

The Illusion of ‘Choice’: How Entrepreneurship Reinforces the Oppression of Women in Patriarchal Societies

Abstract

Women’s entrepreneurship is often celebrated as a pathway to economic empowerment. However, in patriarchal societies, this pathway may reflect constraint more than agency. This study critically examines how entrepreneurship can reinforce rather than disrupt systemic gender inequalities, particularly when women’s entry into business is shaped by cultural expectations and familial obligations rather than autonomous choice. Drawing on Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research explores the lived experiences of 38 Nigerian women entrepreneurs—78% of whom reported entering business due to spousal disapproval of formal employment or the need to conform to domestic norms. IPA is used to uncover the internalised tensions and emotional negotiations underpinning these constrained entrepreneurial trajectories. The findings reveal that entrepreneurship often functions as an extension of women’s unpaid care work, sustained by the dual logics of Social Reproduction Theory and neoliberal responsibilisation. Participants describe feelings of exhaustion, guilt, and performative compliance, challenging the narrative of entrepreneurship as inherently liberatory. Instead, the study demonstrates how neoliberal feminist discourses, which frame economic participation as empowerment, can obscure the structural coercion and patriarchal regulation women continue to face. By situating women’s entrepreneurship within the intersecting frameworks of patriarchy, neoliberalism, and emotional labour, this study offers a critical feminist intervention into African entrepreneurship scholarship. It calls for a reframing of entrepreneurship discourse to recognise coercion, affective labour, and structural constraint—not merely as contextual backdrops, but as constitutive elements of entrepreneurial life in patriarchal economies.

Keywords: No choice; Oppression; Patriarchy; Neoliberalism; Social Reproduction Theory

1.0. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely promoted as a fast track to women's economic emancipation, especially in emerging economies where formal labour markets remain exclusionary. Yet the promise of empowerment can mask a different reality: for many women, "choosing" self-employment is less an exercise of free agency than a constrained response to patriarchal rules that police mobility, income, and respectability. To unpack this contradiction, we anchor our analysis in Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) - which traces how unpaid care work and gendered expectations are reproduced across generations—and in Neoliberalism, whose celebration of self-reliance relocates responsibility for economic survival from state and household onto the individual (Fraser 2016; Brown 2019). In tandem, these lenses show how women's businesses can become sites where domestic obligations, market logics, and moral judgments converge.

In feminist theory, gender is understood as a social construct that prescribes ideologies, behaviours, and roles for individuals based on perceived masculine and feminine norms. These roles, rooted in social institutions, perpetuate divergent expectations for men and women, shaping their positions and opportunities within society (Olawoye et al, 2004; Eagly et al., 2012; Adhikari and Sigdel, 2024). In African contexts, as elsewhere, gender relations are deeply embedded in social norms, values, and beliefs, often reinforcing patriarchal structures that subordinate women. Women are frequently defined in relation to men - as daughters, wives, or mothers - rather than as individuals with independent identities or achievements (Irene, 2016; Irene et al., 2021). This societal devaluation of women is further exemplified in cultural practices, such as the preference for male children, which frames the birth of girls as a "calamity" (Abara, 2012). Such norms restrict women's autonomy, limiting their access to education, economic opportunities, and decision-making power within households (Ahmed, 2021; Yusuff, 2014). The disparities in role distribution are primary drivers of sex-differentiated social behaviour, with psychological and social processes reinforcing male-dominated hierarchies (Yusuff, 2014). Historically, men have been socialised as breadwinners, while women are confined to domestic roles as caregivers and homemakers. Even when women enter formal employment, they are often viewed as temporary workers, expected to relinquish their careers upon marriage or childbirth (Yusuff, 2014). These roles, described by Talcott Parsons as "instrumental" for men and "expressive" for women, perpetuate systemic inequalities, with deviations from prescribed norms risking social isolation and economic consequences (Abara, 2012; Olawoye et al., 2004).

However, gender roles are not static. Economic shifts, particularly in Nigeria, have necessitated dual-income households, gradually altering traditional power dynamics (Rowland Edet and Ekundina, 2019; Balogun and Aruoture, 2025). This transition has sparked discourse on women's empowerment, defined as the process of challenging power structures and gaining control over resources and ideologies (Batliwala, 2007). Empowerment, as a transformative concept, emphasizes collective action and the redistribution of power, enabling women to redefine their identities and assert agency over their lives (Kabeer, 2008; Va Erdewijk et al., 2017). This feminist perspective underscores the need to address structural inequities rather than focusing solely on individual self-assertion, positioning empowerment as a critical tool for dismantling patriarchal oppression.

Drawing on Social Reproduction Theory and Neoliberalism, this research critically explores the ways in which patriarchal structures dictate women's engagement in entrepreneurship. Social Reproduction Theory highlights how labour and social roles are continuously reproduced across generations, reinforcing traditional gender norms that confine women to domestic and unpaid labour. Meanwhile, Neoliberalism promotes self-enterprise and individual responsibility, shifting the burden of economic survival onto individuals while obscuring the structural barriers that limit women's choices.

Rather than representing true economic freedom, entrepreneurial endeavours often function as extensions of traditional gender roles, keeping women confined to socially acceptable forms of labour. By analysing the experiences of Nigerian women entrepreneurs, this study challenges dominant narratives that frame entrepreneurship as inherently liberating and instead argues that it can perpetuate existing systems of oppression. Thus, this study aims to answer the following question: *'does entrepreneurship reinforce the oppression of women in patriarchal contexts?'*

Our approach surfaces three intertwined dynamics that expand current scholarship. First, the emotional toll - manifest in exhaustion, resignation, and performative gratitude - reveals how neoliberal tropes of resilience are internalised even as they intensify self-blame. Second, a cross-class perspective (spanning O-level traders to PhD-qualified consultants) shows that patriarchal gatekeeping cuts across education and income strata but produces differentiated vulnerabilities and coping scripts. Third, we uncover women's strategic accommodation: subtle practices of compliance, delay, and collective support ("Pull Up a Sister" circles) that preserve marital harmony while carving limited manoeuvring space.

By relocating the analysis from market entry barriers to the relational and affective conditions under which businesses are started and sustained, the study reframes entrepreneurship, not as an unalloyed route to empowerment, but as part of the infrastructure that maintains, negotiates, and occasionally fractures patriarchal order. This reframing has implications for policy metrics that equate firm formation with agency, and for interventions that overlook the hidden costs women absorb to keep both household and enterprise afloat.

2.0. Theoretical Backdrop

This study draws on **Social Reproduction Theory (SRT)** and **Neoliberalism** to critically examine how entrepreneurship in patriarchal societies perpetuates the structural oppression of women. These theoretical lenses provide a nuanced understanding of how gendered labour divisions and capitalist ideologies shape women's entrepreneurial experiences, particularly in contexts where economic participation is framed as both a necessity and a form of subjugation.

2.1 Social Reproduction Theory (SRT): Patriarchy in Motion

Social Reproduction Theory explains how patriarchy is renewed daily through the indispensable yet undervalued labour of bearing children, nursing the sick, preparing food, and mediating familial harmony—tasks overwhelmingly assigned to women (Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2016). Patriarchy is therefore not only a structural condition, but an ongoing reproductive process enacted within households, markets, schools, churches, and mosques.

In the Nigerian context, this reproduction of patriarchal order manifests in multiple and interlinked ways:

1. **Lineage and Inheritance Rules** – Customary law seats property, surnames, and ritual authority in the male line. The eldest son may wield authority even over his mother, perpetuating material and symbolic male dominance (Appadorai 2006; Abara 2012).
2. **Gendered Time-Use** – Participants' businesses flex around school runs and elder-care, exemplifying Young's (1990) *inhibited intentionality*: women pre-emptively curtail aspirations to remain perpetually 'available.'
3. **Moral Pedagogies** – Religious and cultural scripts (e.g., Proverbs 31, *purdah*) frame sacrifice as virtue, teaching daughters to reproduce—rather than contest—gender hierarchy.

2.1.1 Intersectional Textures of Constraint

Class, education, and marital status modulate these mechanisms without dissolving their patriarchal logic. A widowed, PhD-educated poultry farmer could travel freely yet still shouldered total care responsibility, while an O-Level trader accepted that profit must merely ‘support’ her husband’s income. Thus, while the form of constraint mutates, its patriarchal content endures.

By foregrounding these everyday circuits of care, obedience, and symbolic deference, SRT reveals patriarchy as a reproductive regime actor: it persists not only through overt domination but through the routinised conversion of women’s unpaid labour into the social energy that keeps households, and, by extension, markets, running.

2.2 Neoliberalism and the Entrepreneurial Ideal

Neoliberalism, as an ideological and economic paradigm, promotes self-reliance, market competition, and individual responsibility as the foundation of economic success (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2005; Benson and Sonu, 2021). Under neoliberal discourse, entrepreneurship is idealized as a pathway to personal empowerment and economic independence, obscuring the structural barriers that hinder women’s participation in the market (Rottenberg, 2018; 2022). Women are increasingly encouraged to embrace the entrepreneurial self, where success is framed as a matter of individual effort rather than systemic inequality (Scharff, 2016a, 2016b; Gill 2021).

In patriarchal societies, this neoliberal framework operates in tandem with social reproduction structures, producing what Fraser (2016) refers to as the ‘crisis of care’ - where the pressures of economic participation are offloaded onto women without the necessary institutional support. As a result, women are forced into precarious entrepreneurial ventures that demand self-exploitation, long working hours, and emotional resilience, all while continuing their domestic and caregiving duties (Onwutuebe, 2015). The findings in this study reflect this tension, as many women describe feelings of exhaustion, resignation, and low self-worth, despite being positioned as ‘empowered’ entrepreneurs.

Moreover, neoliberalism legitimises the privatisation of responsibility - placing the burden of economic survival on individuals rather than addressing systemic issues such as labour market exclusion, workplace discrimination, and inadequate social welfare. The ‘no choice’ option in entrepreneurship thus becomes a neoliberal mechanism that shifts economic risk onto women while maintaining male economic dominance. By branding women’s entrepreneurial activities

as ‘empowering,’ neoliberal ideology masks the structural constraints that force women into these roles in the first place.

2.3 Integrating SRT and Neoliberalism in the Study

By integrating Social Reproduction Theory with Neoliberalism, this study provides a critical analysis of how entrepreneurship in patriarchal societies reinforces rather than disrupts existing gender inequalities. The forced entrepreneurial participation of women is not merely a response to economic necessity but also a mechanism of social control, ensuring that women’s labour remains both productive and subjugated.

This theoretical framework enables us to interrogate the contradictions within dominant entrepreneurial narratives—where empowerment discourse coexists with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. It also challenges the assumption that entrepreneurship is inherently liberatory for women, demonstrating instead how it can function as a tool of gendered oppression and economic marginalisation.

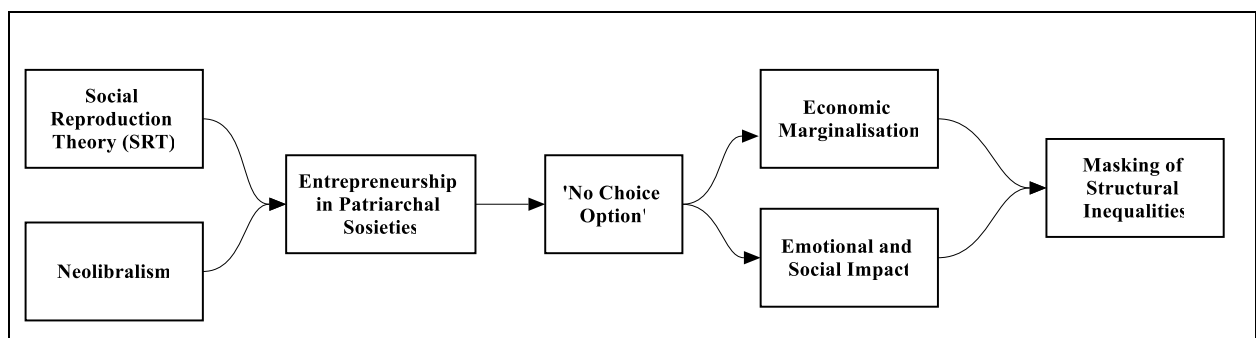


Figure 1: *Theoretical Framework used in this Study*

Thus, the study seeks to **reframe women’s entrepreneurship not as a free choice but as a product of intersecting structural forces**, where social reproduction and neoliberal imperatives work together to maintain patriarchal economic orders.

2 Methodology

3.1 Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

This study employs Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the internalised dynamics of choice, constraint, and emotional negotiation among Nigerian women entrepreneurs. IPA is suited to uncovering how individuals make meaning of complex, affect-laden experiences within specific sociocultural settings (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Central to IPA is its double hermeneutic process: participants interpret their world, while researchers

interpret those interpretations. This duality is especially relevant when examining socially sanctioned emotions—such as resignation, guilt, and duty—that are rarely expressed directly in high-context cultures like Nigeria’s. IPA enabled the excavation of these implicit affective dimensions, allowing us to explore how participants rationalised their constrained entrepreneurial pathways in culturally permissible ways.

Table 1: Sample interview frame for this study

Example interview questions used to explore the no-choice option given the sensitive nature of the phenomenon.

1. Was entrepreneurship your first career option or choice?

Prompts: *What kind of career did you consider that you will have prior to getting married and starting family? Did you try to pursue that career? How did you feel working in a regular career? What is your preferred career option?*

2. How do you feel about not pursuing your career choice?

Prompts: *Do you wish you persevered in your job? Why? What do think you could have achieved in a regular career that you cannot as a business owner? If you had the opportunity, will you go back and carry on with the job?*

3. Do you think that being a wife and mother made it impossible to pursue a career?

Prompts: *Would you have given up your job if you were not a wife or mother? Do you think there was undue pressure to make you give up your job? Or do you think it is what is expected from you? What do think could have happened if you had carried on working regardless of the expectations?*

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Structural Diversity

We adopted a purposive and snowball sampling approach to recruit 38 Nigerian women entrepreneurs across 11 sectors (e.g., fashion, real estate, trading, consultancy, poultry). The sectors were intentionally varied to capture structural diversity in class, educational attainment, religious affiliation, and marital status. Participants ranged from O-Level holders to PhD graduates, included both Christian (88%) and Muslim (12%) women, and spanned married, divorced, and widowed categories. This allowed the study to examine how intersectional variables shaped entrepreneurial motivations and emotional responses.

Saturation was determined through iterative review of transcripts and thematic recurrence. By the sixth focus group, no new themes were emerging, and emotional typologies (e.g.,

performative compliance, entrepreneurial fatigue, symbolic sacrifice) had stabilised. A final round of two focus groups was held to test this thematic saturation.

Table 2: Demographic Profile for the Focus Groups

Respondents Demographics		Total (%)	Type of Business	Total (N)
Marital Status			Bookstore	1
Married	33	88	Fashion	10
Divorced	3	9	Advertising	1
Widowed	2	3	Real Estate	1
Total	38	100	Retail	2
Age of business			Education	2
0-5	13	34	Petty Trading	5
6-10	9	24	Fashion and Accessories	4
11-15	8	21	Events Management	1
Above 15	8	21	Printing	1
Total	38	100	Poultry	1
Religion			Building and construction	1
Christian	33	88	Wholesale	1
Muslim	5	12	Eatery	2
Total	38	100	Beauty and Cosmetics	4
Number of employees			Consultancy	1
0-10	30	79		
11-20	8	21		
Total	38	100		
Level of Education				
Bachelor's degree	18	47		
Master's degree	8	21		
PhD	1	2		
HND	3	9		
O/Level	8	21		
Total	38	100	Total	38

3.3 Focus Groups and Phenomenological Integrity

Though IPA traditionally prioritises individual interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) were adopted due to their cultural appropriateness in the Nigerian context, where communal dialogue is often preferred and emotional narratives are co-constructed. Each FGD comprised 8–10 participants and lasted approximately 90–120 minutes.

To maintain phenomenological depth, the facilitation design was carefully structured: - A semi-structured guide was used with open-ended, reflexive prompts. - Facilitators employed rotating prompts to ensure balanced participation. - Dominant voices were moderated through directed individual probing. - Non-verbal and indirect communication (common in high-context settings) was documented and interpreted in post-session analysis.

Each session was co-facilitated by a lead researcher and a trained assistant to capture both verbal and emotional nuance. Participants were encouraged to reflect individually before responding, and dissenting views were actively invited to disrupt consensus-building biases.

Guided by the central research question – ‘*to what extent does entrepreneurship reinforce the oppression of women in patriarchal contexts?*’ - the study operationalized this inquiry through open-ended questions. These explored participants' motivations for entrepreneurship, their perceptions of it relative to other career options, and the influence of societal expectations on their entrepreneurial intentions and identities. Specifically, the study examined how participants navigated dual roles as entrepreneurs and homemakers within Nigeria’s gendered socio-cultural framework, alongside the impact of spousal, familial, and societal pressures on their decision-making processes. Table 3 illustrates the systematic note-making process used to record and interpret data.

Table 3: An extract from one focus group

Original transcript	Exploratory comments
Interviewer: <i>Can you tell us what motivated you to start a business?</i> You know, I belong to a group called ‘pull up a sister’ and we regularly meet to discuss issues that affect us. One of the things we talk about is why we started our businesses. You will see across the board that it is not for survival reason as most of us did not have financial constraints. The thing is most of us had careers but by the time we got married, there is a stop to the careers. As soon as we got married and our husbands are well off in the Nigerian sense, the idea is that their jobs are more important because they are the ‘bread winners. The default position is that the woman’s career must be sacrificed because a good wife stays at home and takes care of the family. Doing business is the alternative to boredom while you are being an obedient wife.	<i>Using hypotheticals cases to describe their own personal experience.</i> <i>Hint of anger at being made to choose between the family and career?</i> <i>Attributing the choice to ‘sacrifice’? can this mean the same as a ‘forced choice’?</i>
Interviewer: <i>How do feel about not pursuing your chosen career?</i> Exhausted. The truth is that because the business is often not planned, there is a tendency to get into something that you are not passionate about and making a success out of it takes a toll. Then most women find themselves opting out of the corporate world to achieve work-life balance but still unable to achieve that because business takes a toll on them. Then they end up with a dissatisfied husband and often, neglected children. They are physically and emotionally drained leading to guilt and accusations. This begins to eat them up and affect everyone around them, especially the husband. You finally accept the fact that you are the sacrificial lamb. Women always take a backseat in terms of career options, when this occurs, self-esteem is injured, our sense of being begins to and eroded during the period of time and although some women are strong enough to	<i>Using hypotheticals cases to describe their own personal experience.</i> <i>Feelings of resentment, resignation, disappointment, and indifference?</i> <i>Feeling like a failure?</i> <i>Forced sacrifice? Impact on family relations?</i> <i>Low self-esteem? Lack of personal identity?</i>

go through this and settle into business as an alternative career option mostly small scale so that they can find who they are in the process , some others find themselves fighting back to come into the corporate world; either way, most women are emotionally sound and even when they're in business they masked it, they conceal how they really feel and try to make the most of their businesses. It has saddened me as an individual and impactful for those who are around, you know, I never liked it and so once again, about this aspect of my life, if you ask me to say one or two things that may have reflected my personal life, this is one of them. It is how my personal life has been mostly, never going the way, I planned or desired, but I am not bitter about it. It's like you're a pastor of a church and your children are Muslims do you understand what am saying? that's how you it is with me but am grateful is the counselling course I did. It has helped me to come to terms with everything.	<i>Seems to portray an air of resentment and anger for having to make these choices.</i> <i>Does this help the development of resolve and character?</i> <i>Psychological impact?</i> <i>Personal reflexivity? Some hardlines crossed and parallels drawn.</i>
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3.4 Data Analysis

The data for this study was analysed using the multi-stage process outlined by Smith et al. (2009) for Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), integrating descriptive coding, interpretative clustering, and theoretical mapping. The process involved multiple readings of transcripts, with the aim of identifying emotionally significant moments, symbolic language, and value-laden reflections.

3.4.1 Coding Structure and Thematic Development

We employed a three-tier analytical structure:

First-Order Codes (Sample Quote)	Second-Order Themes (Interpretative Categories)	Theoretical Dimensions
“I opened my business because my husband didn’t want me working other with men in an office environment”	Symbolic Compliance	Social Reproduction Theory (SRT)
“I feel guilty when I focus on work and there is chaos in the home”	Emotional Bargaining	Affective Economies (Ahmed, 2004)
“My shop operates very flexible structure because I want to be available at home anytime I am needed. I’m always the one who adjusts for the family”	Forced Flexibility	Inhibited Intentionality (Young, 1990)

Themes were developed collaboratively by two researchers who cross-coded three randomly selected transcripts to establish consistency, and discrepancies were resolved via memoing and consensus.

3.4.2 Reflexivity in the Analytic Process

Reflexivity was not limited to a discrete section but actively informed our analytic decisions. For example, one of the lead researchers, a senior academic and mother, observed that her status elicited deference and moral justifications from participants. During one session, a participant said:

“I know you career women won’t understand, but being there for your husband or partner is more important than climbing ladders. At the end of the day, what will you achieve if you have all the professional achievements and no family to come back home to?”

Such moments were not dismissed as bias but recognised as emotionally loaded sense-making, helping us understand how normative ideals of womanhood are performed even within research settings.

Similarly, emotionally charged silences, especially when participants were prompted about career regrets, were carefully documented. Pauses, eye contact deflection, and laughter in place of answers were noted as communicative strategies. These non-verbal cues informed the interpretation of affective themes, especially around resignation, fatigue, and identity loss.

Field notes, facilitator journals, and analytic memos were integrated throughout the process to track how researcher positionalities shaped not just what was said, but how and when it was shared.

3.5 Ethical and Reflexive Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained, and participants gave informed consent. Member-checking was used to validate transcripts. Reflexivity was an ongoing process: the lead researchers’ academic and professional identities may have influenced participant responses, especially where they were seen as exemplars of professional success. These positionalities were documented in analytic memos and used to critically interrogate power asymmetries during interpretation.

This study, as with most IPA studies, utilises a small sample size which allowed for a micro-level reading of participants’ narratives and provided insights into the elusive and complex topics mentioned earlier. This helped us generate rich and detailed accounts of how the

participants' experienced the 'no choice' option and engage in an in-depth exploration of entrepreneurial intentions (EI)/motivations to (a) understand the role of patriarchy in women's EI and (b) answer our research question - *Is entrepreneurship reinforcing the oppression of women in patriarchal contexts?*

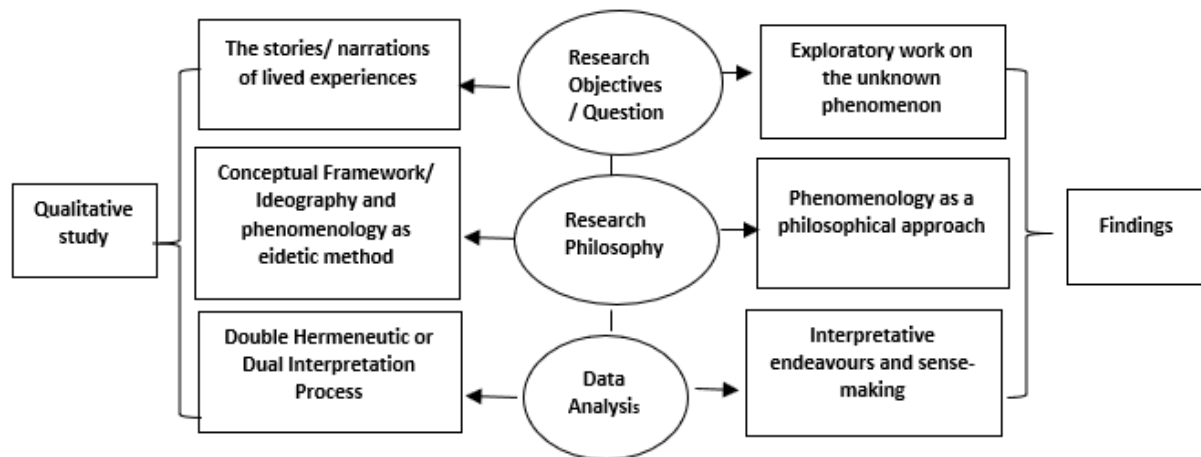


Figure 2: The Methodological Framework for this study

4 Findings

Rather than presenting a single, undifferentiated 'no-choice' narrative, the results are organised into three intersecting subthemes. Each illuminate how women negotiate patriarchal strictures emotionally and materially, while drawing on feminist phenomenology (Young 1990) and affect theory (Ahmed 2004) to interpret the texture of their accounts.

4.1 Economic Co-optation: Forced Flexibility

Entrepreneurship often emerges as a pragmatic patch for labour market exclusion. Participants describe their ventures as extensions of domestic duty, not opportunities for autonomous accumulation. As shown earlier from the narratives, time is elastic for women, never for husbands, an example of what Young (1990) calls 'inhibited intentionality': capacities curtailed by anticipatory accommodation to others' needs. Businesses become economically productive because they are pliable to household rhythms, reinforcing the very reproductive labour SRT critiques.

"My salon opens only after school drop-off. When the baby teethed, I shut for two weeks—clients waited because they know I am first of all, a mother." (P06, Hairdresser)

SRT explains how the unpaid social and affective labour required to sustain households is reproduced across generations, allocating caregiving to women and shaping what counts as “productive” work. Our data reveal three concrete manifestations:

1. **Caregiving as Entrepreneurial Constraint**

“My shop opens only when the children are in school; if one is ill, the business closes. My husband’s schedule never shifts—mine always does.” (P12, Boutique owner, Bachelor’s degree, married)

2. **Generational Transfer of Duty**

“My mother left teaching when she married; she tells me, ‘A good wife is always near home.’ I repeated her path—just with a different business.” (P03, Hairdresser, O-Level, married)

3. **Undervaluation of Women’s Labour**

“They say I ‘help’ the family even though my sales sometimes pay our rent. It is still called ‘assisting.’” (P21, Poultry farmer, PhD, widowed)

These narratives show that ‘choice’ is circumscribed by reproductive expectations, not merely by access to capital. The narratives also reveal that women’s entry into entrepreneurship is often driven by necessity rather than aspiration, reflecting the tension between personal ambition and societal expectations. For 89% of participants, these gender roles felt constraining, with 74% expressing frustration over their limited career options. This illustrates how role prescriptions perpetuate a cycle in which women’s economic contributions remain secondary to their domestic responsibilities.

4.1.1 Intersectional Inflections of SRT

Patriarchal caregiving norms cut across the sample, yet their force varies by **religion, education, and marital status**:

- **Religion:** 88 % Christian participants invoked Proverbs 31 to justify home-based commerce, whereas Muslim women (12 %) referenced *purdah*, intensifying spatial restrictions.
- **Education:** Participants with tertiary degrees described sharper status loss (“From bank manager to small kiosk” – P05, Master’s, divorced), while O-Level traders normalised micro-enterprise as default.

- **Marital Status:** Widows (3 %) reported greater latitude in work hours once male oversight lapsed, contrasting with married women’s self-policing to avoid charges of neglect.

These intersections illuminate how patriarchal reproduction is modulated rather than monolithic.

4.2 Neoliberalism and the Entrepreneurial Self

Neoliberalism further exacerbates these challenges by framing entrepreneurship as a pathway to empowerment while obscuring the structural inequalities that constrain women’s choices (Onwutuebe, 2015). The study reveals how neoliberal ideals individualize success and failure, placing the burden of economic survival on women while ignoring systemic barriers. Participants reported high levels of stress (81%), uncertainty (76%), and resignation (69%) due to their restricted agency in career selection. Emotional strain, particularly the pressure to balance business responsibilities with household duties, was a recurring theme for 88% of participants. This underscores the dissonance between the neoliberal promise of autonomy and the reality of constrained decision-making.

The emotional toll of these constraints also impacted business performance and entrepreneurial commitment. Women who entered entrepreneurship out of necessity rather than desire often struggled with motivation and business sustainability. Negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and low self-esteem further hindered business growth and personal fulfilment. These findings challenge the neoliberal narrative of entrepreneurship as a liberatory tool, revealing instead how it reinforces traditional gender roles by shifting the burden of economic survival onto individuals.

Neoliberal discourse valorises autonomy, grit and market responsabilisation. Our participants articulate and contest these ideals in emotionally charged registers:

Table 4: Neoliberal discourse

Neoliberal Ideal	Illustrative Quote	Felt Emotion
Self-reliance	<i>“Government won’t feed you; you must create your own ladder.”</i> (P27, Real-estate agent)	Determination + Anxiety
Resilience	<i>“If you fail, dust off and try again—no excuses.”</i> (P14, Fashion designer)	Exhaustion

Neoliberal Ideal	Illustrative Quote	Felt Emotion
Personal Accountability	<i>"I left banking; if I'm broke now, it's on me, not the system."</i> (P06, Ex-banker)	Guilt / Self-blame

These affective responses confirm how neoliberal mantras become internalised yardsticks against which women measure their ‘success’ or ‘failure’, even when structural barriers remain.

The study concludes that patriarchal norms significantly shape women’s entrepreneurial pathways, with 84% engaging in business not as a form of empowerment but as an adaptation to imposed roles. This has critical implications for policy and support structures, emphasizing the need for interventions that address systemic barriers rather than reinforcing traditional gender roles through business ownership. A broader re-evaluation of gender roles and economic participation frameworks is essential to create pathways that genuinely empower women within patriarchal societies.

Participant	Direct Quote
Participant 1 (Hairdresser)	Have been working, have worked in a bank and other organizations and my husband felt I need something that will keep me within reach of my children
Participant 10 (Hairdresser)	For me for some time after I got married, I didn't work for a long time, I stopped work to concentrate on the marriage and family before I started doing what am doing now but the challenge, I have is that the business is not giving you money like when you're working. I am putting so much and getting so little out. But going back to my previous career is out of the question, I have to figure out how to make this business successful
Participant 12 (Boutique Owner)	When married men are successful, their careers are often prioritised because they’re seen as the 'breadwinners.' Culturally, women are expected to step back as homemakers. Even educated women seeking financial independence or reduced work hours face resistance, making it nearly impossible. For peace at home, many women, like me, conform to societal expectations of being 'virtuous,' sacrificing their ambitions. Over time, this triggers emotional strain as key aspects of their lives are neglected
Participant 4 (Wholesaler)	In my culture, the greatest achievement you can have as a woman is to be married to someone ‘important’ while the men are recognised and praised for their achievements. Even when you have money as a woman, it is deemed to have come from the men
Participant 8 (Interior Decorator)	In Africa, women have subjective freedom where you are given consideration but only to a certain extent. We are continuously living in the shadow of the men

The findings showed that participants navigated employment and business paths within patriarchal systems, encountering hurdles linked to gendered cultural norms. The ‘no choice’ option refers to women forced into entrepreneurship due to circumstances like retrenchment, limited job opportunities, or cultural expectations (Murray & Syed, 2013; Yang et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2022). For many, the promise of flexibility and work-life balance becomes a key

motivator (Loscocco & Bird, 2012). However, in this study, women were often pushed into entrepreneurship by spousal decisions or societal pressures to prioritize family roles over careers. Deviating from these expectations risked being labelled as “too independent” or ostracised. The data also showed that participants’ entrepreneurial motivations were shaped by: (a) acceptance of cultural norms prioritizing family over personal ambitions, and (b) a desire to maintain familial harmony by conforming to spousal wishes (Irene, 2018; Meyer, 2009; Meyer & Landsberg, 2015). This often meant sacrificing personal goals, highlighting how patriarchal structures constrain women’s agency and career autonomy. To explore the impact of the ‘no choice option’ on women’s entrepreneurial intentions, participants were asked about their career preferences. Results showed that 68% had no intention of becoming entrepreneurs, 11% viewed it as a secondary income source, and only 21% expressed a genuine desire to pursue entrepreneurship. This highlights the constrained nature of their entrepreneurial engagement.

Emotional responses to career disruptions were predominantly negative: participants reported sadness, disappointment, or unhappiness; some felt deprived or stuck; while others were indifferent; and only a handful remained hopeful. These emotions had tangible impacts on their businesses. Women with negative emotions often described their ventures as survivalist or failing, citing low motivation, limited resources, and a sense of helplessness. This aligns with Su et al.’s (2020) findings that positive emotions enhance entrepreneurial intentions and performance, while negative emotions hinder motivation, cognitive flexibility, and resilience. One participant explains it thus:

‘Negative emotions can trigger serious illnesses, like breast cancer, so women need to be mindful of this. I strive to stay positive because emotional balance makes you unstoppable—like a champion. But when emotions are chaotic, you lose control, and it affects everything—business, home, life. We must find joy, somehow, somewhere.’ (Dress maker).

The narratives reveal a disconnect between neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurship as empowerment and the reality of women engaging in it out of necessity. For many, entrepreneurship was not a source of fulfilment but a pragmatic response to systemic constraints, underscoring the need to address emotional and structural barriers in patriarchal contexts. Figures 3 and 4 presents the data on no choice option with some typical quotes from the respondents.

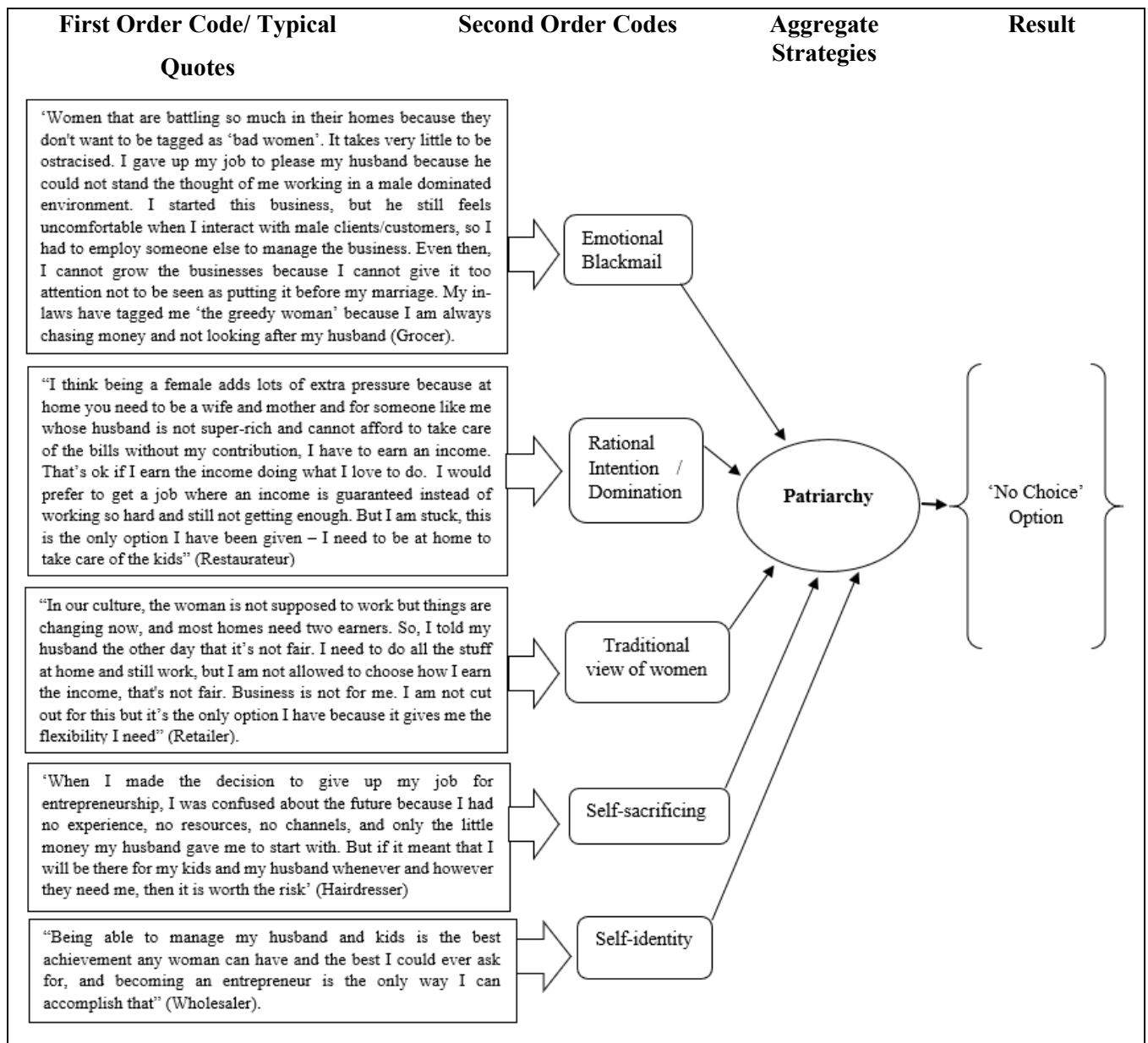


Figure 3: Overview of the data on ‘No Choice’ Option

The analysis reveals that Nigerian women face significant barriers rooted in patriarchal culture as they navigate their careers and entrepreneurial journeys. These barriers, tied to the ‘no choice’ option (Table 3), often stem from spousal or societal pressures to prioritize their roles as housewives over personal ambitions (Irene, 2018). This dynamic evokes negative emotions such as uncertainty, anxiety, stress, and depression, compounded by fears of backlash or failure as wives and mothers.

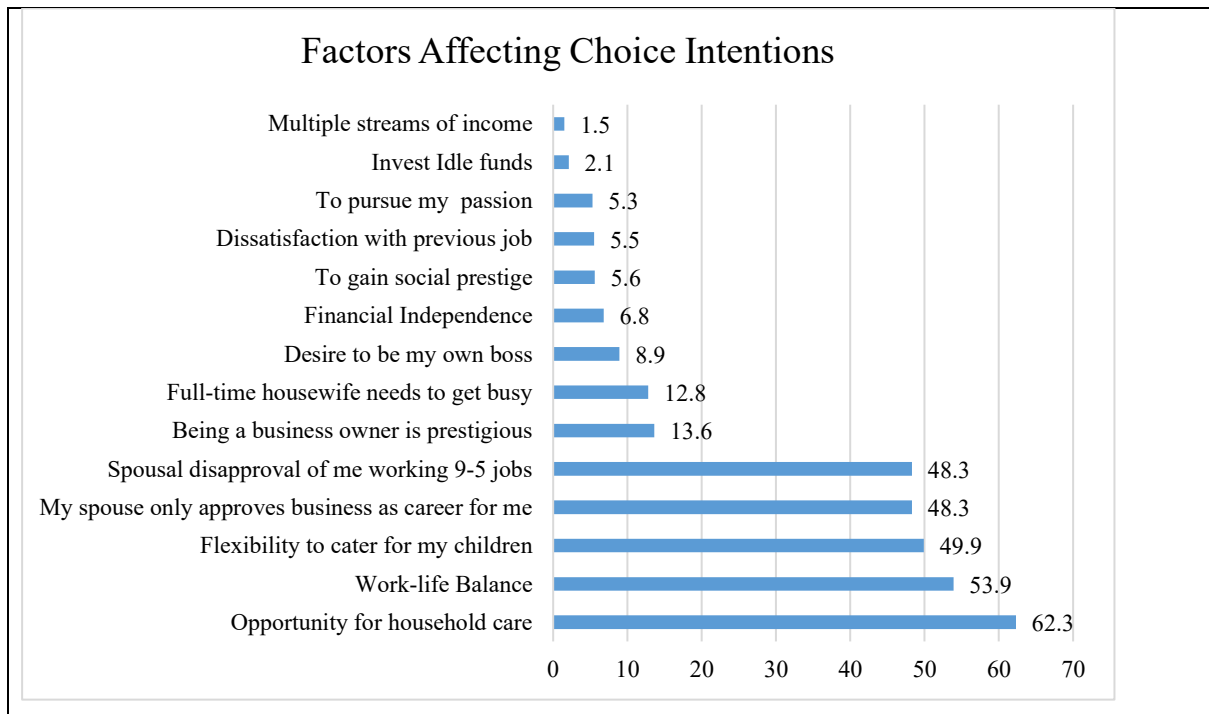


Figure 4: Entrepreneurial Motivation of Participants. Sources: Primary Research Data

The study uncovers an illusion of autonomy and empowerment, where women's acceptance of entrepreneurship is shaped by: (a) adherence to cultural norms prioritizing family over self, and (b) a desire to maintain familial harmony by conforming to spousal expectations. This underscores the constrained nature of their agency, revealing how patriarchal structures perpetuate subjective freedom rather than genuine empowerment. According to some participants:

"In Africa women have subjective freedom where you are given consideration but only to a certain extent. We are continuously living in the shadow of the men"
(Contractor).

"When married to successful men, their careers take priority. Women are expected to step down as homemakers. Even when educated, seeking financial independence is often dismissed, leaving many to choose business as the only socially acceptable path. This leads to emotional strain over time." (Boutique owner)

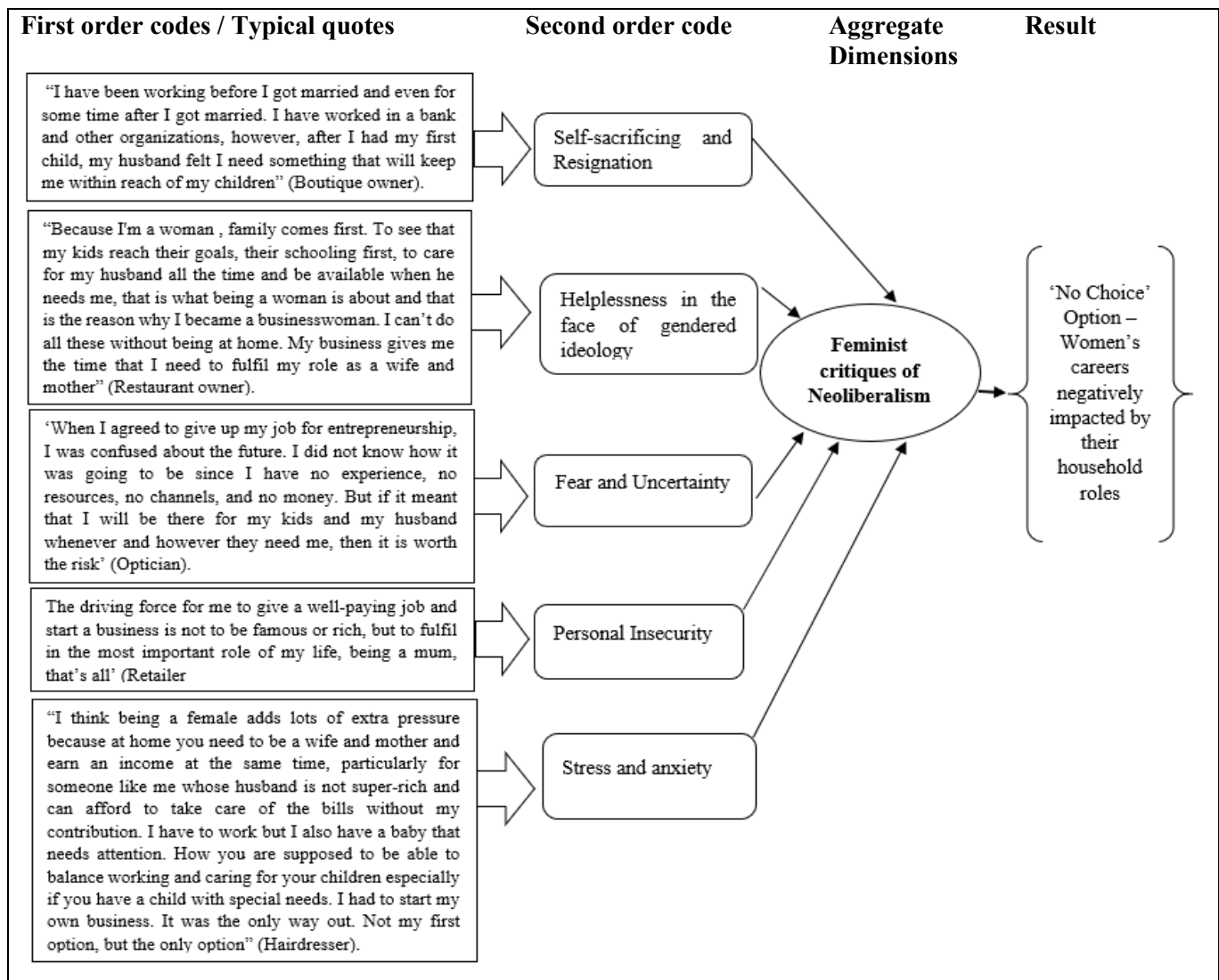


Figure 3: Overview of the data on 'No Choice' Option

4.3 Linking Theory and Data

By reading SRT and neoliberalism together, we expose a double bind: (a) SRT clarifies why women remain primary caregivers, rendering entrepreneurship the *only* viable economic activity compatible with domestic duty; (b) Neoliberalism reframes this coerced compatibility as *empowerment*, turning emotional endurance into proof of entrepreneurial worth.

This synthesis advances the debate by demonstrating that women's businesses are not simply market responses but arenas where patriarchal reproduction and neoliberal responsibilisation co-produce a distinctly gendered form of precarious agency.

Table 3: Reference Points for Emotions node coding

Implications of the 'No Choice'		Source Number*	Reference Point**	Direct Quotes
Classification	Emotions			
Feminist Neoliberalism	Disappointment	1	18	'I know is that I would have done very well in my field, and if I was given the opportunity to work in an organization where promotion is granted, I think I would had been at the top management level by now' (Retailer).
No Choice	Low Self-esteem	1	6	"Women always take a backseat in terms of career options, when this occurs, self-esteem is injured, our sense of being begins to be eroded and although some women are emotionally strong enough to go through this and settle into business as an alternative career option, it is mostly small scale so that they can find who they are in the process. Some others find themselves fighting back to come into the corporate world; either way, most women are emotionally strong and even when they're in business they masked their emotions, they conceal how they really feel and try to make the most of their businesses." (Restaurant owner).
Oppression	Sadness	1	29	'I want to let people know that negative emotions trigger even terminal illness, one of which is breast cancer. So that is the angle women need to be mindful of. I try to overcome my disappointment and stay positive because for me once you're emotionally balanced, you're like a horse, you're like a champion you can run through anything, but when your emotions are chaotic you are never in charge of anything that is why we don't do well... Whether in the business or at home, we just must find joy somehow, somewhere' (Dress maker).
Gendered Ideology	Depression Frustration	1	8	You asked if this was my first business, and I said 'no.' I initially left my corporate job to start a business but had to stop because it became more demanding than my job. My husband complained about my absence at home, and I was accused of neglecting my family. Unable to balance both, I became a full-time housewife. Now that my children are older, I've resumed my air freshener business. If I hadn't stopped, I would have expanded further. Unlike men, women are judged not by business success but by how well they manage their homes." (Chemist/Manufacturer)
Patriarchy	Deprivation	1	16	Feeling deprived: 'It has saddened me as an individual and impacted for those who are around, you know. I never made peace with the situation and if you ask me to say one or two things that reflects my personal life, this is one of them. This is how my personal life has been mostly, never going the way, I planned or desired. I am trying not bitter about it. It's like you're a pastor of a church and your children are Muslims do you understand what am saying? That's how it is with me, but I am grateful for a counselling course I did. It has helped me to come to terms with everything.' (Counsellor)
Insufficiency	Resignation Uncertainty	1	17	You see women that are battling so much in their homes because they don't want to be tagged as 'bad women'. It takes very little to be ostracised. I gave up my job to please my husband because he could not stand the thought of me working in a male dominated environment. I started this business, but he still feels uncomfortable when I interact with male customers, so I had to employ someone else to manage the business. Even then, I cannot grow the businesses because I cannot give it too attention not to be seen as putting it before my marriage or to be more successful than their husbands. My in-laws have tagged me 'the greedy woman' because I am always chasing money and not looking after my husband (Grocer).

Notes: * indicates the number channels: focus group discussions

** indicates the number of related quotes found in the data. Participants indicated more than one motivation driver.

5 Discussions

5.1 Rethinking Entrepreneurial Intention in Patriarchal Economies

Mainstream entrepreneurial-intention (EI) models presume voluntarist action shaped by self-efficacy and opportunity recognition (Krueger, 2017). Our findings reveal, instead, a continuum of coerced participation where EI is produced within gendered power relations. The ‘no-choice’ pathway illustrates how anticipated marital sanctions override perceived desirability, and how Neoliberal scripts of self-responsibility recast compulsion as individual aspiration. Thus, conventional EI measures risk misclassifying structural accommodation as genuine agency.

5.2 Variations Across Social Locations

While patriarchal norms shape the entrepreneurial experiences of all participants, the ways in which these constraints are internalised, negotiated, or resisted vary significantly across lines of education, marital status, and socio-economic positioning.

Social Location	Dominant Emotional Register	Entrepreneurial Strategy
Tertiary-educated / Married	Long-term regret, status dissonance	Professionalised micro-firms that mimic prior careers yet remain spatially tethered to home
O-Level / Married	Normalised compliance	Subsistence trading framed as ‘helping’ husband
Widows / Divorced	Pragmatic autonomy, cautious optimism	Bolder market expansion; fewer spousal vetoes but heavier kin surveillance

These gradations confirm that *patriarchal reproduction is uneven*, modulated by education, marital status, and kin arrangements, yet never dissolved. Widows’ relative latitude underscores how male oversight, not cultural tradition per se, is the immediate constraint.

5.3 Strategic Compliance and Micro-Resistance

Women seldom mount overt defiance; instead, they deploy micro-resistances that safeguard dignity while preserving social harmony: (a) coded Language & Humor – Jokes about being the “deputy breadwinner” let women acknowledge economic contribution without challenging

male primacy; (b) financial Stealth – profits are reinvested in children’s education before husbands can redirect surplus, subtly shifting intergenerational power and (c) sister Circles – Groups like *Pull Up a Sister* function as covert incubators where business tactics and emotional coping strategies are exchanged, collectively diluting patriarchal scrutiny.

These tactics exemplify what Mahmood (2005) calls *agency within subordination*: acts that neither fully resist nor wholly capitulate but recalibrate the terms of conformity.

5.4 Neoliberalism and the Illusion of Empowerment

Under neoliberal ideology, entrepreneurship is framed as the pinnacle of self-reliance, a route to empowerment premised on personal initiative and resilience (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Michaeli, 2021). This discourse encourages women to adopt the “entrepreneurial self,” positioning economic success as a direct reflection of individual effort rather than a product of structural advantage (Pyysiainen et al., 2017; Radhakrishnan & Solari, 2023). However, our findings challenge this narrative, revealing that for many women, entrepreneurship emerges not from opportunity but from constraint.

Participants repeatedly described being nudged, or outright pushed, into business ventures as a socially acceptable compromise between domestic expectations and financial necessity. These ventures, often under-capitalised and time-bound, demanded emotional and physical self-exploitation. One woman, a grocery trader, shared:

“I started this business, but my husband still feels uncomfortable when I interact with male customers, so I had to employ someone else to manage the business. Even then, I cannot grow the business because I cannot give it too much attention without being seen as neglecting my family.”

Her account encapsulates a broader pattern: the entrepreneurial path is not merely chosen; it is negotiated within a tightly regulated gender order. Neoliberalism compounds this by shifting the burden of economic survival onto women themselves, while masking systemic exclusions, such as limited access to formal employment, childcare, or spousal support, behind aspirational rhetoric.

Rather than dismantling structural inequalities, the neoliberal empowerment narrative repackages precarity as agency, framing sacrifice as ambition and exhaustion as evidence of strength. As many participants noted, the emotional toll of juggling business and caregiving was not just draining, it also became a site of moral judgement. One respondent remarked:

“You cannot complain. If the business fails, it’s your fault. If the house is a mess, it’s your fault. So, you smile and say it’s empowerment.”

Such testimonies highlight how deeply neoliberal logics are internalised, reinforcing the illusion that economic participation equates to freedom, when in reality, it often masks the ongoing reproduction of gendered inequality.

5.5 Emotional and Psychological Impact of Constrained Choices

The emotional toll of being forced into entrepreneurship is significant, with many participants reporting feelings of sadness, disappointment, and low self-esteem. These negative emotions not only hinder personal well-being but also impact business performance, as women struggle with motivation and resilience in the face of systemic barriers. For example, one participant shared,

"Negative emotions can trigger serious illnesses, like breast cancer, so women need to be mindful of this. I strive to stay positive because emotional balance makes you unstoppable - like a champion. But when emotions are chaotic, you lose control, and it affects everything - business, home, life."

The narratives reveal a disconnect between neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurship as empowerment and the reality of women engaging in it out of necessity. For many, entrepreneurship was not a source of fulfilment but a pragmatic response to systemic constraints. This underscores the need to address emotional and structural barriers in patriarchal contexts, as the psychological impact of constrained choices can have long-term consequences for women's mental health and economic stability.

5.6 Cultural and Religious Context: Reinforcing Patriarchy

In Nigeria, cultural and religious norms often dictate that women prioritise their roles as wives and mothers over their careers (Irene et al, 2025). This cultural expectation forces many women into entrepreneurship as a socially acceptable alternative to formal employment, even when it is not their preferred career path. The findings show that 87% of participants cited spousal disapproval of formal employment, while 82% stated that business ownership was the only socially acceptable alternative. This dynamic evokes negative emotions such as uncertainty, anxiety, stress, and depression, compounded by fears of backlash or failure as wives and mothers.

Similar patterns have been observed in other patriarchal societies, such as India and Pakistan, where women are often pushed into informal entrepreneurship due to cultural expectations and limited access to formal employment (Boeri, 2018; Roomi et al, 2018; Xheneti et al., 2021). This suggests that the 'no choice' option is not unique to Nigeria but is a widespread phenomenon in patriarchal contexts. As one participant explained,

"In Africa, women have subjective freedom where you are given consideration but only to a certain extent. We are continuously living in the shadow of the men."

This highlights how deeply entrenched patriarchal values are in shaping women's economic participation.

5.7 Theoretical Synthesis: SRT Meets Neoliberal Affect

Social Reproduction Theory pinpoints how women's unpaid care work sustains capitalist economies; Neoliberal affect frames that compulsory labour as self-chosen empowerment. Our data show the affective fusion of these logics: exhaustion rebranded as resilience, guilt repackaged as virtue. By mapping care obligations onto market participation, Nigerian women entrepreneurs become buffer citizens, absorbing economic shocks while patriarchy and capital evade structural change.

In foregrounding coerced intention, social variation, and micro-resistance, this discussion advances feminist entrepreneurship theory beyond empowerment rhetoric toward a situated understanding of how women inhabit, negotiate, and subtly remake patriarchal economies.

6. Conclusions

This study interrogates the widely accepted assumption that entrepreneurship inherently empowers women, particularly within patriarchal societies. Drawing on Social Reproduction Theory and feminist critiques of neoliberalism, the findings reveal that many Nigerian women entrepreneurs are not entering business out of uncoerced choice but in response to gendered constraints that foreclose alternative livelihoods. Entrepreneurship, in this context, becomes an adaptive mechanism for navigating domestic expectations, marital gatekeeping, and structural exclusion from formal employment.

Rather than affirming the rhetoric of empowerment, participants' narratives point to a deeper affective economy of sacrifice, exhaustion, and strategic compliance. The illusion of autonomy is sustained by internalised neoliberal ideals that valorise individual resilience while ignoring the unpaid care work and moral regulation that women continue to bear. In effect, entrepreneurship often becomes an extension of domestic labour, embedded within patriarchal logics and socially sanctioned expectations.

These findings call for a shift in how entrepreneurship is theorised and supported in development discourse. Specifically, the study advocates for:

- ❖ Dismantling marital gatekeeping as a critical barrier to women's economic autonomy, recognising spousal consent and control as informal but powerful labour market constraints.
- ❖ Reframing entrepreneurship discourse to account for coercion, reproductive labour, and the emotional costs borne by women who are navigating highly gendered social terrains.
- ❖ Revisiting measurement tools in entrepreneurship research to better capture constrained agency, structural coercion, and affective labour.

In centring lived experience and emotional complexity, this study contributes to a more grounded feminist theorisation of entrepreneurship—one that foregrounds not only the structural persistence of patriarchy, but also the subtle, situated ways women resist, comply with, and repurpose it in the name of economic survival.

6.1 Recommendations

To address the systemic barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, policymakers should consider implementing programs that provide access to childcare, flexible work arrangements, and financial support for women-owned businesses. Additionally, educational campaigns aimed at challenging traditional gender roles and promoting gender equality could help shift societal attitudes towards women's economic participation. For example, initiatives that encourage men to share domestic responsibilities and support their wives' career aspirations could help reduce the burden on women and create a more equitable environment for entrepreneurship.

- I. **Policy Interventions:** Governments and policymakers should address the structural barriers that limit women's access to formal employment and economic opportunities. This includes implementing policies that promote gender equality in the workplace,

such as equal pay, maternity leave, and childcare support, to enable women to balance work and family responsibilities. Moreover, there is a need for structural reforms that address labour market exclusion, workplace discrimination, and inadequate social welfare. By shifting the focus from individual responsibility to systemic change, policymakers can create pathways that genuinely empower women and enable them to pursue their entrepreneurial aspirations on their own terms.

- II. **Support Systems:** There is a need for institutional support systems that provide women entrepreneurs with access to resources such as funding, training, and mentorship. These programs should be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies, including the emotional and psychological toll of balancing business and domestic responsibilities.
- III. **Cultural Shifts:** Efforts should be made to challenge and transform the cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Public awareness campaigns and educational programs can play a crucial role in shifting societal attitudes towards women's roles in both the workplace and the home.
- IV. **Emotional and Psychological Support:** Given the high levels of stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem reported by women entrepreneurs, there is a need for mental health support services tailored to their needs. Counselling and support groups can help women navigate the emotional challenges of entrepreneurship and build resilience.
- V. **Redefining Entrepreneurship:** Entrepreneurship should be reframed as a genuine choice rather than a fallback option for women. This requires a broader societal re-evaluation of gender roles and economic participation, emphasizing the importance of women's autonomy and agency in their professional and personal lives

6.2 Limitations of the Study

The study's sample size of 38 Nigerian women entrepreneurs, while providing rich qualitative insights, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample size and include women from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to capture a broader range of experiences. The study is focused on the Nigerian context, which may limit its applicability to other patriarchal societies with different cultural and religious dynamics. Comparative studies across different regions could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how patriarchy shapes women's entrepreneurial experiences globally. Additionally, while Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers deep insights into individual experiences, it may not fully capture the broader structural and systemic factors that

influence women's entrepreneurship. Future research could combine qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a more holistic understanding of the issue.

The study captures a snapshot of women's experiences at a particular point in time. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how women's entrepreneurial intentions and experiences evolve over time, particularly in response to changing societal norms and economic conditions. Finally, as with any qualitative study, the researchers' perspectives and interpretations may influence the findings. While efforts were made to ensure reflexivity and member checking, future studies could involve multiple researchers to cross-validate interpretations and reduce potential bias.

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