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Unseen Burdens: Self-Exploitation in Women Entrepreneurship through a Work–Life Boundary Lens

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ABSTRACT

Women entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognized as a key driver of economic and social development; however, it continues to be shaped by persistent gendered constraints that remain insufficiently theorized. This study develops a conceptual framework to examine the emergence of unseen burdens in women entrepreneurship through the integration of invisible labor, work-life boundary dynamics, and self-exploitation. Drawing on worklife boundary theory and gendered role perspectives, the paper conceptualizes how unpaid domestic responsibilities, caregiving roles, and emotional labor extend beyond formal entrepreneurial activities and contribute to role overlap. It proposes that worklife boundary blurring acts as a critical mechanism through which invisible labor translates into sustained role integration, reduced recovery, and increased strain. Building on this, the study introduces self-exploitation as a novel conceptual outcome, referring to the internalized acceptance of excessive work, continuous engagement, and unpaid effort as morally justified within entrepreneurial contexts. The framework advances existing literature by shifting the focus from external structural constraints to the internalization of role expectations and normalization of overwork. The study contributes to entrepreneurship and gender research by offering a theoretically integrated perspective that highlights behavioral dimensions of women's entrepreneurial experiences. It further provides implications for policy, practice, and future research aimed at promoting more sustainable and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems.

***Keywords**: Women Entrepreneurship, Invisible Labor, Work-Life Boundary, Self Exploitation, Gendered Roles, Entrepreneurial Well-being.*

Introduction

Women's entrepreneurship has gained increasing scholarly attention as a vital driver of economic development and social transformation; however, existing research continues to highlight persistent structural and gendered constraints that shape women's entrepreneurial experiences (Ahl, 2006; Jennings & Brush, 2013; Welter, 2011). Traditional entrepreneurship theories, often grounded in gender-neutral assumptions, inadequately capture the complex realities faced by women, thereby necessitating more nuanced and context sensitive frameworks (Brush et al., 2009; Henry et al., 2016). In particular, women entrepreneurs operate within sociocultural environments where entrepreneurial activities are intertwined with normative expectations related to family roles and caregiving responsibilities (Marlow & McAdam, 2013; Xheneti et al., 2019). A critical yet under examined dimension

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within this context is the role of invisible labor, which includes unpaid domestic work, emotional caregiving, and reproductive responsibilities disproportionately borne by women (Duffy, 2007; Power, 2020). These hidden forms of labor remain largely unaccounted for in entrepreneurship discourse, despite their significant influence on women's capacity to initiate, manage, and sustain business ventures (Williams & Gurtoo, 2011; Adisa et al., n.d.). The persistence of such responsibilities creates an uneven distribution of time and energy, thereby constraining women's entrepreneurial engagement and intensifying rolerelated pressures. Within this setting, the interface between work and non-work domains becomes a central concern. The literature on worklife boundaries suggests that individuals continuously negotiate the segmentation and integration of professional and personal roles, with boundary permeability often leading to role conflict and strain (Kreiner, 2006; Kossek et al., 2012). For women entrepreneurs, this boundary management is particularly challenging due to the overlapping nature of business and household responsibilities, which frequently results in blurred role distinctions (Jennings & McDougald, 2007; Shelton, 2006). Such conditions may reduce opportunities for recovery and well-being, especially when work demands extend into personal domains without clear limits (Wepfer et al., 2018; Kelliher et al., 2019).These dynamics give rise to a subtle yet significant phenomenon conceptualized in this study as self-exploitation, referring to the internalized acceptance of excessive work, continuous role engagement, and unpaid effort as a necessary or morally justified aspect of entrepreneurship. Unlike externally imposed constraints, this form of exploitation is self-driven and embedded within broader gender norms and entrepreneurial expectations (Gherardi, 2015; Eddleston & Powell, 2012). Existing research indicates that prolonged exposure to such conditions may adversely affect entrepreneurs' mental health, well-being, and long-term venture sustainability (Cardon & Patel, 2015; Stephan, 2018).Moreover, the literature suggests that women entrepreneurs frequently navigate complex trade-offs between business performance and family responsibilities, which are not experienced uniformly across genders (Powell & Eddleston, 2013; Poggesi et al., 2015). These trade-offs are further shaped by contextual and institutional factors, reinforcing the normalization of invisible labor and the internalization of excessive work commitments (Poggesi et al., 2016; Neneh, 2021). Despite growing recognition of worklife challenges, the implications of such self-imposed burdens remain insufficiently explored in existing research. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine the intersection of invisible labor, worklife boundary dynamics, and self-exploitation in women entrepreneurship. By adopting a worklife boundary lens, the study seeks to advance understanding of how blurred boundaries and gendered expectations contribute to the emergence of unseen burdens. In doing so, it contributes to the entrepreneurship literature by foregrounding the dimensions of women's entrepreneurial experiences and by offering a foundation for more sustainable and inclusive perspectives.

Literature Review

- **Women Entrepreneurship: Evolving Perspectives and Structural Realities**

The studies on women entrepreneurship has progressively shifted from descriptive accounts toward more critical and theory-driven analyses that question the universality of traditional entrepreneurial models (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Henry et al., 2016). Earlier studies often treated entrepreneurship as gender-neutral; however, subsequent research has demonstrated that such approaches overlook the socio-cultural embeddedness of women's entrepreneurial experiences (Ahl, 2006; Welter, 2011). Contemporary perspectives emphasize that women's entrepreneurship is shaped by institutional contexts, access to resources, and societal expectations, which collectively influence entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes (Brush et al., 2009; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). These insights highlight the need to examine not only economic factors but also relational and structural dimensions that define women's entrepreneurial trajectories.

- **Invisible Labor and Gendered Division of Work**

A growing body of literature underscores the persistence of gendered divisions of labor, wherein women disproportionately engage in unpaid and often unrecognized forms of work (Duffy, 2007; Power, 2020). This invisible labor includes domestic responsibilities, caregiving roles, and emotional management, which significantly shape women's availability for entrepreneurial activities. Unlike formal work contributions, these responsibilities remain largely excluded from performance and productivity assessments, thereby creating hidden constraints on entrepreneurial growth (Williams & Gurtoo, 2011). In the context of small and informal enterprises, such burdens are further intensified due to limited institutional support and resource constraints, reinforcing structural inequalities in entrepreneurial participation (Adisa et al., n.d.).

- **WorkLife Boundary Dynamics in Entrepreneurship**

The worklife interface has been extensively examined in organizational research, with particular emphasis on how individuals manage boundaries between professional and personal roles (Kreiner, 2006; Kossek et al., 2012). Boundary theory suggests that individuals adopt varying strategies of segmentation and integration, which influence their experience of role conflict and well-being. In entrepreneurial contexts, these boundaries tend to be more fluid due to flexible work arrangements and the absence of formal organizational structures (Jennings & McDougald, 2007). For women entrepreneurs, this fluidity often translates into overlapping responsibilities, where business and family roles coexist within the same temporal and spatial domains (Shelton, 2006).Empirical studies indicate that weak or highly permeable boundaries can lead to increased strain, reduced recovery opportunities, and heightened emotional exhaustion (Wepfer et al., 2018; Kelliher et al., 2019). Moreover, the effectiveness of boundary management is influenced by role salience and contextual factors, suggesting that women entrepreneurs may prioritize family responsibilities even at the cost of business performance (Neneh, 2021). This dynamic underscore the complexity of balancing entrepreneurial and personal demands, particularly in gendered contexts.

- **Work-Family Interface and Entrepreneurial Outcomes**

The interplay between work and family roles has significant implications for entrepreneurial performance and well-being. Research indicates that work-family conflict can negatively affect both business outcomes and personal satisfaction, particularly for women entrepreneurs managing dual responsibilities (Eddleston & Powell, 2012; Shelton, 2006). At the same time, some studies highlight the potential for work-family enrichment, where support from family domains can positively influence entrepreneurial success (Powell & Eddleston, 2013). However, such positive spillovers are not uniformly experienced and often depend on the availability of resources and support mechanisms. Further, evidence suggests that women entrepreneurs adopt various coping strategies to manage these competing demands, including role prioritization, time reallocation, and collective support systems (St-Arnaud &Giguère, 2018). Despite these strategies, the persistent imbalance between work and family demands continues to shape entrepreneurial experiences, often leading to constrained growth and reduced well-being (Poggesi et al., 2015; Poggesi et al., 2016).

- **Entrepreneurial Stress, Well-Being, and Emerging Ethical Concerns**

Entrepreneurship is inherently associated with high levels of uncertainty, workload, and stress, which can have significant implications for mental health and overall well-being (Cardon & Patel, 2015; Stephan, 2018). For women entrepreneurs, these stressors are compounded by additional role expectations and invisible labor responsibilities, resulting in intensified psychological and emotional demands. The literature increasingly recognizes that sustained exposure to such conditions may lead to burnout, reduced productivity, and long-term health consequences. In parallel, emerging discussions point toward the ethical dimensions of entrepreneurial work, particularly in relation to self-imposed pressures and internalized expectations. While prior research has largely focused on external constraints, limited attention has been given to how individuals may internalize these pressures and normalize excessive work practices. This gap is particularly relevant in the context of women entrepreneurship, where societal norms and identity expectations may contribute to the acceptance of disproportionate burdens (Gherardi, 2015).

Research Gap

Although existing literature provides substantial insights into women entrepreneurship, work -life balance, and gendered labor dynamics, it remains fragmented in addressing their intersection. Specifically, there is limited integration of invisible labor, boundary management, and ethical considerations within a unified conceptual framework. The notion of self-exploitation, as an outcome of blurred boundaries and internalized expectations, has not been systematically examined within entrepreneurship research. Addressing this gap is essential to advance a more comprehensive understanding of the hidden costs associated with women's entrepreneurial engagement.

Theoretical Foundation

- **Work-Life Boundary Theory Perspective**

The present study is primarily grounded in work-life boundary theory, which provides a robust framework to understand how individuals construct, maintain, and negotiate boundaries between work and non-work domains. Boundary theory posits that individuals actively manage the interface between

these domains through processes of segmentation (clear separation) and integration (blending of roles), with varying consequences for role performance and well-being (Kreiner, 2006; Kossek et al., 2012). The permeability and flexibility of these boundaries determine the extent to which roles overlap, thereby influencing experiences of role conflict and strain.In the context of entrepreneurship, boundary management becomes inherently complex due to the absence of formal organizational structures and the flexible nature of work arrangements. Entrepreneurs often operate across temporal and spatial boundaries, leading to increased integration of work and personal roles (Jennings & McDougald, 2007). For women entrepreneurs, this integration is further intensified by the simultaneous management of business responsibilities and domestic roles, resulting in continuous role transitions and boundary blurring (Shelton, 2006). Such conditions reduce opportunities for psychological detachment and recovery, thereby negatively affecting well-being (Wepfer et al., 2018).Moreover, boundary theory highlights that individuals' preferences and contextual constraints jointly shape boundary management strategies. In gendered contexts, societal expectations often limit women's ability to segment roles effectively, compelling them toward higher levels of integration even when it leads to increased strain (Kelliher et al., 2019; Neneh, 2021). Thus, work-life boundary theory offers a critical lens to examine how structural and normative factors influence women entrepreneurs' experiences of role overlap and associated pressures.

- **Gendered Role Expectations and Invisible Labor**

Complementing boundary theory, the study draws on perspectives from gendered role expectations to explain the persistence of invisible labor in women's entrepreneurial experiences. Gendered norms assign primary responsibility for caregiving, domestic work, and emotional labor to women, positioning these roles as natural and obligatory (Duffy, 2007; Power, 2020). These expectations extend into entrepreneurial contexts, where women are required to simultaneously fulfill business and family roles without corresponding institutional support. Entrepreneurship research has increasingly recognized that such gendered expectations shape not only access to resources but also the allocation of time and effort within entrepreneurial activities (Brush et al., 2009; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). As a result, women entrepreneurs often experience a disproportionate burden of unpaid labor, which remains invisible within traditional measures of productivity and performance (Williams & Gurtoo, 2011). This structural imbalance contributes to persistent inequalities and constrains entrepreneurial growth and sustainability. Importantly, these gendered dynamics are embedded within broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts that reinforce normative expectations and limit alternative role configurations (Welter, 2011; Xheneti et al., 2019). Consequently, women entrepreneurs are not only managing multiple roles but are also navigating deeply ingrained societal norms that shape their decision-making and behavior.

- **Entrepreneurial Stress and Well-Being Perspective**

The theoretical foundation is further strengthened by integrating insights from the entrepreneurship literature on stress and well-being. Entrepreneurship is characterized by high levels of uncertainty, workload, and responsibility, which can significantly impact individuals' psychological and physical health (Cardon & Patel, 2015; Stephan, 2018). These stressors are particularly salient in contexts where role demands are excessive and resources are limited.For women entrepreneurs, the coexistence of business pressures and invisible labor responsibilities amplifies these stressors, leading to heightened emotional exhaustion and reduced well-being. The literature suggests that sustained engagement in high-demand roles without adequate recovery can result in adverse outcomes, including burnout and decreased performance (Wepfer et al., 2018). Furthermore, the continuous negotiation of work and family roles creates a dynamic environment where individuals must constantly balance competing demands, often at the expense of personal well-being (Poggesi et al., 2015; Poggesi et al., 2016).

Conceptualizing Self-Exploitation

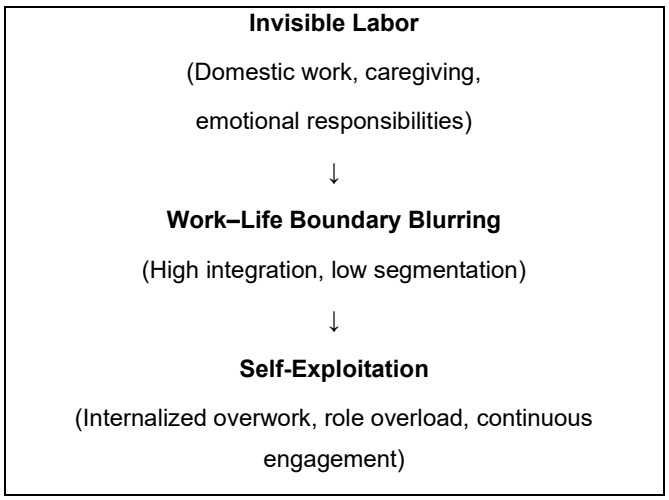
Building on the integration of boundary theory, gendered role expectations, and entrepreneurial stress perspectives, this study conceptualizes self-exploitation as a central construct. Self-exploitation refers to the internalized acceptance of excessive work, unpaid effort, and continuous role engagement as morally justified or necessary within the entrepreneurial context. Unlike traditional forms of exploitation that are externally imposed, this phenomenon is self-driven and embedded within normative beliefs about responsibility, commitment, and success. Prior research suggests that women entrepreneurs often internalize societal expectations related to caregiving and role fulfillment, leading them to accept

disproportionate workloads as part of their entrepreneurial identity (Gherardi, 2015; Eddleston & Powell, 2012). This internalization is further reinforced by the desire to achieve business success while maintaining family responsibilities, resulting in the normalization of excessive effort and self-sacrifice. Over time, such patterns contribute to the perpetuation of invisible labor and the erosion of work-life boundaries. Thus, self-exploitation emerges as an outcome of the interaction between blurred boundaries, gendered expectations, and entrepreneurial pressures. By positioning this construct within a work-life boundary framework, the study advances a nuanced understanding of how internalized norms and structural constraints jointly shape women's entrepreneurial experiences.

Theoretical Integration

The integration of these perspectives provides a comprehensive foundation for examining unseen burdens in women entrepreneurship. Work-life boundary theory explains the mechanisms through which roles overlap and create strain, while gendered role expectations highlight the structural origins of invisible labor. The entrepreneurial stress perspective underscores the consequences of sustained role demands on well-being, and the concept of self-exploitation bridges these elements by capturing the internalization of such pressures. Together, these theoretical lenses enable a holistic understanding of how invisible labor and boundary dynamics contribute to the emergence of self-exploitation, thereby offering a strong foundation for the development of the study's conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework proposes that invisible labor acts as the foundational driver of unseen burdens in women entrepreneurship. Unpaid domestic responsibilities, caregiving roles, and emotional labor disproportionately borne by women create structural pressures that extend beyond formal business activities. These hidden demands increase the likelihood of overlapping responsibilities across work and personal domains. This overlap leads to work-life boundary blurring, characterized by high role integration and reduced segmentation. In entrepreneurial settings, where work structures are inherently flexible, women often experience continuous role transitions without clear psychological or temporal separation. Such boundary permeability limits recovery opportunities and intensifies role-related strain. As a consequence, these conditions give rise to self-exploitation, conceptualized as the internalized acceptance of excessive work, unpaid effort, and continuous engagement as necessary or morally justified. Rather than being externally imposed, this form of exploitation emerges from the interaction between gendered expectations, entrepreneurial commitment, and blurred boundaries. Overall, the framework highlights a sequential mechanism, where invisible labor indirectly contributes to self-exploitation through the mediating role of work-life boundary dynamics, thereby capturing the emergence of unseen burdens in women entrepreneurship.

Propositions Development

- **P1:** Invisible labor is positively associated with work-life boundary blurring among women entrepreneurs.

- **P2:** Work-life boundary blurring is positively associated with self-exploitation among women entrepreneurs.
- **P3:** Invisible labor is positively associated with self-exploitation among women entrepreneurs.
- **P4 (Mediation):** Work-life boundary blurring mediates the relationship between invisible labor and self-exploitation.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to the entrepreneurship literature by advancing a theoretically integrated understanding of unseen burdens in women entrepreneurship. First, it extends existing research by foregrounding invisible labor as a central construct, thereby shifting attention from purely economic and performance-oriented perspectives to the hidden and unpaid dimensions of entrepreneurial work. In doing so, it responds to calls for more gender-sensitive and contextually grounded frameworks in entrepreneurship research. Second, the study enriches work-life boundary theory by situating it within the entrepreneurial context, where role boundaries are inherently fluid and less regulated. By conceptualizing boundary blurring as a mediating mechanism, the study provides a nuanced explanation of how structural and role-based pressures translate into individual-level outcomes. This contributes to the literature by linking boundary dynamics with broader gendered experiences rather than treating them as isolated work-life balance issues. Third, the introduction of self-exploitation as a conceptual outcome represents a novel theoretical contribution. The study moves beyond traditional notions of external constraints and highlights how internalized norms, role expectations, and entrepreneurial commitment interact to normalize excessive work practices. This perspective adds adimension to entrepreneurship research, offering a deeper understanding of how inequality is reproduced not only structurally but also behaviorally. From a practical standpoint, the findings underscore the need for multi-level interventions to address the hidden challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. At the policy level, there is a need to design support systems that recognize and reduce the burden of unpaid labor, including access to childcare services, flexible support mechanisms, and inclusive entrepreneurial policies. Such measures can help create a more enabling environment for women-led ventures. At the organizational and ecosystem level, incubators, support institutions, and entrepreneurial networks should promote boundary management awareness and well-being practices, enabling women entrepreneurs to establish clearer role boundaries and reduce continuous role overlap. Training programs focused on time management, delegation, and resource access can further support sustainable entrepreneurial engagement. At the individual level, the study highlights the importance of reframing entrepreneurial success beyond constant availability and overwork, encouraging women entrepreneurs to adopt strategies that prioritize well-being alongside performance. Recognizing and addressing self-exploitation is essential for ensuring long-term sustainability, both at the individual and venture levels. Overall, the study offers a holistic contribution by integrating theoretical advancement with actionable insights, thereby supporting the development of more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable models of women entrepreneurship.

Discussion

The present study advances the understanding of women entrepreneurship by conceptualizing how invisible labor and work-life boundary dynamics jointly shape self-exploitation. The proposed framework highlights that unseen burdens are not merely a consequence of external structural constraints but also emerge through the internalization of role expectations and continuous role engagement. This shifts the focus from traditional work-life conflict narratives toward a more nuanced understanding of how boundary blurring normalizes excessive work practices. The findings suggest that work-life boundary blurring functions as a critical mechanism through which invisible labor translates into sustained role overlap and strain. In entrepreneurial contexts, where flexibility is often assumed to be beneficial, the absence of clear boundaries may instead intensify pressures, particularly for women managing multiple responsibilities simultaneously. This reinforces the argument that flexibility without structural support can inadvertently contribute to inequality. Further, the study underscores that self-exploitation is embedded within broader gendered norms, where commitment, resilience, and multitasking are often valorized. Such expectations may lead women entrepreneurs to accept disproportionate workloads as a necessary condition for success, thereby masking the underlying inequities. This highlights the importance of recognizing how socially constructed norms influence not only opportunities but also behavioral responses. Overall, the discussion emphasizes that addressing challenges in women entrepreneurship requires moving beyond surface-level solutions to examine the interplay between structural conditions, boundary management, and internalized pressures. By bringing

these elements together, the study provides a more comprehensive perspective on the hidden costs associated with entrepreneurial engagement and opens avenues for more sustainable and equitable approaches.

Future Research Directions

Future research should empirically test the proposed framework to validate the relationships between invisible labor, work-life boundary dynamics, and self-exploitation across diverse entrepreneurial contexts. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in examining how these dynamics evolve over time and influence venture sustainability and well-being. Further, researchers may explore contextual variations, including cultural, institutional, and sectoral differences, to understand how socio-economic environments shape the intensity and manifestation of unseen burdens. Comparative studies across formal and informal sectors, especially in emerging economies, can provide deeper insights into structural inequalities. There is also scope to examine additional mediating and outcome variables, such as emotional exhaustion, burnout, and entrepreneurial performance, to enrich the explanatory power of the framework. Integrating perspectives from psychological and behavioral research can further strengthen theoretical development. Finally, future work should focus on identifying and testing intervention mechanisms, including boundary management strategies, policy support systems, and ecosystem-level initiatives, to mitigate self-exploitation and promote sustainable entrepreneurship among women.

Conclusion

This study develops a conceptual framework to explain how unseen burdens emerge in women entrepreneurship through the interaction of invisible labor, work-life boundary dynamics, and self-exploitation. By positioning invisible labor as a foundational driver and identifying boundary blurring as a critical mechanism, the study highlights how overlapping role demands translate into sustained over-engagement and internalized pressures. The study advances the literature by introducing self-exploitation as a distinct conceptual outcome, thereby extending existing discussions beyond structural constraints to include the normalization of excessive work within entrepreneurial contexts. This perspective underscores that the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs are not solely external but are also shaped by deeply embedded norms and expectations that influence behavior and decision-making. Overall, the study emphasizes the need to move toward more inclusive and sustainable models of entrepreneurship that recognize hidden forms of labor and address the conditions that perpetuate them. By integrating theoretical insights with practical relevance, the framework provides a foundation for future research and informed interventions aimed at enhancing well-being, equity, and long-term entrepreneurial sustainability among women.

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