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Neither Free nor Forced: Survival Entrepreneurship, Household Governance, and Constrained Labor Among Displaced Syrian Women

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship is widely promoted as a pathway to refugee self-reliance, yet the conditions under which entrepreneurial livelihoods unfold, and the forms of labor they generate, remain underexamined. This study investigates how displacement and patriarchal household relations shape refugee women's entrepreneurship, asking when survival-oriented enterprise produces labor vulnerability rather than alleviating it. Drawing on in-depth qualitative research with Syrian refugee women entrepreneurs in Lebanon, the study reveals that entrepreneurship emerges primarily as a survival response to exclusion and precarity rather than an opportunity-driven choice. As a result, entrepreneurial activity becomes embedded within informal, relationally governed arrangements that intensify dependency and constrain exit, while women's labor is regulated through overlapping household expectations, kinship obligations, and gendered moral economies that reproduce unprotected, difficult-to-exit work. The study shows that entrepreneurship and labor vulnerability may be co-constituted, repositions households as institutions of labor governance, and bridges entrepreneurship and forced labor scholarship by demonstrating how constrained labor emerges within self-employment through relational governance and survival imperatives. These findings challenge policy approaches that treat entrepreneurship as a stand-alone solution to refugee labor exclusion, revealing how market-based inclusion may normalize precarity instead.

Keywords: refugee entrepreneurship; forced labor vulnerability; survival entrepreneurship; gendered labor; displacement; informal work; household relations

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1. Introduction

Armed conflict and forced displacement have profoundly reshaped refugees' access to work in host societies. Excluded from formal labor markets through restrictive immigration regimes, limited legal status, and discriminatory employment practices, refugees are frequently confined to informal, unregulated, and insecure forms of work in which labor participation reflects survival necessity rather than free choice (Anderson 2010; Lewis et al. 2015; ILO 2017). In response to these conditions, entrepreneurship has increasingly been promoted as a policy solution for refugee self-reliance and economic inclusion. This

orientation reflects a broader shift toward market-based displacement governance, in which responsibility for economic survival is progressively transferred from states to displaced individuals (Betts et al. 2017; OECD and UNHCR 2018; UNHCR 2019).

Refugee entrepreneurship refers to self-employment or business creation undertaken by forcibly displaced individuals as a strategy for livelihood generation within host-country constraints (e.g., Wauters and Lambrecht 2008; Betts et al. 2017). In protracted displacement settings such as Lebanon, such activities frequently emerge as necessity-driven responses to legal and labor market exclusion rather than opportunity-based market entry (Bizri 2017). However, policy-oriented approaches that promote entrepreneurship often overlook the structural conditions under which refugee entrepreneurial activity unfolds, including legal insecurity, informality, and limited labor protections. Recent studies demonstrate that institutional exclusion and multi-layered constraints continue to shape refugee entrepreneurial engagement and economic participation in host societies (Yetkin and Tunçalp 2024; Althalathini and Abdul-Rahman 2025).

Research further shows that refugee entrepreneurs tend to operate in marginal, low-capital sectors characterized by long working hours, limited autonomy, and heightened exposure to economic risk, potentially absorbing displacement-related vulnerability rather than alleviating it (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008; Alrawadieh et al. 2019). For refugee women, these pressures are compounded by gendered expectations surrounding caregiving, respectability, and household responsibility. As a result, entrepreneurial engagement becomes embedded within relational settings and family survival strategies rather than enabling substantive autonomy (Kabeer 1997; Al-Dajani and Marlow 2010, 2013; Foley et al. 2018). Feminist scholarship highlights that entrepreneurial activity undertaken in contexts of poverty, informality, and limited institutional support may reproduce rather than transform existing inequalities, as women's labor becomes conditional, supervised, or controlled through household relations that mediate access to markets, mobility, and income (Verduijn et al. 2014; Jennings et al. 2016; Wolf and Frese 2018; El Ali and Le Loarne-Lemaire 2022).

Despite growing scholarly attention to refugee entrepreneurship and women's economic participation in displacement contexts, important gaps remain. Existing research often frames entrepreneurship in binary terms, as either empowering or oppressive, without sufficiently capturing its relational, contingent, and structurally shaped character (Rindova et al. 2009; Calás et al. 2009; Msowoya and Luiz 2025). At the same time, scholars of forced labor and migration have called for analyses that move beyond overt coercion to examine how structural conditions, dependency, and limited alternatives generate constrained labor in everyday settings (Anderson 2010; Lewis et al. 2015; ILO 2017). Such perspectives, however, remain underexplored within entrepreneurship research (Kohlenberger et al. 2025). Moreover, context-sensitive feminist research that captures women's lived experiences, motivations, and constraints within daily entrepreneurial practices remains insufficiently developed (Welter 2020; Henry et al. 2021).

This study addresses these gaps by advancing two interrelated research questions. First, how do displacement conditions and patriarchal household relations jointly shape refugee women's entrepreneurial livelihoods? Second, under what conditions do survival-oriented entrepreneurial activities give rise to labor vulnerability and constrained work arrangements rather than economic autonomy? In addressing these questions, we advance a theoretical repositioning that conceptualizes refugee women's entrepreneurship not as opportunity-driven venturing, but as livelihood-securing practices enacted under displacement-induced precarity. These practices are subsequently mediated by patriarchal household relations that structure how women's labor is organized, regulated, and appropriated within family survival strategies.

We examine these dynamics through an in-depth qualitative analysis of Syrian refugee women engaged in entrepreneurial activities in Lebanon, a context characterized by prolonged displacement, restrictive labor regimes, and economic crisis (BouChabke and Haddad 2021; Haddad and BouChabke 2022). By the end of 2024, an estimated 123.2 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced, including approximately 6.1 million Syrian refugees concentrated primarily in neighboring host countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (UNHCR 2024). Within this regional landscape, Lebanon hosts one of the largest refugee populations per capita globally. As of December 2025, UNHCR reports 532,357 registered Syrian refugees in the country, while Lebanese government estimates place the number at approximately 1.12 million, accounting for roughly one-fifth of Lebanon's total population, with women comprising approximately half of the registered refugee population (UNHCR 2025). Despite this disproportionate hosting burden, Lebanon imposes severe barriers to refugees' access to formal employment, rendering entrepreneurship one of the few available livelihood options (Bizri 2017). Drawing on semi-structured interviews with twelve Syrian refugee women entrepreneurs and members of their immediate social networks, the analysis reveals how women's entrepreneurial efforts to escape precarity become reshaped within household and social relations, shifting from attempted exits from vulnerability into constrained and difficult-to-exit forms of labor.

This study contributes to scholarship in several ways. It extends feminist entrepreneurship research by moving beyond binary framings of empowerment versus oppression, demonstrating that entrepreneurship and labor vulnerability may be co-constituted rather than opposing conditions under displacement. It also repositions households as institutions of labor governance rather than merely contextual support structures, showing how patriarchal household relations organize access to work, control over income, and the capacity to renegotiate or exit entrepreneurial activity. Finally, the study bridges the literature on entrepreneurship and forced labor by illustrating how constrained and difficult-to-exit labor can emerge within self-employment through relational governance and survival imperatives rather than overt coercion alone, thereby extending forced labor frameworks into domains traditionally understood as autonomous economic activity.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework by reviewing literature on refugee entrepreneurship, gendered labor, and constrained work. The methodology section then presents the research context and approach. Findings are subsequently organized around key themes, followed by a discussion of theoretical implications. The paper concludes with contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Refugee Entrepreneurship as Livelihood Practice

Research on refugee entrepreneurship increasingly examines entrepreneurial activity as embedded within livelihood strategies developed under conditions of displacement (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008; Alrawadieh et al. 2019). Complementing this, scholarship on everyday entrepreneurship highlights how entrepreneurial practices may emerge from routine coping within resource-constrained environments (Baker and Welter 2017). In parallel, entrepreneurship has also been widely promoted by international organizations and development actors as a policy tool to foster refugee self-reliance, reduce dependency on humanitarian aid, and facilitate economic inclusion in host societies (Betts et al. 2017; OECD and UNHCR 2018; UNHCR 2019; Althalathini and Abdul-Rahman 2025). However, refugee economic activity is frequently shaped by displacement-induced uncertainty and restricted access to formal labor markets, resulting in livelihoods that are survival-oriented and precarious rather than opportunity-driven (Lewis et al. 2015). Within such contexts,

refugee entrepreneurship commonly emerges as a practical means of generating income for household survival within fragile and informal economic environments (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008; Alrawadieh et al. 2019).

Empirical studies show that refugee entrepreneurs are predominantly engaged in small-scale, low capital ventures often concentrated in retail, services, and informal commerce (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008; Alrawadieh et al. 2019). These activities are characterized by modest returns, long working hours, and reliance on informal networks and family labor. Rather than offering pathways to economic mobility, these livelihood practices are oriented toward immediate income generation and subsistence. Access to finance, infrastructure, and formal business support is limited, reinforcing the small scale and precarious nature of entrepreneurial activity (Bizri 2017; OECD and UNHCR 2018). These dynamics are further intensified within hostile regulatory and legal environments that systematically produce migrant insecurity (Hynes 2022). Such environments do not merely restrict access to work, but shape how authority, dependency, and legitimacy are experienced and internalized in everyday economic practices under conditions of legal and institutional precarity (Walsh and Ferazzoli 2023).

Despite growing interest in refugee entrepreneurship, significant gaps remain in how these practices are theorized. Refugees in developing-country contexts, and refugee women in particular, remain underrepresented in entrepreneurship research, limiting theoretical understanding of entrepreneurship under extreme constraint, alongside other marginalized and silenced communities (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008; Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013; De Vita et al. 2014; Alrawadieh et al. 2019; Refai et al. 2018; Bastian et al. 2018). Within this broader context, refugee women face additional gendered constraints that further mediate their entrepreneurial efforts (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013; Hynes 2022). Boundaries between entrepreneurial work, domestic labor, and caregiving are often blurred, making entrepreneurial activity inseparable from everyday social reproduction (Williams and Nadin 2010).

Moreover, entrepreneurship scholarship has often overlooked the contextual and relational dimensions shaping everyday entrepreneurial practice, privileging decontextualized accounts over analyses grounded in lived experience (Gaddefors and Anderson 2017; Newth 2018). Responding to this limitation, scholars have emphasized the importance of contextualizing entrepreneurship as a situated and relational process shaped by social, economic, and institutional conditions (Welter 2011; Welter et al. 2019; Baker and Welter 2020). While such perspectives deepen understanding of variation within entrepreneurial activity, they have rarely been applied to examine how refugee women's livelihood practices are organized and sustained within household relations. Addressing this gap requires closer attention to the gendered and relational dynamics through which refugee entrepreneurship is enacted in everyday life, a focus developed in the following section through an examination of household relations and gendered livelihood dynamics.

2.2. Refugee Women, Households, and the Gendered Organization of Entrepreneurial Labor

For refugee women, entrepreneurial activity is embedded within gendered social relations that shape how work is organized, valued, and controlled within households and communities (Kabeer 1997; Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013). Women's entrepreneurial livelihoods are frequently intertwined with expectations of caregiving, respectability, and family obligation, situating income-generating activities within domestic and relational spaces rather than autonomous economic spheres (De Vita et al. 2014; Foley et al. 2018). Consequently, refugee women's entrepreneurship must be understood not simply as individual livelihood practice, but as gendered labor mediated through household relations,

where authority, dependency, and responsibility shape women's capacity to engage in and benefit from entrepreneurial work (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2010; Welter et al. 2019).

Within refugee contexts, women face compounded challenges including social marginalization, patriarchal norms, discrimination, and legal exclusion in host societies (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013). Poverty combined with patriarchal institutions limits women's access to formal employment through cultural, familial, and gendered barriers, as well as employer prejudice (Cavaglieri 2008). Caregiving obligations, patriarchal expectations, and community surveillance further limit women's mobility and the social legitimacy of their work, channeling them into home-based or informal entrepreneurial activities that are socially permissible yet economically precarious (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013; Sözer 2021; Bastian et al. 2018). In these contexts, patriarchal norms operate as taken-for-granted organizing principles within households, shaping authority, decision-making, and control over women's labor without necessarily relying on overt coercion (Kabeer 1997; Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013). These dynamics heighten women's vulnerability to dependency and constraint, blurring the boundary between entrepreneurship and unprotected or potentially exploitative forms of labor (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2010; El Ali and Le Loarne-Lemaire 2022).

Research on family involvement in entrepreneurship further demonstrates how women's entrepreneurial labor is embedded within relational contexts. While spousal and family participation may provide emotional, financial, or practical support, it can also constrain women's autonomy, particularly when authority over income, decision-making, or business visibility is retained by male household members (Nikina et al. 2015; Haddad and Le Loarne 2015; Haddad 2017; Wolf and Frese 2018). In such settings, women's entrepreneurship is often legitimized through its contribution to household reproduction rather than recognized as independent economic activity, positioning women's labor as conditional, morally regulated, and difficult to refuse or exit (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013; El Ali and Le Loarne-Lemaire 2022). As a result, women's entrepreneurial livelihoods may become deeply embedded within household survival strategies, limiting their capacity to control income, renegotiate working conditions, or withdraw from entrepreneurial activity without jeopardizing family stability.

Despite these insights, much of the entrepreneurship literature continues to treat household relations as contextual background rather than as central mechanisms shaping entrepreneurial outcomes (Welter 2011; Welter et al. 2019). This gap is particularly pronounced in refugee settings, where women's entrepreneurial livelihoods are simultaneously shaped by displacement, gender norms, and household survival imperatives. Greater analytical attention is therefore needed to examine how women's entrepreneurial labor is organized and governed within households, and how these relations mediate women's capacity to benefit from, or exit entrepreneurial activity.

By foregrounding households as sites of labor organization rather than neutral units of support, this study builds on feminist and contextual entrepreneurship scholarship to conceptualize refugee women's entrepreneurship as gendered livelihood work embedded within relational power structures (Baker and Welter 2020; Henry et al. 2021). This perspective provides the conceptual foundation for examining how women's attempts to secure livelihoods under displacement may evolve into constrained and difficult-to-exit forms of labor, as explored in the following section.

Taken together, these studies suggest that refugee women's entrepreneurial livelihoods may not only be gendered and household-mediated, but also shaped by conditions that limit their capacity to refuse or exit work, raising important connections with scholarship on forced and constrained labor.

2.3. Forced and Constrained Labor Under Conditions of Displacement

Contemporary scholarship on forced and coerced labor increasingly challenges narrow definitions that equate coercion solely with overt violence, physical confinement, or explicit threats. Instead, researchers emphasize how forced labor can emerge through structural conditions that limit individuals' capacity to refuse, renegotiate, or exit work, even when labor appears formally voluntary (ILO 2017; Anderson 2010; Kohlenberger et al. 2025). From this perspective, coercion operates along a continuum, shaped by dependency, insecurity, and constrained alternatives rather than direct force.

The International Labor Organization defines forced labor as work performed under the menace of penalty for which individuals have not offered themselves voluntarily (ILO 2017). Crucially, voluntariness is understood not as a binary condition but as one that may be undermined by economic necessity, legal insecurity, debt, or social obligation. When the costs of refusing or leaving work threaten basic survival, labor may become effectively compulsory despite the absence of overt coercion (Anderson 2010; Lewis et al. 2015). This broader understanding has prompted scholars to conceptualize forced labor as structurally produced, embedded within everyday economic arrangements rather than confined to extreme or exceptional cases.

Research on migrant and precarious labor highlights how such conditions generate what Lewis et al. (2015) describe as hyper-precarity, characterized by instability, dependency, and limited bargaining power. Workers in hyper-precarious positions may retain formal freedom of movement while experiencing substantive unfreedom due to economic dependence, fear of income loss, or lack of viable alternatives. These dynamics complicate distinctions between free and unfree labor, pointing instead to a spectrum of constrained labor arrangements shaped by vulnerability and power asymmetries (Strauss and McGrath 2017).

While forced labor research has traditionally focused on waged employment, similar mechanisms are increasingly recognized within self-employment and entrepreneurial activity. Scholars note that entrepreneurship undertaken under conditions of necessity and informality may involve excessive working hours, limited autonomy, and difficulty exiting economic activity without severe consequences for household survival (Williams and Nadin 2010; Baker and Welter 2017). In such contexts, entrepreneurial labor may function less as an expression of independence and more as a compelled response to constrained livelihood options.

Recent work further emphasizes that forced and constrained labor must be understood as relational and embedded within social institutions, including households and migration governance regimes (Kabeer 1997; Wolf and Frese 2018). Legal and regulatory environments that produce migrant insecurity play a central role in shaping these dynamics by limiting access to protection, and structuring the conditions under which migrants engage in economic activity (Hynes 2022). These conditions do not merely restrict access to labor markets but structure everyday economic practices by shaping how authority, dependency, and legitimacy are experienced and internalized (Walsh and Ferazzoli 2023).

These dynamics are particularly visible in refugee-hosting contexts characterized by restrictive labor governance. In Lebanon, for example, Syrian refugees face sectoral limitations, complex work permit requirements, and administrative barriers that significantly constrain access to formal employment, contributing to extremely high levels of informality and pushing many Syrian refugees into informal and legally ambiguous forms of work, including home-based and digital activities (Hackl and Najdi 2024; ILO 2023). Rather than reflecting entrepreneurial preference, such informality can be understood as shaped by restrictive legal and regulatory frameworks that limit access to formal protection and render refugee enterprises vulnerable to inspection, closure, and sanction (Fathallah 2020).

In this sense, displacement does not merely expose refugees to precarious labor markets but contributes to structuring the conditions under which livelihood strategies become difficult to exit (Lewis et al. 2015; Strauss and McGrath 2017).

For displaced populations, constrained labor often emerges through the intersection of survival imperatives and limited exit options. Refugees may engage in work arrangements that appear voluntary yet are sustained by necessity, obligation, and fear of losing income essential to household survival (ILO 2017; Innes 2023). In such cases, exploitation arises not through overt coercion but through the interaction of informality, dependency, and lack of protection, creating conditions under which individuals remain in work they are unable to refuse or exit.

Building on this literature, this study conceptualizes refugee women's entrepreneurship as labor that may become constrained and difficult to exit under conditions of displacement. Rather than treating entrepreneurship as inherently emancipatory or exploitative, this approach foregrounds the processes through which livelihood activities are shaped by overlapping structures of vulnerability, household relations, and migration governance. This framework provides the basis for analyzing how women's attempts to secure livelihoods under displacement may evolve into forms of constrained labor mediated through household relations, as examined in the empirical analysis that follows.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

To examine how refugee women's entrepreneurial activity unfolds under conditions of displacement and how household and family dynamics shape this process, we adopted an interpretive qualitative research design (Creswell and Guetterman 2021; Arino et al. 2016). Guided by a feminist research orientation, the study centers women's situated experiences while attending to the gendered power relations that structure access to work, income, and decision-making (Drakopoulou-Dodd et al. 2014; Dana and Dana 2005). This perspective enabled us to conceptualize entrepreneurship not as an individual market activity, but as labor embedded within relational and institutional arrangements that shape authority, obligation, and dependency.

This study draws on twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugee women entrepreneurs operating in Beirut, Lebanon. Interviews with women entrepreneurs were complemented by additional conversations with husbands, children, relatives, and close friends identified by the participants. This multi-perspective strategy enabled triangulation across data sources and provided insight into how entrepreneurial activity was perceived, regulated, and negotiated within households and community networks. These additional accounts were used to contextualize and deepen analysis of women's narratives rather than to construct parallel case histories. The lead researcher's linguistic and cultural proximity to participants facilitated rapport while also requiring ongoing reflexive attention to positionality and interpretive assumptions throughout the research process.

3.2. Research Context

Lebanon constitutes a particularly salient empirical setting for this analysis given its prolonged and large-scale reception of forcibly displaced populations. By the end of 2024, an estimated 123.2 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, armed conflict, violence, human rights violations, and events seriously disturbing public order (UNHCR 2024). Of this population, approximately 6.1 million are Syrian refugees, the majority of whom remain in neighboring host countries, most notably Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (UNHCR 2024).

Within this regional landscape, Lebanon has absorbed a disproportionate share of Syrian displacement. As of December 2025, UNHCR reports 532,357 registered Syrian refugees residing in the country, while Lebanese government estimates place the number of displaced Syrians at approximately 1.12 million (UNHCR 2025). Syrians thus account for roughly one-fifth of Lebanon's total population, positioning the country as the highest host of refugees per capita globally. Women comprise approximately half of the registered Syrian refugee population, highlighting the distinctly gendered nature of this humanitarian context (UNHCR 2025).

This large-scale and protracted presence of refugees has intensified Lebanon's pre-existing economic and political challenges, placing additional strain on already fragile public services and labor markets (ILO 2020). Within this environment, Syrian refugees face significant legal, economic, and social barriers, including restricted access to formal employment and limited legal protections. These constraints frequently compel reliance on informal, precarious, and low-security forms of work (BouChabke and Haddad 2021; Haddad and BouChabke 2022).

The legal and regulatory architecture governing refugee labor market access in Lebanon is particularly restrictive and warrants explicit attention. Lebanese labor policy formally excludes refugees from a wide range of professions, and the administrative requirements associated with obtaining and renewing both work and residency permits constitute significant structural barriers to legal employment (Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) (2023)). Due to these restrictive labor regulations and the limited availability of formal work permits, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are overwhelmingly concentrated in informal labor arrangements, with 92 per cent lacking formal work contracts (ILO 2023). As a result, many refugee livelihoods, including small-scale entrepreneurial activities, operate informally, frequently from home-based or unregistered settings without legal protection or contractual security (Fathallah 2020). Operating informally exposes refugee businesses to heightened precarity, including the risk of municipal intervention, eviction or forced closure, and unequal or exploitative market arrangements (Fathallah 2020). These conditions are central to understanding how entrepreneurship among Syrian refugees in Lebanon is constituted not as a volitional market entry but as a survival-oriented response structured by an exclusionary legal regime.

At the same time, refugees' economic participation is shaped by gendered social relations that structure access to work and income. Prior to displacement, female labor force participation in Syria was estimated at approximately 13–14 per cent (World Bank 2026). Following displacement, participation remains limited: among Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, only around 18 per cent are economically active (UNHCR et al. 2023). While cultural practices are neither homogeneous nor static, a substantial body of research characterizes Syrian gender relations as organized around patriarchal norms that govern household authority and women's participation in economic life (Almelhem et al. 2022; Kamla 2014). Women's labor force participation is therefore shaped not only by prevailing economic conditions but also by social norms and institutional arrangements that can constrain women's access to public spaces and paid employment (Habib 2018). Within the Syrian legal framework, husbands have been described as possessing the formal authority to forbid their wives from working outside the home (Kelly and Breslin 2010).

Evidence from conflict-affected and fragile contexts further suggests that women's paid work is often rendered socially legitimate primarily when framed as an economic necessity, particularly in situations where male breadwinning capacity has been disrupted (Hudock et al. 2016). Such normative framings help explain why women's labor is frequently negotiated through household authority and moral expectations rather than treated as an individual

or autonomous choice. In this study, we therefore approach patriarchy as a relational and historically situated system that is reconfigured under conditions of displacement.

This intersection of legal exclusion and gendered household authority is particularly consequential for understanding home-based entrepreneurship among Syrian refugee women. In such contexts, informal, home-based enterprise does not constitute a simple or direct equivalent of formal gainful employment; rather, it occupies an ambiguous position that is simultaneously economic and domestic, productive and reproductive, visible within the household yet largely invisible to formal regulatory frameworks. As Al-Dajani and Marlow (2010) demonstrate, for refugee women in particular, economic activity conducted from the home is frequently organized and negotiated within gendered household authority structures, rendering the boundary between domestic labor and entrepreneurial labor analytically and empirically unstable. It is precisely this ambiguity that this study seeks to examine; in particular, how women's entrepreneurial labor is defined, legitimated, and constrained when it unfolds within the domestic sphere under conditions of profound legal and material precarity.

3.3. Data Collection

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify Syrian refugee women entrepreneurs residing and operating in Beirut, enabling the selection of participants who met criteria aligned with the research objectives (Patton 2015; Creswell and Guetterman 2021). All participants were married Syrian refugee women who had established and were actively managing small-scale enterprises in Beirut, Lebanon. To ensure that the study captured sustained entrepreneurial practices rather than short-term or exploratory activities, enterprises were required to have been in operation for a minimum of one year (see Table 1).

During the initial phase of data collection, access to participants was facilitated through collaboration with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide support programs for refugee women engaged in start-up and small business activities. This entry point enabled contact with women actively operating enterprises under conditions of displacement. Recruitment then proceeded through purposive and snowball sampling, as participants referred other eligible women within their social networks. This strategy enabled access to a hard-to-reach population while allowing for variation in business type, household arrangements, and duration of entrepreneurial activity. Participants were engaged in a range of sectors, including home-based food production, tailoring, retail, and small-scale services, and varied in household composition, length of displacement, and prior work experience. Sampling continued until no substantively new themes, patterns, or relational dynamics emerged, indicating analytical saturation.

Data were collected in 2025 through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted over multiple rounds with each woman entrepreneur. Each interview lasted between one and 1.5 h and was conducted at the participant's primary place of work, either within her home-based enterprise or at her shop, according to her preference and availability. Conducting interviews in these settings enabled observation of everyday business practices and supported contextually grounded discussions of entrepreneurial and household dynamics. These interviews were complemented by conversations with members of participants' immediate social and support networks, including husbands, children, relatives, and close friends when present and appropriate. In total, thirty-four interviews were conducted across the women entrepreneurs and their support networks.

The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to each interview, and participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any

time. For husbands and other family members, consent was obtained separately to ensure independent participation. Interviews were conducted in private settings to minimize potential risks, and all data were anonymized using pseudonyms.

Table 1. List of participants.

Name	Type of Business	Age	Reason for Starting Business	Legal Status	Location of Work
Kinda	Tailoring	35	Husband's illness and household survival	Informal	Home-based
Faten	Small retail shop	40	Loss of husband's employment	Informal	Shop
Noha	Sewing	37	Income instability and food insecurity	Informal	Home-based
Hala	Bakery (family business)	19	Household income needs	Informal	Shop
Bushra	Home-based food production	45	Family survival and debt	Informal	Home-based
Nahla	Retail	33	Supplementing unstable income	Informal	Shop
Layal	Beauty and tattoo studio	31	Household income needs	Informal	Home-based
Samar	Waxing services	36	Household income needs	Informal	Home-based
Amani	Home-based services/Hairdressing	39	Household income needs	Informal	Home-based
Soha	Home-based/online selling	35	Household income needs	Informal	Home-based
Nidaa	Home-based services/Baking	40	Household income needs	Informal	Home-based
Zeinab	Home-based services/Nails	28	Household income needs	Informal	Home-based

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive process that moved from participants' accounts toward increasingly abstract analytical categories (Gioia et al. 2013). Through iterative comparison across cases, we sought to generate empirically grounded insights rather than impose predefined analytical frameworks (Pratt 2009). This approach enabled systematic movement from detailed accounts of lived experience toward higher-order conceptual dimensions explaining how entrepreneurial labor was organized and regulated under conditions of displacement.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic, the mother tongue of both the lead researcher and the participating women entrepreneurs. This linguistic alignment minimized the risk of meaning distortion and helped preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives (Temple and Young 2004). Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently translated into English for analysis. Care was taken during the translation process to retain the nuances of participants' expressions and contextual meanings.

Each transcript was read in detail, and the lead author conducted line-by-line coding to generate first-order concepts grounded in participants' own language. These captured experiences of compelled entrepreneurial entry, management and appropriation of earnings, negotiation of permission, bodily strain, and reliance on family support. In the second stage, first-order concepts were systematically compared and clustered into second-order themes reflecting recurring patterns across cases. In the final stage, these themes were

further refined into aggregate dimensions through continued abstraction and analytical comparison, enabling movement from descriptive accounts toward theoretically meaningful explanations.

Throughout the process, analytic memos and ongoing team discussions were used to challenge emerging interpretations, examine deviant cases, and refine conceptual boundaries. While the initial coding and data structuring were conducted by the lead author, the emerging themes and aggregate dimensions were collaboratively reviewed to enhance analytical transparency and conceptual robustness.

Table 2 presents a sample of the progression from empirical accounts to aggregate dimensions, which the findings develop in detail (see Table 2).

Table 2. Analytical Data Structure.

First Order Concepts (Participants' Words)	Second Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
"When he got sick. . . I started sewing for neighbors. I couldn't wait for help; the children needed food." (Kinda)	Necessity-driven livelihood response	Survival-Oriented Entrepreneurial Labor
"When my husband lost his job, the shop was the only way to keep paying rent. It wasn't a dream, it was survival." (Faten)	Household survival strategy	
"After we left our home country, my husband could not keep a job. . . sometimes we had no food at home." (Noha)	Displacement-induced livelihood precarity	
"That is why I had no choice but to apply for a loan from an NGO and begin working." (Noha)	Compelled entrepreneurial entry	
"When I was pregnant, we were suffocating. There was no money, no work, no future" (Hala)	Entrepreneurship under livelihood crisis	
Husband: "I tried my best, but I couldn't find any job. I used to work in a construction company, but when the project was over, I couldn't find any other job. We had no choice; she had to work." (Hala's Husband)	Male breadwinner disruption	
"Three days after giving birth, I was back in the bakery. My stitches were still healing [. . .] Every one or two hours, I would run upstairs, breastfeed my baby, then run back down to work" (Hala)	Compression of recovery, care, and paid work	Gendered Intensification of labor and Bodily Costs
"I manage the shop and the house. While my husband spends most of his time either at home or hanging out with neighbors and friends." (Faten)	Double burden of income generation and domestic labor	
"I have severe pain. My fingers and my back hurt most of the time because of the long working hours." (Noha)	Embodied exhaustion and physical harm	
"I don't work, I feel depressed. If I work, I feel tired [. . .] I don't feel comfortable spending money on myself. Every penny feels like a betrayal if my family needs it" (Kinda)	Emotional exhaustion and moral obligation	
"I prepare everything, the dough, the fatayer, the heat. . . But he deals with the customers and the money." (Hala)	Gendered division of visible and invisible labor	Patriarchal Governance of Entrepreneurial Authority
Husband: "She is still very young to deal with clients. It is better that I handle the money." (Hala's husband)	Male mediation of legitimacy and financial control	

Table 2. *Cont.*

First Order Concepts (Participants' Words)	Second Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
"Whatever I make, I hand to him. . . I never keep anything for myself." (Bushra)	Appropriation of women's earnings	
"I deal with customers every day. . . But when it comes to big decisions . . .I still have to ask him." (Nahla)	Conditional decision-making authority	
Husband: "He says the money is his, so in the end the shop is his too, even though, I am the one doing the work." (Layal's)	Symbolic appropriation of enterprise ownership	
"He helped me open the shop, but it must be at home. . . Sometimes when he is angry, he starts threatening to force me leave my work." (Layal)	Conditional permission to work	Conditional Access and Relational Regulation of Work
"My husband agreed I could work, but only if I am back before he arrives, the food is hot, and the kids are already in bed." (Samar)	Gatekeeping women's time and priorities	
Husband: "As long as she finishes housework and takes care of the kids, I don't mind." (Samar's Husband)	Gatekeeping women's time and priorities	
"I adjust everything around his rules." (Amani)	Ongoing negotiation to sustain work access	
"I keep my voice low, so he won't hear me discussing money with customers and know how much I get paid [. . .] if he knows, he will stop contributing to the household expenses." (Kinda)	Self-censorship to avoid relational sanctions	
"I tell him I am working just to pass time and help a little. He likes to hear that. Though he knows that I pay most of the household expenses from my income" (Layal)	Strategic minimization of contribution	
"He doesn't want me to work in shops. He doesn't want me to visit customers [. . .] He gets angry if I work after ten at night" (Kinda)	Spatial and temporal restriction of work	
"Without my mother-in-law and sister-in-law taking care of the children, I wouldn't be able to work." (Samar)	Kinship as enabling childcare infrastructure	Kinship and Community as Enabling yet Disciplinary Forces
"My mother gave me her money to help me start, and my sister has always stood by me." (Nahla)	Familial financial and emotional support	
"When a woman works outside, people say her husband has no authority." (Neighbor)	Community surveillance and moral regulation	
"Even though my husband didn't mind, I chose not to work because it would harm his image." (Samar's sister)	Self-regulation to protect male respectability	

4. Findings

Drawing on rich empirical narratives, the findings reveal that refugee women's entrepreneurial activity was rarely driven by opportunity or individual aspiration. Instead, it functioned as survival labor embedded within conditions of displacement, gendered expectations, and relational systems of control. While entrepreneurship enabled households to meet urgent needs, it also exposed women to informal and unregulated work arrangements governed not by market institutions but by household and kinship dynamics.

These arrangements co-produced income generation and labor vulnerability, demonstrating that entrepreneurship and exploitation are not opposing conditions but may unfold simultaneously. The findings reposition households as institutions of labor governance, organizing not only who works and how income is distributed, but also shaping women's ability to renegotiate, resist, or exit entrepreneurial activity.

This section presents five interrelated themes that illuminate how refugee women's entrepreneurship emerges through constrained choice and is embedded within informal, relationally governed systems of patriarchal and kin-based regulation.

4.1. Survival Entrepreneurship Under Constrained Choice

Across cases, women framed entrepreneurship as a response to urgent household survival needs rather than a matter of choice. Women explained that they engaged in business to cover rent, feed their children, or compensate for their husbands' inability to provide due to unemployment or illness. In these accounts, entrepreneurship was framed as an extension of their caregiving role as wives and mothers ensuring household survival, rather than a voluntary or opportunity-driven endeavor.

Kinda, who began working as a tailor when her husband fell ill, emphasized necessity over choice:

> "When he got sick, and stopped working, everything fell on my shoulders. I started sewing for neighbors. I couldn't wait for help; the children needed food [. . .] Every month begins with the same fear: rent [. . .] Sometimes life pushes you into a direction you did not choose. I just wanted to be a normal wife."

Similarly, Faten, who opened a small shop, described:

> "When my husband lost his job, the shop was the only way to keep paying rent. It wasn't a dream, it was survival."

Similarly, Noha began working after her husband was unable to maintain stable employment following displacement. She explained:

> "After we left our home country, my husband could not keep a job. The income was never stable. Sometimes we had no food at home, and the children could not go to school [. . .] That is why I had no choice but to apply for a loan from an NGO to buy a sewing machine and began working."

Hala, who operates a bakery with her husband, explained:

> "When I was pregnant, we were suffocating. There was no money, no work, no future [. . .] He tried again and again to find work here, but doors kept closing [. . .] Opening the bakery was the only way to survive"

Husbands likewise framed women's entrepreneurial engagement as a compelled response to constrained circumstances. One husband explained:

> "I tried my best, but I couldn't find any job. I used to work in a construction company, but when the project was over, I couldn't find any other job. We had no choice; she had to work."

These narratives show that women's entrepreneurial activity was driven by the urgent need to sustain their families under conditions of economic precarity and limited alternatives. Entrepreneurship thus functioned as survival-oriented labor undertaken under constrained choice rather than genuine volition, with any gains in agency remaining indirect, family-centered, and unlikely to translate into individual autonomy.

4.2. Bodily Costs and the Gendered Intensification of Work

Entrepreneurship did not reduce women's domestic responsibilities; rather, it intensified them. Women endured long working hours while continuing to shoulder primary responsibility for childcare and household labor. This double burden demonstrates how women's entrepreneurial activity frequently reproduced, rather than redistributed, gendered labor.

Hala's case underscores how even pregnancy, a moment often associated with withdrawal from labor, became a trigger for intensified economic responsibility under conditions of displacement. Hala recounted returning to work shortly after childbirth:

> "Three days after giving birth, I was back in the bakery. My stitches were still healing [. . .] Every one or two hours, I would run upstairs, breastfeed my baby, then run back down to work"

Faten similarly described carrying the full weight of both income-generating work and household responsibilities, while her husband remained largely disengaged, noting:

> "I manage the shop and the house. While my husband spends most of his time either at home or hanging out with friends"

Noha explained that after long hours spent sewing and managing household responsibilities, she now lives with constant pain in her joints and back. She described the toll this work has taken on her body.

> "I have severe pain. My fingers and my back hurt most of the time because of the long working hours."

Kinda's account captures the emotional dimension of this burden, marked by exhaustion, guilt, and responsibility:

> "If I don't work, I feel depressed. If I work, I feel tired [. . .] I don't feel comfortable spending money on myself. Every penny feels like a betrayal if my family needs it"

These accounts point to the embodied costs of entrepreneurship. Women's labor was stretched across economic and domestic domains, with their physical and emotional well-being often sacrificed to uphold household stability.

4.3. Patriarchal Governance of Entrepreneurial Authority

Although women were central to the operation of their businesses, decision-making power and control over finances were often retained by male household members. Gendered norms structured who had the authority to manage money, interact with clients, and make key business decisions.

Women performed the labor, but legitimacy and control remained filtered through patriarchal expectations. Their efforts expanded the economic base of the household without fully disrupting preexisting hierarchies.

Hala, described how labor and authority were divided:

> "I prepare everything, the dough, the fatayer, the heat, while my body was still recovering [. . .] But he deals with the customers and the money. He says I'm too young to talk to people."

Her husband, when asked, confirmed:

> "She is still very young to deal with clients. It is better that I handle the money."

Bushra described having no independent access to the income she generated:

"Whatever I make, I hand to him. He says it is for the house, but I never keep anything for myself."

Even when women's skills were recognized, decision-making authority remained elsewhere. Nahla explained:

"I deal with customers every day, I buy and sell. But when it comes to big decisions, like purchasing stock or changing what we offer, I still have to ask him and get his approval. That is what he expects"

Layal's case showed how financial control extended into symbolic ownership:

"He says the money is his, so in the end the shop is his too, even though, I am the one doing the work."

These arrangements demonstrate that women's entrepreneurial labor expanded while remaining governed by existing gendered hierarchies. Authority was not displaced but reconfigured, allowing women to work under conditions in which control over income, legitimacy, and ownership remained relationally regulated and unprotected.

4.4. Conditional Access and Relational Regulation of Entrepreneurial Work

For many participants, access to entrepreneurial activity was enabled through relational approval that simultaneously regulated how work could be performed. Women's engagement in entrepreneurship was often contingent on compliance with explicit and implicit conditions concerning location, timing, visibility, and the prioritization of domestic responsibilities. Rather than constituting shared authority or collaboration, such approval functioned as a mechanism through which entrepreneurial labor was rendered conditional, monitored, and revocable.

These conditions were also articulated explicitly by husbands themselves, who framed women's work as permissible only within defined boundaries. One husband explained:

"I don't mind her work, but only if she works from home."

Another stated:

"As long as she finishes housework and takes care of the kids, I don't mind."

A third emphasized moral limits:

"I allowed her to work as long as she does not interact with men."

These accounts reveal that entrepreneurial access was not assumed but granted, and remained subject to spatial, temporal, and moral constraints.

Layal, who established a beauty and tattoo studio, described how initial financial assistance was accompanied by clear spatial and moral boundaries:

"He helped me open the shop, but he made it clear, it must be at home [. . .] He doesn't want me working outside where other men could see me [. . .] Sometimes when he is angry, he starts threatening to force me leave my work[. . .] though he knows that I make a relatively good income which helped us cover our daily expenses which we could not do with his unstable income"

Similarly, Samar, who offered waxing services from her home, emphasized that permission to work was tied to continued fulfillment of domestic expectations:

"My husband agreed I could work, but only if I am back before he arrives, the food is hot, and the kids are already in bed. These are his conditions."

Amani highlighted the ongoing nature of these negotiations:

> "He doesn't forbid me completely, but he reminds me my first job is the house and children. I adjust everything around his rules."

Kinda's experience shows how permission was enforced through strict limits on when and where she could work:

> "He doesn't want me to work in shops. He doesn't want me to visit customers [. . .] He gets angry if I work after ten at night"

Beyond these externally imposed conditions, women also engaged in practices of self-regulation aimed at sustaining continued access to entrepreneurial labor. Participants described deliberately concealing income, downplaying transactions, or minimizing the visibility of their economic activity to avoid triggering relational sanctions that could jeopardize continued permission to work. Kinda explained:

> "When I discuss the prices with the customers, I keep my voice low, so he won't hear me discussing money with customers and know how much I get paid [. . .] if he knows, he will stop contributing to the household expenses."

Similarly, Layal described framing her work as marginal to preserve household stability:

> "I tell him I am working just to pass time and help a little. He likes to hear that. Though he knows that I pay most of the household expenses from my income"

These accounts illustrate how entrepreneurial labor was not freely accessible but sustained through ongoing relational compliance and self-discipline. Work remained permissible only insofar as it did not disrupt established norms of care, availability, and respectability.

4.5. Kinship as Enabling Infrastructure and Surveillance

Extended kinship networks and community relations played a central role in sustaining women's entrepreneurial labor under conditions of displacement. In the absence of formal childcare, social protection, or labor regulation, family members, particularly female relatives and neighbors, functioned as an informal labor infrastructure, providing unpaid care work, domestic support, and occasional financial assistance that enabled women to remain economically active.

On the other hand, these same networks acted as guardians of patriarchal respectability, enforcing social norms that constrained women's autonomy, visibility, and legitimacy as economic actors.

Samar, who provided waxing services from home, highlighted the enabling dimension of kinship:

> "Without my mother-in-law and sister-in-law taking care of the children, I wouldn't be able to work. It would be impossible."

Similarly, Nahla described how intergenerational and sibling support underpinned her venture:

> "My mother and sister are my greatest support. My mother even gave me her money to help me start, and my sister has always stood by me, encouraging my dreams."

Layal also emphasized how support extended beyond family to neighbors who stepped in to help sustain her business:

> "My neighbor is my biggest support; she encourages me and sometimes even helps with my kids when things get too busy."

While such support made entrepreneurial activity possible, it also embedded women's work within dense relational obligations. Kinship and community networks simultaneously

operated as mechanisms of moral regulation, shaping which forms of work were considered acceptable, visible, and legitimate. Norms surrounding respectability and family reputation constrained women's mobility and public presence as economic actors.

As Maha's neighbor explained:

> "When a woman works outside the home, she may be perceived as having lower social status, while her husband is viewed as lacking authority."

These norms were often internalized and acted upon by women themselves, limiting labor participation even in the absence of explicit prohibition. Samar's sister described choosing not to pursue work despite having permission:

> "Even though my husband didn't mind, I chose not to work because it would harm his image."

These accounts underscore the dual nature of kinship: while it provided essential support that made women's entrepreneurial activity possible, it simultaneously embedded their labor in dense networks of obligation, surveillance, and normative control.

Taken together, these findings show that refugee women's entrepreneurship, when undertaken under survival imperatives and patriarchal household governance, may become a site of gendered labor vulnerability. Rather than disrupting dependency, entrepreneurial activity can entrench it, sustaining livelihoods while intensifying informal obligations and limiting women's capacity to resist or exit. The analysis demonstrates that constrained labor is not confined to waged employment; it can also arise within self-employment, where precarity and relational forms of control compel women into work they cannot meaningfully refuse or renegotiate.

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine how displacement conditions and household relations shape refugee women's entrepreneurial livelihoods, and under what conditions survival-oriented activities produce labor vulnerability and constrained work arrangements. We identified three interconnected gaps in the literature: the tendency to frame entrepreneurship in binary terms of empowerment versus oppression; the underexplored application of forced labor perspectives to entrepreneurship research; and the insufficient development of context-sensitive, feminist research capturing women's lived experiences under displacement. We address each in turn.

5.1. Beyond Binary Framings: Entrepreneurship as Relational and Contingent

Responding to critiques that entrepreneurship research frames outcomes in binary terms (Rindova et al. 2009; Calás et al. 2009; Msowoya and Luiz 2025), this study demonstrates that refugee women's entrepreneurship is neither straightforwardly empowering nor simply oppressive. Rather, it constitutes a relational and contingent process whose outcomes depend on the structural and household-level conditions under which it unfolds. Women initiated entrepreneurial activity and sustained household survival, yet simultaneously experienced intensified labor burdens, limited control over income, and constrained capacity to exit or renegotiate work. This duality cannot be adequately captured through dichotomous categories.

By foregrounding households as sites of labor governance rather than neutral support structures, the study extends Welter's (2011) call to treat context as constitutive. Patriarchal household relations did not merely shape entrepreneurship externally; they organized how work was accessed, performed, and controlled. Authority over income, mobility, and decision-making operated through everyday practices framed as protection or moral obligation, reflecting Kabeer's (1997) insight that power functions through taken-for-granted

norms rather than explicit force. Entrepreneurial activity thus expanded women's labor contributions without displacing existing hierarchies, producing outcomes that were simultaneously enabling and constraining.

5.2. Bridging Entrepreneurship and Forced Labor Scholarship

Scholars of forced labor and migration have called for analyses moving beyond overt coercion to examine how structural conditions and limited alternatives generate constrained labor (Anderson 2010; Lewis et al. 2015; ILO 2017), yet such perspectives remain underexplored in entrepreneurship research. This study responds by demonstrating how constrained labor can emerge within self-employment through survival imperatives and relational governance rather than direct compulsion.

The concept of hyper-precarity (Lewis et al. 2015), characterized by instability, dependency, and limited bargaining power, proves analytically productive for understanding refugee women's entrepreneurship. Women retained formal freedom to work yet experienced substantive unfreedom through economic dependence, conditional access, and the absence of viable alternatives. Exit was not formally prohibited but rendered costly through intertwined survival needs and relational obligations. This aligns with contemporary understandings of forced labor as structurally produced through limited alternatives rather than overt compulsion (ILO 2017; Anderson 2010).

Critically, the study extends this framework by identifying households as key sites through which constrained labor is organized within self-employment. While forced labor scholarship examined employer-worker relations and migration governance regimes (Hynes 2022; Walsh and Ferazzoli 2023), it has paid less attention to how household relations generate labor constraint in entrepreneurial contexts. Our analysis demonstrates that patriarchal household governance, through conditional permission, relational surveillance, and control over income, produces effects functionally analogous to external labor coercion, even within nominally autonomous self-employment.

5.3. Context-Sensitive Feminist Analysis of Lived Experience

The gendered intensification of labor, where entrepreneurship added productive responsibilities without redistributing care work, demonstrates how patriarchal arrangements are reconstituted rather than disrupted through displacement. Women absorbed the physical costs of both production and social reproduction, with survival imperatives overriding bodily limits in ways that echo forced labor scholarship's attention to work continued despite significant personal cost due to absent alternatives (ILO 2017). Importantly, women's entry into entrepreneurial activity was driven fundamentally by poverty, collapsing male breadwinning capacity, and the imperative to survive rather than by displacement alone.

These conditions could, in principle, arise independently of refugee status, consistent with Kabeer's (1997) insight that women's labor participation in contexts of poverty is frequently compelled by household survival needs and mediated through patriarchal authority. What displacement contributes, however, is a compounding layer of structural vulnerability: legal exclusion from formal labor markets, absence of institutional protections, and informality as the only available mode of economic participation (Lewis et al. 2015; Fathallah 2020; ILO 2023). Displacement does not create patriarchy, but it reconfigures the conditions under which patriarchal governance operates by removing the institutional counterweights, including formal employment, legal protections, and state social services, that might otherwise moderate its effects on women's labor (Hudock et al. 2016; Hynes 2022). Patriarchal household governance and displacement-induced precarity thus operate as mutually reinforcing forces: pre-existing gendered norms governing women's economic participation (Kamla 2014; Kelly and Breslin 2010) become more consequential and harder

to contest within a context stripped of formal regulation and viable alternatives (Anderson 2010; Strauss and McGrath 2017).

This analytical distinction challenges any straightforward characterization of these women as autonomous entrepreneurs. The findings reveal a troubling configuration in which women performed the substantive labor of production while husbands retained control over income, mediated customer interactions, and exercised symbolic ownership over the enterprise. These dynamics constitute a form of economic violence embedded within intimate relations (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2010; El Ali and Le Loarne-Lemaire 2022), raising a fundamental issue: when women perform all productive labor yet exercise no control over earnings or strategic decisions, and when the capacity to work remains contingent on male permission, the distinction between entrepreneur and exploited household laborer becomes analytically unstable. Following Verduijn et al. (2014) and Calás et al. (2009), we argue that these women occupy a liminal position that existing categories fail to capture: neither fully autonomous entrepreneurs nor straightforwardly coerced workers, but laboring within relationally governed arrangements where productive contribution and patriarchal appropriation coexist. This liminality is precisely what the concept of constrained labor within self-employment seeks to theorize.

The core barrier to women's economic autonomy is not refugee status but the patriarchal organization of household authority rooted in cultural norms, socialization, and gendered expectations regarding the division of roles (Kamla 2014; Kelly and Breslin 2010; Habib 2018; Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013). What matters analytically is that displacement reconfigures the conditions under which this governance operates, eliminating the institutional safeguards that might otherwise enable women to negotiate more favorable terms or exit exploitative arrangements.

Equally significant is the dual function of kinship networks as both enabling infrastructure and a disciplinary mechanism. Extended family and community relations substituted for absent institutional support while simultaneously enforcing respectability norms that constrained women's autonomy and visibility. This extends work on family involvement in entrepreneurship (Nikina et al. 2015; Haddad and Le Loarne 2015; Wolf and Frese 2018) by showing how kinship simultaneously enables labor participation and stabilizes unprotected work, a dynamic rendered particularly consequential under displacement conditions where formal protections are absent. Critically, the findings reveal a marked gendered asymmetry within these networks. The practical enabling infrastructure, including childcare, domestic support, financial assistance, and emotional encouragement, was overwhelmingly provided by other women: mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, sisters, and female neighbors. In contrast, husbands predominantly occupied positions of surveillance, gatekeeping, and enforcement, controlling financial flows and retaining authority to revoke permission to work. This gendered division demonstrates that household labor governance operates not through a single patriarchal authority figure but through a differentiated relational system in which enabling and disciplinary functions are distributed along gendered lines. Women's solidarity constitutes the informal infrastructure making entrepreneurial labor materially possible, yet this infrastructure operates within and does not disrupt the overarching patriarchal framework governing women's labor participation (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013; Kabeer 1997). Female kin absorb care deficits through their own unpaid reproductive labor, subsidizing household survival strategies, while male authority over permission, income, and visibility remains intact. This extends scholarship on spousal influence (Wolf and Frese 2018; Nikina et al. 2015; El Ali and Le Loarne-Lemaire 2022) beyond dyadic relations to broader kinship networks in which gendered roles of support and control are structurally distributed.

6. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study carry implications for theory, policy, and future research. The following subsections outline the study's contributions to scholarly understanding of refugee entrepreneurship and constrained labor, identify practical recommendations for policymakers and humanitarian actors, and acknowledge limitations that point to avenues for further inquiry.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

This study advances scholarship across several interconnected domains.

First, it contributes to feminist entrepreneurship theory by demonstrating that entrepreneurship and labor vulnerability can be co-constituted within the same livelihood arrangement rather than functioning as opposing outcomes. The concept of constrained labor within self-employment provides a theoretical vocabulary for capturing this duality that existing entrepreneurship frameworks have lacked.

Second, the study repositions households as institutions of labor governance. Rather than treating households as background context, the analysis shows that patriarchal household relations function as organizing mechanisms regulating access to work, control over income, and the capacity to exit entrepreneurial activity. This calls for entrepreneurship theory to incorporate household-level power dynamics as constitutive of entrepreneurial outcomes, particularly where formal institutional protections are absent.

Third, the study bridges entrepreneurship and forced labor scholarship by extending constrained labor frameworks into self-employment. By showing that labor constraint emerges through relational governance and survival imperatives rather than overt coercion, the analysis opens a new theoretical interface between two fields that have developed largely in isolation.

Fourth, the study advances contextual entrepreneurship scholarship by demonstrating that displacement operates not merely as a backdrop but as a structural force that reconfigures gendered household governance. Displacement intensifies pre-existing patriarchal dynamics by removing institutional counterweights such as formal employment, legal protections, and state services, rendering household authority over women's labor more consequential and harder to contest.

Fifth, the identification of kinship networks as simultaneously enabling and disciplinary reveals a gendered division of relational labor governance: enabling infrastructure was overwhelmingly provided by female kin, while surveillance and gatekeeping functions were exercised by male household members. This extends existing scholarship on family involvement in entrepreneurship beyond dyadic spousal relations.

6.2. Practical Implications

The findings challenge the prevailing policy orientation that treats entrepreneurship as a stand-alone pathway to refugee self-reliance. In contexts such as Lebanon, where refugee entrepreneurship operates outside formal legal frameworks and remains an unauthorized economic practice, promoting enterprise creation without addressing the regulatory environment that renders it illegal risks normalizing precarity under the guise of empowerment. Policymakers and international organizations should move beyond enterprise creation as a metric of success and instead confront the fundamental contradiction of encouraging entrepreneurial activity that host-country legal regimes simultaneously prohibit, leaving women trapped in livelihood arrangements that are both necessary for survival and permanently exposed to legal sanction, closure, or exploitation.

This legal ambiguity compounds the gendered vulnerabilities documented in this study. Because refugee women's enterprises lack formal recognition, they operate entirely

outside the reach of labor protections, leaving women without recourse to minimum standards, occupational health safeguards, or mechanisms for addressing economic coercion within household settings. The findings highlight the need for host-country governments and humanitarian actors to develop regulatory pathways that acknowledge the reality of refugee economic participation rather than maintaining legal frameworks that criminalize survival-oriented livelihoods while tacitly depending on them. Gender-sensitive protections that extend to informal and home-based self-employment are particularly urgent, given that the domestic location of women's enterprises renders their labor simultaneously invisible to regulatory institutions and highly visible to household surveillance.

Humanitarian programming supporting refugee women's entrepreneurship should integrate attention to household power dynamics into program design. This includes facilitating women's independent access to financial services, strengthening their control over income and business decisions, and creating support mechanisms that do not depend on male household intermediation. Programs that channel resources through household units without attending to intra-household power asymmetries risk reinforcing the very dynamics that constrain women's autonomy. Critically, program design must also account for the fact that the illegal status of refugee enterprises amplifies women's dependence on male household members, since the absence of formal business registration means that women have no independent legal claim to the enterprises they build and operate.

The embodied costs documented in the study, including chronic pain, physical exhaustion, and emotional distress, point to the need for integrating health and psychosocial support into livelihood programming. The compression of productive labor, caregiving, and domestic responsibilities without rest or institutional support constitutes an underrecognized dimension of entrepreneurial precarity that is intensified by the absence of any formal labor standards governing working hours, rest periods, or occupational safety within illegal informal enterprises.

At the structural level, the most consequential policy intervention would be host-country labor market reforms that expand refugees' legal access to formal employment. As long as refugee labor market participation remains legally prohibited or severely restricted, displaced women will continue to be channeled into informal, relationally governed, and legally precarious entrepreneurial arrangements in which neither their labor nor their enterprises enjoy any institutional protection. Easing work permit restrictions, broadening legally accessible sectors, and creating simplified registration pathways for small-scale refugee enterprises would reduce dependence on survival entrepreneurship and strengthen women's bargaining position within households by offering viable economic alternatives.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that suggest productive avenues for future inquiry.

The empirical material is drawn exclusively from Syrian refugee women in Beirut, limiting transferability to other displacement settings. Future research could adopt comparative designs across host-country contexts with different regulatory regimes, levels of formality, and gender norms to examine how varying institutional environments shape the relationship between entrepreneurship and labor vulnerability.

The study captures experiences at a single point in time. Longitudinal designs would be valuable for tracing how constrained entrepreneurial labor evolves, whether exit possibilities expand or contract, and how bodily exhaustion accumulates over the course of displacement.

The sample consists entirely of married women. Future research should examine how constrained labor dynamics manifest among unmarried, widowed, or female-headed

refugee households where patriarchal governance may operate through different relational channels such as extended family, community elders, or landlords.

While the study centered women's experiences, it did not systematically examine men's perspectives on breadwinner disruption and the renegotiation of masculinity under displacement. Engaging more extensively with men's narratives could deepen understanding of how patriarchal governance is reproduced or reconfigured within refugee households.

The micro-level tactics of self-regulation and strategic minimization identified in the study deserve further theoretical development. Future research could draw on concepts of everyday resistance or tactical compliance to examine whether these practices incrementally shift household power dynamics over time.

Future research should also more systematically connect macro-level structures, including immigration policy, labor regulation, and humanitarian governance, with household-level dynamics through multi-level analytical frameworks.

7. Conclusions

This study examined refugee women's entrepreneurship under conditions of displacement, legal exclusion, and patriarchal household relations. By analyzing entrepreneurship as survival-oriented labor embedded in informal and relationally governed arrangements, the study highlights how self-employment may reproduce labor vulnerability rather than alleviate it. The findings show the importance of treating entrepreneurship not only as economic activity but as work shaped by institutional, relational, and bodily constraints. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for both scholarship and policy concerned with refugee livelihoods, labor rights, and gendered inequalities under displacement.

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