, women entrepreneurs expressed less optimism about employment creation compared to 2019, with 69% expecting to become employers but lowering their expectations for business expansion and employment growth (GEM, 2022).

There are differences between Irish male and female entrepreneurs in their perceptions of opportunities and their confidence in their skills and knowledge to start a business. The ratio of male to female owner-managers of established enterprises is almost two to one (1.9:1), higher than among early-stage entrepreneurs. Additionally, while 66% of Irish male entrepreneurs believe they have the necessary skills and knowledge to start a business, only 49% of female entrepreneurs share this belief despite women being more highly educated (GEM, 2022).

III. Research Approach and Methods

The study's research methods are rooted in a social constructionist ontology and interpretive epistemology (Landi, 2023) that recognize entrepreneurial leadership as a gendered phenomenon

shaped by women's socially constructed perceptions and experiences (Kakabadse et al., 2019; Ince-Yenilmez, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2023). It employs qualitative analysis to explore and understand women's entrepreneurship in Ireland, focusing on their well-being and gender equality (Mahajan & Mahajan, 2022). For semi-structured interviews, a purposive snowball sampling was used to select eight women entrepreneurs from startups and small enterprises (Khan, 2020; Hiebl, 2021; Obilor, 2023). The sample selection addressed the research question: "What drives women entrepreneurship in Ireland, and how do they navigate role demands, constraints, and choices?"

Table 1 – Profile of Women Entrepreneurs Interviewed in Ireland

Identifier	**Age**	**Education**	**Leadership Role**	**Experience Yrs.**	**Industry**
Interviewee 1	45	University	Owner	5	Recruitment
Interviewee 2	30s	University	Owner	3	Philanthropy/ Partnerships
Interviewee 3	40s	University	Owner	5	Bookkeeping
Interviewee 4	40s	University	Co-Founder	4	Healthcare
Interviewee 5	50	MBA	Owner	25	Business Consulting/ Author
Interviewee 6	30s	University	Owner	4	Children's Educational Product
Interviewee 7	40s	University	Owner	3	Children's Educational Product
Interviewee 8	50s	University	Owner	10	Finance
Interviewee 9	60	University	CEO	8	Solar Energy
Interviewee 10	30	MBA	Owner	5	Digital Marketing
Interviewee 11	50s	MBA	Owner	15	Cyber Security
Interviewee 12	50s	University	CEO/Founder	22	Digital Meetings/ Female Entrepreneurship
Interviewee 13	30s	University	Self-Employed	10	Innovation events
Interviewee 14	50s	University	CEO/Founder	2	Business Development Tech

Source: Compiled by the Authors

The research sample consisted of early-stage entrepreneurial organizations led by women selected through the researchers' professional networks. Inclusion criteria required participants to actively participate in leadership roles within entrepreneurial settings for at least three years. Based on previous studies and Stewart's DCC model, the interview protocol focused on participants' entrepreneurial experiences in Ireland, emphasizing their responsibilities, constraints, and decision-making processes. Interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom and transcribed for analysis. Data were coded using NVivo and thematic analysis within Stewart's DCC framework to identify recurring themes related to role demands, constraints, and choices (Landi, 2023; Ince-Yenilmez, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2023). The coding process involved organizing data by emerging themes, conducting axial coding to develop broader categories, and analyzing these categories within the context of Stewart's model. The research process aimed to uncover patterns and regularities in the

experiences of women entrepreneurs in Ireland (Monaro et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Dokter, 2023; Gao & Chugh, 2023).

IV. Data Analysis and Findings

The data analysis reveals the interconnectedness and significance of role demands, constraints, and choices in the leadership experiences of women entrepreneurs in Ireland, illustrating their dynamic and interdependent nature (see Figure 1 for a word cloud of main themes from the interview transcripts).

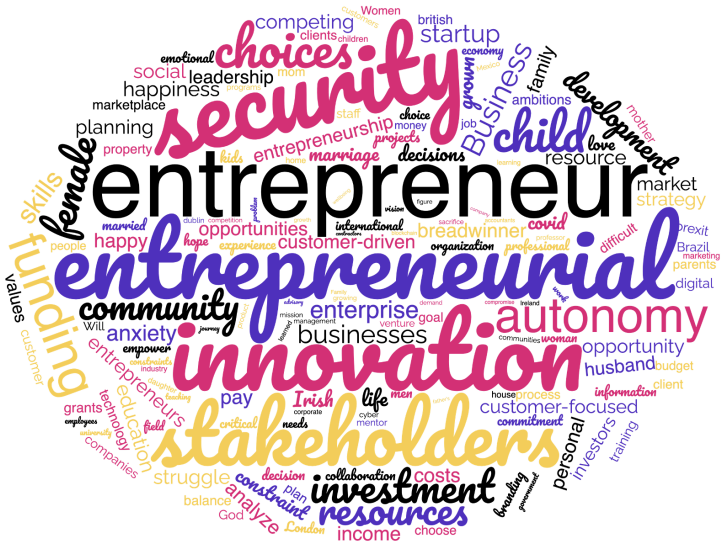

Figure 1: Main themes arising from semi-structured interviews.

Despite the limited sample size and consequent lack of generalizability, this study highlights the dedication of Irish women entrepreneurs to their work and businesses, alongside the challenges stemming from their roles as mothers, wives, and family caretakers. The thematic analysis focused on entrepreneurial ventures, innovation, stakeholder concerns, and security, with challenges related to childbearing, spousal dynamics, and family responsibilities present but not predominant. Decisions made by these women often reflected circumstantial necessities, especially concerning their children's and family's well-being, leading them to prioritize work and business demands to secure financial stability. This work-centric approach emphasizes the complex interplay between their entrepreneurial endeavors and family life, showcasing their efforts to balance professional success with family well-being within the Irish sociocultural context.

IV.1. Analyzing Women Entrepreneurs' Roles in Ireland through Stewart's DCC Framework

Stewart's DCC model was used to analyze the leadership roles of women entrepreneurs in Ireland, focusing on their perceptions of role demands, constraints, and choices. The study aimed to understand how these factors influence their leadership experiences and performance.

Role Demands Analysis

Interviewees emphasized the importance of leadership demands in determining leadership effectiveness. They highlighted the need for greater alignment of values and leadership in navigating

business challenges and achieving success, a sentiment supported by existing research (Karneli, 2023). A central aspect of their perspectives was achieving results aligned with specific goals and objectives.

> *I have set goals and ambitions that are constantly visited and revisited by me for my business. For as long as I've worked for myself, I have never, ever managed to get all my clients online in line with that in relation to me fitting into their goals and ambitions. (Interviewee 1)*
>
> *Oh, for me in the past, it's [goals and objectives] been very customer-focused. We would work off what our customers wanted and get their feedback, but it would also align with my values as well. (Interviewee 3)*
>
> *There's not a lot of financial support there is. We have what's called a local Enterprise office, which will help you with setting up your [business] start up, your own business and your business plans and setting goals, getting funding if you need it, from banks and microloans and things like that. But there are really good women in business groups here. (Interviewee 2)*

From their leadership positions, interviewees highlighted the critical demand of effectively navigating challenging situations, a concept supported by existing literature, especially in contexts marked by investment and socioeconomic transformations, such as in Ireland. Leaders facing high demands often experience increased stress and burnout, affecting decision-making and team communication (McPherson et al., 2022; Aurangzeb et al., 2023; McMullen, 2023). Moreover, excessive demands can lead to role overload, limiting a leader's ability for strategic thinking and long-term planning (Jackson, 2021; Mander & Antoni, 2022; Demerouti & Bakker, 2023). Proficiency in handling these challenges enables leaders to offer valuable insights into new realities and propose effective structures for organizations and entrepreneurs.

> *I'm a mother of 3 kids. So that's very demanding, you know. And so it's been able to have the support of my husband. You know, there to be able to do a school pick up, or you know that whenever I just can't be there for the kids. (Interviewee 8)*
>
> *So, I had acquired this business, and trying to grow it was actually a constant challenge because I was struggling to get access to and this is way before nowadays, we all think. And the funny thing is that for my international recruitment agency, I'm the only one that lives in Ireland. (Interviewee 1)*
>
> *… if you're watching those numbers move up, how can you get completely engrossed in that and like challenge yourself to just keep growing the numbers based on the analytics? (Interviewee 4)*

Conversations with Irish women entrepreneurs revealed a comprehensive perspective on role demands, covering financial and non-financial outcomes related to their startup investments. The interviewees emphasized the connection between non-financial returns, demands, and overall performance.

> *… I remember having one particular; she actually reached director level in another company that I owned, and I was fortunate enough to sell out of number of years back, and it treated me well financially. (Interviewee 1)*

I think I'm very outcome-focused. So, if what I'm hearing sounds like the outcome sounds all right, even if it's coming from somebody who might not have the business maturity to know how to actually do it. (Interviewee 3)

I've got lots of support. There's nice support here. now because it's seen as a service industry. There's not a lot of financial support there is. (Interviewee 6)

There are people who thought there were people who had given up the security of a salary to take a risk and then hopefully take part in a reward, financial reward. ... But I didn't actually think of that at all in those days. I had access to financing and funding if I wanted it. So, [being in business], it wasn't about that. (Interviewee 2)

The interviewees perceived their role demands through positive leadership, which integrates leadership traits, processes, and intentional behaviors to enhance the developmental potential of leaders, followers, and organizations (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Positive leadership adds value by improving its operational sphere's context, process, or outcomes (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). Notably, the participants felt a strong sense of accountability to supporters, partners, and stakeholders, linking role demands to the pursuit of self-actualization.

... you do need support. And we've kind of plowed in our own resources and money. But another very important thing is you [as a leader]. (Interviewee 6)

I don't have a leadership role there yet. But I can see [its importance and] my entrepreneurial leadership spirit coming through because I've identified a new diversification [and inclusion] strategy for the company. (Interviewee 5)

The findings demonstrate that women entrepreneurs' resilience involves adeptly navigating and adapting to their businesses' challenges, setbacks, and uncertainties. It encompasses enduring, recovering from, and constructively responding to stressors and failures. This resilience relies on psychological fortitude, persistence, and an adaptive mindset, enabling them to rebound, learn from experiences, and maintain their dedication to entrepreneurship (Birsan et al., 2022; Sharma & Rautela, 2022; Liyanagamage et al., 2023). Interviewees highlighted the importance of support from mentors and women-focused groups during the initial stages of their businesses:

[I am] a great believer in having, you know, a support group, I think, for women particularly. It's very important. and that you talk things through. (Interviewee 7)

I think resilience is really important, but I certainly found great support. People might not even think their supporters are mentors or whatever. (Interviewee 4)

I think this is where you have to see a range of what I call supporters mentors that you can discuss the ways around. (Interviewee 5)

This study's findings highlight two crucial themes in women's entrepreneurial leadership. Firstly, affective competencies, including emotional intelligence, trust-building, effective communication, and inspiration, play a significant role in entrepreneurial success, reflecting a shift from traditional competency-based leadership. Secondly, interpersonal relations and emotional intelligence abilities are vital for women entrepreneurs in Ireland, introducing innovative approaches for future outcomes (Paliszkiewicz et al., 2023; Ylisirniö, 2023). While around forty percent of the interviewees were unmarried or divorced, the extent of support from spouses varied based on individual circumstances and relationships. Although some women

entrepreneurs may receive support from their spouses, including emotional, practical, or financial assistance, this was not predominant in the sample. Recent studies suggest that spousal support can contribute to women's entrepreneurial success by providing emotional support, advice, networking opportunities, financial resources, sharing responsibilities, and minimizing interference (Noor et al., 2022; Prabawanti & Rusli, 2022). However, individual experiences may vary, and this study's data about the level of support women entrepreneurs receive from their spouses in Ireland is inconclusive. Societal and cultural shifts may also impact evolving expectations and dynamics within relationships, influencing the support women entrepreneurs receive from their spouses.

> *And again, you know, I was always very lucky in that sense, and that you know my husband's very, very supportive, but my parents as well. (Interviewee 4)*

> *My husband and kids were happy, but whether they were happy, they understood [and supported] us, and you know we were able to manage it. But it was a... It was a difficult time. (Interviewee 5)*

> *Okay, so if you are a separated woman, you are in limbo because you couldn't make it to the break. Women couldn't really work, and there were certain jobs. There were marriage bars, all this type of stuff. So, a married woman had no support. (Interviewee 6)*

> *We didn't get changed from the eighties, so a married woman's dumb as I was ever your husband was. So, if your husband went to the UK. You are now in the UK even though you weren't physically there. And so what you had to do was declare yourself a deserted wife, and the stigma and all of the things that came with that. (Interviewee 7)*

Existing studies indicate that a positive attitude from spouses can positively impact women's entrepreneurial success. However, the findings suggest that some women may not fully recognize the influence and control exerted by men or spouses, indicating persistent male dominance, marianismo, and unequal gender power in a masculine culture, despite women feeling appreciated and empowered by their spouses' support. Women reject the idea of being subtly submissive to their husbands (Mohajan, 2022; De Beauvoir, 2023) and resist being viewed as objects of masculine desire (Honkatukia et al., 2022; Knoppers et al., 2022).

Role Constraints Analysis

Interviewees found the nuances of role constraints within Stewart's DCC model complex and challenging to understand fully. They faced difficulties articulating how role constraints operate in their businesses due to the intricate and dynamic nature of these constraints, which encompass organizational structures, interpersonal dynamics, and societal expectations, creating a complex web of challenges. For these women entrepreneurs in Ireland's fast-paced business landscape, understanding the far-reaching impact of these constraints on their roles and responsibilities was particularly challenging due to factors such as family demands, societal norms, limited professional experience, and evolving business environments. These factors compound the difficulty for entrepreneurs in navigating role constraints effectively:

> *Funding! [The] challenge for me is funding, trying to access either grants or investments and in order to, you know, move the business to the next stage of its development. So, I find that funding is difficult. Accessing that fund is difficult, and I haven't. You know some people*

would... Well, there are statistics out saying that 30% [do get funded in Ireland. (Interviewee 7)

It's difficult [for me to have] autonomy. So, [I am] not sure. I'm not sure I'm not sure how to answer. That wouldn't be an honest thing at the minute. (Interviewee 8)

The interviewees' perspective aligns with existing research on how women entrepreneurs manage the intersection of familial and business responsibilities, which is increasingly relevant due to ongoing socioeconomic changes (GEM, 2022). Understanding women entrepreneurs' challenges is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders to develop targeted interventions to mitigate them and their negative impacts (Maseda et al., 2022; Tajpour et al., 2022). Notably, the study participants did not perceive a strict need to separate family matters from business affairs:

[Regarding motivations] It was like the drive and the values, too. The values of being there together as a family unit and all that. So it's the drive, but it's also the values, in my estimation. (Interviewee 3)

We have a family business here, which I'm in the office of right now... ...So I think my entrepreneurial spirit came from my family. (Interviewee 5)

Well, we can actually choose to get stuck in that [choice between business and family], or we can realize that on one salary, [I am] feeding a family… (Interviewee 2)

Irish women entrepreneurs perceive their businesses as integral to their lives, aiming for synergy between their business and family roles. Recent research confirms the significance of businesses in the lives of women entrepreneurs (Lichy et al., 2021). In Ireland, female entrepreneurial leaders face challenges such as a lack of shared meanings, limited resources, and rigid contextual frameworks. Recent studies highlight these evolving constraints, including the impact of changing societal expectations and economic conditions (Stephens et al., 2021).

Role Choices Analysis

Despite the rise of women-owned businesses in Ireland, women entrepreneurs encounter challenges and often face marginalization. The interview data analysis reveals these entrepreneurs' intricate role choices, highlighting specific challenges and strategic considerations. The data indicates that existing government programs for women entrepreneurs are underutilized due to a lack of awareness or perceived relevance, leading female entrepreneurs to rely on personal networks and communities for support. An identified issue is the limited availability of current information on the barriers they encounter during startup creation. In navigating various role options, these women strategically craft alternatives that may not be apparent to external observers. Their decisions involve balancing role requirements, acknowledging limitations, and evaluating their capacity for creativity and innovation. These findings align with existing literature on entrepreneurial leadership (Stephens et al., 2021; Shepherd & Williams, 2022; Evans, 2023). The research also illustrates that their entrepreneurial leadership roles involve making choices within the parameters of demand and constraint, echoing previous research (Blanco-Gonzalez-Tejero & Cano-Marin, 2023). Their exercise of choice reflects deliberate and strategic decision-making processes. Irish women entrepreneurs demonstrate dynamism by employing various skills, adapting to contextual factors, and managing families, business opportunities, and stakeholders' interests. This adaptability aligns with the multifaceted nature of entrepreneurial leadership and is supported by existing literature (Dsouza & Panakaje, 2023;

Hurtado Mercado, 2023; Sanogo & Sall, 2023), contributing to the evolving narrative of women's entrepreneurial leadership.

> *[Making choices is complex because] I don't have the finances behind me at the minute to do that. But so that's okay. That is going to be something we're gonna look at. But we're doing it. We're looking at a roadmap to get there. (Interviewee 8)*

> *[Regarding choices] I would say, yeah, the safety of employees and our employees' well-being [is a priority for me]. (Interviewee 6)*

> *[When it comes to choices] It just comes down to the end goal and where you want to be. (Interviewee 4)*

> *Oh, yeah, [when it comes to choices] I'd say time plays a big part, but I also have to align it with my overall goal. So, my goal is definitely to grow my company. I have my own company, and I would like shares of my dad's business that I'm currently working in. (Interviewee 3)*

> *We'd grown it over five years and sold it for, I'm sorry, I sold my share for a lot of money in it for a very short space of time. So, I was feeling like the queen bee, which was completely ridiculous. (Interviewee 1)*

Irish female entrepreneurs in diverse businesses emphasize effectual conduct to enhance follower dedication. They also highlight the importance of fostering employee development and enabling collective learning as essential leadership competencies. These findings align with existing literature, emphasizing knowledge transfer as a crucial developmental imperative (Bryson et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2023; Yoon et al., 2023).

> *I suppose like knowledge is some time it can sometimes [be] a constraint as well because I do need to do a lot of research for both and make sure to share it. (Interviewee 4)*

> *Sharing my knowledge, I suppose, even sharing with the younger [ones]. You know, women. you know, instilling that confidence that you can do it if you have the passion and you really want it. (Interviewee 8)*

Scholars propose Irish entrepreneurs as proactive learners, framing entrepreneurship as a structured learning trajectory, especially in an era of digital business transformation (Goncalves, 2014; Gomes et al., 2022; Shirish et al., 2023). This study builds on this idea by conceptualizing Irish women's entrepreneurship as a collaborative developmental effort, prioritizing cooperation and coordinated learning crucial for adaptability and success. Their entrepreneurial approach emphasizes co-development, positive relationship cultivation, and shared learning, aligning with discussions on gender, identity, and power dynamics (Chereau & Meschi, 2022; Bolton et al., 2023; Johner et al., 2023). Consequently, the findings underscore the significance of relational qualities in enhancing leadership behaviors in entrepreneurial contexts.

4. Research Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations, Limitations and Further Research

Irish women entrepreneurs significantly impact the country's economy by creating businesses and employment opportunities. This study reveals nuanced motivations driving their entrepreneurship, reflecting global trends of women seeking self-actualization and autonomy (Banu et al., 2023; Jacob et al., 2023; Lingappa & Rodrigues, 2023). Employing Stewart's DCC model, the research examines how these entrepreneurs navigate multifaceted role demands, constraints, and choices, contributing

to the gender equality discourse in entrepreneurship and leadership within Ireland's socio-economic context.

Traditionally, entrepreneurship narratives have centered on men, but this study challenges this by highlighting the diverse roles of Irish women entrepreneurs, from high-growth enterprises to subsistence businesses. This binary view fails to capture the complexity of entrepreneurship, as both men and women engage in various forms of entrepreneurship across cultural contexts. Recent research suggests that opportunity motivations are prevalent even among traditionally necessity-driven businesses (Jafari-Sadeghi, 2020). Perpetuating these stereotypes risks reinforcing gender inequality in Irish entrepreneurship. Efforts are needed to empower women entrepreneurs as they contribute to economic and social development.

The study also emphasizes the significance of women's entrepreneurship in generating employment, fostering innovation, and driving economic growth in Ireland. It identifies obstacles such as limited education, training, and financial support access. While Irish women entrepreneurs are driven by factors like revenue generation, independence, personal growth, and development, they face challenges like limited access to financing and market opportunities. Context-based strategies and gender considerations are crucial in addressing these challenges (Gressel et al., 2020; Semkunde et al., 2022).

Critically, the study highlights the need to address cultural and societal norms restricting women's entrepreneurship. Some scholars argue that focusing solely on women's entrepreneurship perpetuates stereotypes and overlooks structural causes of poverty and inequality (Ogundana et al., 2021; Apolevič, 2023; Reshi & Sudha, 2023; Sudha & Reshi, 2023). Nonetheless, the study emphasizes the crucial role of women's entrepreneurial leadership in fostering economic development while acknowledging their unique gender-based challenges.

4.1. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study reveals distinct motivations among female entrepreneurs in Ireland, diverging from those typically seen in advanced economies. Table 2 summarizes key findings regarding role demands, constraints, choices, and beliefs in the Irish context. The empirical data underscores the Irish environment's significance in shaping women's entrepreneurial leadership. Results suggest that Irish women entrepreneurs view leadership as centered on value creation, well-being enhancement, and benefits for stakeholders, including employees, communities, and the organization. Additionally, their ability to navigate Ireland's dynamic business landscape is crucial for ensuring firm success.

Table 2 Summary of findings

Items Descriptors	Descriptors
Drivers	• Generating value for the business, its stakeholders, and society. • Partnerships • Well-being, affluence, and contentment
Demands	• Outcomes for the business, encompass both monetary and non-monetary aspects. • Resilience, adaptability, inclusion • Self-discovery and self-fulfillment
Constraints	• High workload • Inexperience and absence of established cognitive frameworks. • Absence of common understanding • Marriage, offspring, familial responsibilities, and business obligations.

	• Direct access to financial resources and programs (complex to understand/apply) • Conventional Irish norms for femininity, family roles, and societal expectations.
Choice	• Mutual professional enhancement/advancement possibilities • Teamwork • Flexible and adaptive expectations and roles • Career progression or professional development

Source: Compiled by the authors.

In the Irish women's entrepreneurship landscape, leadership is defined by outcomes that align with diverse stakeholder interests and societal well-being, encompassing financial and non-financial gains. The sustainability of entrepreneurial results is crucial, emphasizing a dual commitment to profitability and the welfare of collaborative networks, including family and close collaborators (Daradkeh, 2023; Eilertsen, 2023). Emerging challenges and opportunities, such as market trends, digital transformations, and global events, further shape female entrepreneurial leadership dynamics in Ireland (Khurana et al., 2022; Vuchkovski et al., 2023), offering avenues for ongoing research and extending the DCC model's understanding in this context.

To advance women's entrepreneurship in Ireland, the following critical recommendations, supported by extant research, are proposed:

- Access to Funding and Resources: Increase access to financial resources and funding, addressing gender inequalities in venture capital and traditional financing while implementing targeted financial programs and incentives (Stephens et al., 2021; Henry et al., 2022).
- Community Engagement and Awareness: Encourage community engagement to create a supportive ecosystem and raise awareness about gender equality and inclusiveness in entrepreneurship (Henry & Lewis, 2023).
- Corporate Partnerships: Foster collaborations between women entrepreneurs and established businesses, providing mentorship and access to larger markets (Korinek & van Lieshout, 2023).
- Cultural and Mindset Shifts: Work on shifting societal attitudes and stereotypes regarding women in leadership and entrepreneurship (Hamouda et al., 2022; Hurtado Mercado, 2023).
- Educational and Networking Initiatives: Develop tailored educational programs focusing on entrepreneurship skills for women and expand networking opportunities and mentorship programs (Kelly & McAdam, 2023; Nziku & Bikorimana, 2023).
- Policy Advocacy and Support: Advocate for policies promoting gender equality and supportive measures like flexible working arrangements (Henry et al., 2022).
- Promoting Digital Literacy: Enhance digital literacy programs and training in digital marketing and e-commerce strategies (Faugoo & Onaga, 2022).
- Research and Data Collection: Invest in research focusing on women entrepreneurs' challenges and regularly collect gender-disaggregated data for evidence-based policymaking.

4.2.Limitations and Further Research

This study's limitations stem from the specific attributes of the Irish women entrepreneurs interviewed, the small sample size, and the challenges of generalizing qualitative data (Levitt, 2021;

Fischer & Guzel, 2023). While this approach addresses research gaps, it limits understanding of entrepreneurship as gendered in Ireland due to limited research beyond male norms (Panteli & Urquhart, 2022). Future research should gather more evidence from Ireland and similar economies to validate and elaborate on this study's nuances and outcomes. Developing a comprehensive model with testable propositions could highlight the complex links between women's entrepreneurship, entity attributes, and societal constructs.

Access-related issues stemming from snowball sampling are inherent limitations, but the study sheds light on gender equality and values disparities, informing leadership conceptualization in Irish women's entrepreneurship. These insights contribute to understanding Irish women's entrepreneurial leadership and inspire further research on women's perceptions and experiences of leadership influenced by individual and contextual factors shaped by gender in Ireland.

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