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Work-life Balance Experiences of Women Entrepreneurs in the Middle East: A Systematic Review

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Abstract. This study provides the first systematic review that analyses how institutional structures shape work-life balance experiences of women entrepreneurs in the Middle East, examining institutional barriers and strategies they employ to manage professional and personal responsibilities within their sociocultural context between 2014-2024. Following PRISMA guidelines, the study synthesizes nine qualitative studies encompassing 181 women entrepreneurs across five Middle Eastern countries: Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates. The review employed thematic synthesis methodology, utilising institutional theory and work-life border theory as theoretical frameworks. The analysis revealed five key themes: (1) the paradox of entrepreneurial emancipation (2) forced integration as cultural adaptation (3) technology as a double-edged sword in boundary management (4) the role of Islamic context in shaping institutional pillars (5) strategic responses through identity management and resource optimisation. The study develops a conceptual framework demonstrating how institutional pillars, anchored in Islamic values, drive forced integration and create paradoxical tensions. Theoretical and practical implications, and future research directions, are discussed.

Keywords: Work-life balance, women entrepreneurs, Middle East, institutional theory, border theory.

1. Introduction and Background

The intersection of entrepreneurship and gender dynamics in the Middle East can be understood through institutional theory, where formal institutions (laws, regulations, administrative systems) and informal institutions (cultural norms, social expectations, family ties, gender roles) create a complex framework

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shaping entrepreneurial behaviour (Li, 2024; North, 1990; Scott, 2001, 2010). Women entrepreneurs in this region navigate unique challenges as they balance entrepreneurial ambitions with deeply embedded institutional constraints that reflect and reinforce traditional gender roles (Ahmed and Weir, 2024; Hashim et al., 2024).

The growing presence of women entrepreneurs in Middle Eastern economies has sparked scholarly interest in understanding how these individuals negotiate competing demands of business leadership and traditional gender roles within patriarchal systems. In these systems, gender roles are relationally structured, positioning men as primary economic providers and decision-makers while assigning women primary responsibility for domestic and caregiving roles. Such traditional gender roles reproduce asymmetries in social, economic, and decision-making power (Hashim, 2023), shaping norms and institutions that limit women's autonomy and opportunities (Lassoued et al., 2024; Mawad and Freiha, 2024; Patterson and Mavin, 2025; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019).

From an institutional perspective, the evolving workplace characterised by technological advancement and intensifying competition has significantly increased work-related demands (Ghanbaripour et al., 2023; Mordi et al., 2024; Sfeir et al., 2022). For Middle Eastern women entrepreneurs, these pressures are compounded by institutional barriers (Borham et al., 2024) and traditional role expectations (Ghaderi et al., 2023) that create 'institutional voids' — gaps between formal institutional support and actual business needs (Khanna and Palepu, 2010). The spillover effect of these demands often adversely impacts non-work roles, creating additional WLB challenges (Lingard and Turner, 2022; Staines, 1980).Work-life balance (WLB) has emerged as a critical concern in contemporary organisational research as workforce demographics and societal values evolve (Hasan and Muafi, 2023; Lee et al., 2024). For women entrepreneurs in the Middle East, achieving WLB is complicated by the region's institutional framework, requiring navigation of both universal business leadership challenges and specific institutional pressures placed upon women in Middle Eastern societies (Hashim, 2023; Goncalves et al., 2024).

Moreover, while studies have documented various WLB challenges women entrepreneurs face, there is limited understanding of how these challenges vary across Middle Eastern countries and how successful entrepreneurs navigate them (Aloulou et al., 2024). This gap is particularly significant given the region's diverse cultural, economic, and social contexts, which may influence the nature of WLB challenges and the effectiveness of various coping strategies (Harb and Keyrouz, 2022). Although extensive research exists on women's entrepreneurship globally, and while there has been growing interest in women's entrepreneurship in the Middle East (Hashim, 2023; Hashim et al., 2024), several significant gaps exist in our understanding of their WLB experiences. First, while individual studies have examined WLB challenges in specific Middle Eastern countries, there is a lack of comprehensive synthesis of findings across the region

(Lekchiri and Eversole, 2021). Second, existing research often focuses on either work-related or family-related aspects, with limited attention to their intersection in entrepreneurial contexts (Czerwiska-Lubszczyk and Byrtek, 2024). Third, the impact of recent regional developments — including economic crises, technological advancement, and changing social norms — on women entrepreneurs' WLB strategies remains underexplored (Nicolian and Khadra, 2024).

To address these gaps, this systematic review explores how institutional structures shape WLB experiences among women entrepreneurs in five Middle Eastern countries: Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The overarching research question is*: "What are the WLB experiences of women entrepreneurs in the Middle East, and how are these shaped by institutional structures?"*. Specifically, the study identifies institutional barriers to achieving WLB and examines strategies and coping mechanisms employed to manage these challenges.

The review is grounded in institutional theory (Scott, 2014) and border theory (Clark, 2000). Institutional theory provides a framework for analysing how formal and informal social structures shape entrepreneurial behaviour and WLB experiences. Border theory explains how individuals construct and maintain boundaries between work and personal life (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009). The theoretical foundations emphasise that boundary management is an active process involving negotiation, segmentation, and integration of work and personal domains (Adisa et al., 2021a; Mordi et al., 2023).

The research extends institutional theory by demonstrating how religious context operates as a pervasive institutional force transcending traditional pillars, and advances work-family border theory through the concept of institutionally mandated integration, revealing how institutional contexts can compel specific integration patterns beyond Western conceptualisations of individual strategic choice (Clark, 2000).By reviewing qualitative studies on WLB experiences of women entrepreneurs in the Middle East, the study makes several significant theoretical contributions to the interdisciplinary domains of entrepreneurship, gender studies, and institutional theory. The study develops a conceptual framework (See Figure 2: Conceptual framework showing the WLB experiences of women entrepreneurs in the Middle East 2) drawing on five key analytical themes. First, the *paradox of entrepreneurial emancipation* —the simultaneous sense of freedom and new constraints that entrepreneurship brings— revealed how entrepreneurship simultaneously offers liberation and imposes new constraints, challenging traditional narratives of women's professional autonomy (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Rindova et al., 2009). Second, *forced integration*, or the necessity to merge work and personal life due to external pressures rather than choice, showed how women entrepreneurs adapt to institutional expectations (Clark, 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009; Tahir, 2024a). Third, *technology emerged as a*

double-edged sword, providing opportunities for flexibility while intensifying work-life boundary challenges (Mordi et al., 2024; Tahir, 2024b; Tahir and Raza, 2020). Fourth, the *role of Islamic principles* underscoring how religious institutions profoundly shape entrepreneurial experiences through regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive mechanisms (Bastian et al., 2018; Scott, 2014; Tlaiss, 2015). Finally, *strategic responses* highlighted women entrepreneurs' sophisticated approaches to navigating institutional constraints through identity management and creative resource optimisation (Althalathini et al., 2020; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). However, in the Middle East, border management processes are uniquely complicated by institutional frameworks where formal institutions lag behind global gender equality trends while informal institutions maintain strong traditional gender expectations (D'Enbeau et al., 2015; Ghaderi et al., 2023; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). This institutional complexity creates 'border-keeper powerlessness' — limited authority to define and maintain clear boundaries between work and family domains (Clark, 2000; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Lingard and Turner, 2022).

2. Methods

This systematic review follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency and reproducibility in the review process. The study adopted the methodology to identify, evaluate, and synthesise relevant qualitative studies between 2014 and 2024 on WLB practices and experiences of Middle Eastern women entrepreneurs, particularly, Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and UAE. Given the study's focus on how institutional structures shape lived experiences, qualitative research offers unique value by capturing the depth, complexity, and context-specific meanings of WLB that quantitative or mixed-methods designs may overlook. Before conducting the systematic literature review, the study carried out a scoping review to develop the research questions, identify relevant search terms and explore the existing literature on the topic.

2.1. Review Criteria

The review protocol was developed following established systematic review methodologies (Butler et al., 2016; Thomas and Harden, 2008). The research question guiding this review was: *What are the WLB experiences of women entrepreneurs in the Middle East?* Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria1 details the inclusion and exclusion criteria based on period, geographic focus, population, research focus, publication type, research design, language, and publication status.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Period	Studies published between January 2014 and December 2024	Studies published before 2014 or after 2024
Geographic Focus	Studies conducted in Middle Eastern countries	Studies from other regions or without a clear geographic focus
Population	Women entrepreneurs who own and operate businesses in the Middle East	Women employees or entrepreneurs outside the Middle East
Research Focus	Primary focus on WLB practices, experiences, and challenges	Studies where WLB is only peripherally mentioned
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference papers, books, book chapters, dissertations, working papers
Research Design	Qualitative studies (including case studies, interviews, ethnographies, phenomenological studies)	Quantitative studies, mixed-methods studies, theoretical papers, literature reviews
Language	English	Non-English publications
Publication Status	Published studies	Unpublished studies, preprints

The criteria were designed to balance comprehensiveness with conceptual focus while recognising inherent limitations. The 2014–2024 timeframe was selected to capture a decade marked by significant sociotechnical and institutional shifts affecting women's entrepreneurship in the region, such as the rise of digital and home-based business models, post–Arab Spring regulatory reforms, and the intensified restructuring of work–life dynamics during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier studies, while valuable for historical context, were considered less aligned with the contemporary institutional landscape shaping current WLB practices.

With regard to research design, the deliberate exclusion of quantitative and mixed-methods studies reflects the review's goal of synthesising research capable of capturing the depth, nuance, and contextual specificity of women's lived experiences within complex institutional environments. Quantitative approaches, while valuable for measuring trends, often reduce socially embedded phenomena to abstract categories that risk overlooking the cultural, familial, and religious dimensions central to WLB in the Middle East (McMahon et al., 2022; Zeilig et al., 2019). This methodological choice aligns with established research approaches in social sciences, where complex, socially embedded experiences require subjective, interpretive methodologies (Butler et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the study acknowledges that excluding mixed-methods studies may result in the omission of research that contains rich qualitative data embedded within broader methodological designs.

Finally, the inclusion of only English-language publications introduces a linguistic limitation, particularly in a region where scholarship may be produced in Arabic, Farsi, or French. As a result, relevant localised insights may not be fully captured, and future reviews incorporating multilingual search strategies could broaden the scope and cultural representativeness of the evidence base.

3. Search Strategy

3.1. Databases

A comprehensive search was conducted across three major academic databases—Web of Science, Scopus, and EBSCO—selected for their extensive coverage of business, management, and social science research (Bramer et al., 2017). These databases collectively provide strong multidisciplinary reach and indexing depth appropriate for a review spanning entrepreneurship, gender studies, and institutional contexts.

3.2. Search Terms

The search strategy employed systematic combinations of keywords using Boolean operators (AND, OR) and truncation symbols to capture variations in terminology. Search strings were developed with guidance from an academic librarian and centred on three core concepts: (1) women entrepreneurs, (2) Middle Eastern country identifiers, and (3) work–life balance. The full database-specific search strings are provided in Appendix A.

Given the definitional variability of "Middle East," the search strategy explicitly included all countries aligned with the study's scope: Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates. Broader regional terms ("Middle East*", "MENA") were retained to avoid unintentionally excluding studies that use regional rather than country-specific identifiers. Searches were executed without applying database-level filters for publication type or peer-review status, to ensure maximum retrieval. Filters for English-language publications, peer-reviewed journal articles, and qualitative designs were applied during the screening phase in accordance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Grey literature, including dissertations, theses, reports, and conference papers was excluded from both the search and screening stages. This decision aligns with the review's focus on synthesising empirically rigorous, peer-reviewed qualitative evidence and avoids variability in methodological quality often found in non-peer-reviewed sources. However, the exclusion of grey literature is acknowledged as a boundary that may limit the capture of emerging or locally produced research.

3.3. Selection of Studies

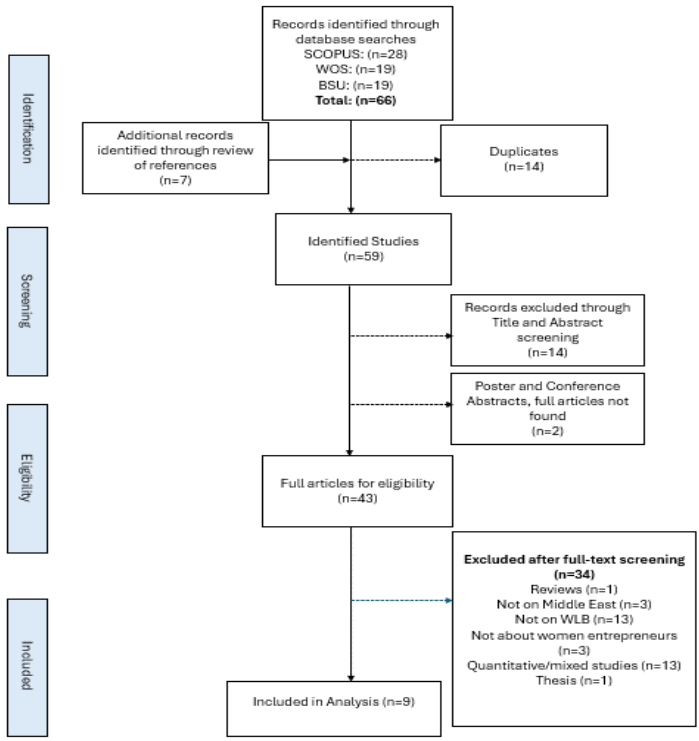
The study selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

3.3.1. First Selection

During the initial screening phase, 14 records were excluded based on title and abstract review. Additionally, two records were excluded as they were conference abstracts for which full papers could not be obtained, despite attempts to retrieve them through institutional repositories and author searches. This resulted in 43

full-text articles being assessed for eligibility.The initial database searches yielded 66 records (SCOPUS: n=28; Web of Science: n=19; EBSCO Business Source Ultimate: n=19). An additional seven studies were identified through a reference list check of relevant articles. After removing 14 duplicates, 59 unique records were identified for screening. The initial screening process involved reviewing titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria. Following established systematic review practices, two independent reviewers screened the articles to minimise selection bias (Moher et al., 2015).

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram showing the data search procedure



3.3.2. Second Selection

A full-text assessment of the 43 potentially eligible studies was conducted independently by the same two reviewers. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and when consensus could not be reached, a third reviewer adjudicated, ensuring consistency and reducing subjective bias. Articles meeting all inclusion criteria were retained for quality assessment (See Table 2). During the full-text screening phase, 34 articles were excluded for the following reasons: Review articles (n=1), studies not focused on the Middle East (n=3), studies not addressing WLB (n=13), studies not about female entrepreneurs (n=3), quantitative or mixed-methods studies (n=13), and thesis/dissertation (n=1) (See Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram showing the data search procedure1). This

rigorous selection process resulted in nine studies meeting all inclusion criteria for the final analysis. These studies formed the core dataset for the systematic review.

3.4. Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, n.d.). Each study was evaluated against ten criteria, including clarity of aims, appropriateness of methodology, research design, recruitment strategy, data collection methods, researcher-participant relationship, ethical considerations, data analysis rigour, clarity of findings, and research value. Studies were scored on a scale of 0-2 for each criterion, with a maximum possible score of 20. Similar to the selection of studies, two reviewers independently assessed all studies using the CASP tool to enhance reliability. Discrepancies in scoring were resolved through discussion. This process ensured consistent interpretation of CASP criteria, given the inherently interpretive nature of qualitative quality assessment.

The quality assessment results revealed consistently high methodological quality across the included studies. All nine studies achieved high-quality ratings (15/20), with a mean total score of 16.56/20 (SD=1.07). The highest scoring studies were Borham et al. (2024) and Tahir and Raza (2020), and Tlaiss and McAdam (2021), all achieving 18/20 (See).Table 2: Quality assessment using CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) The nine studies demonstrated particular strengths in clear aims, appropriate methodology, research design, data collection, findings statements, and research value, with all studies scoring maximum points in these areas.

3.5. Data Extraction

A standardised data extraction form was developed to systematically capture relevant information from the included studies. The form recorded study characteristics (authors, publication year, country), methodological details (study design, sample size, data collection methods), key findings related to WLB, authors' interpretations, and participant quotations. Capturing verbatim quotes was intentional, as retaining participants' voices is essential for preserving contextual depth and strengthening the fidelity of qualitative thematic synthesis. To enhance reliability, two reviewers independently extracted data from all included studies. The extraction form was iteratively refined during the initial extraction stage to ensure clarity and consistency across reviewers. Any discrepancies or uncertainties were resolved through discussion, and a third reviewer was consulted when consensus could not be reached.

All references were managed using Mendeley, which supported organisation, de-duplication, and retrieval of the included studies. Although no qualitative analysis software was employed, the structured extraction form and careful

manual coding facilitated systematic organisation and comparison of key themes across studies.

To ensure analytical rigour, the reviewers maintained an audit trail, including reflective memos documenting decisions, emerging insights, and rationale for thematic groupings throughout the extraction phase. This process supported the traceability of analytical steps and reinforced the credibility of the interpretive synthesis (Levac et al., 2010).

3.6. Data Synthesis

The analytical process followed Thomas and Harden's (2008) three distinct phases of thematic synthesis. In the initial coding phase, extracted data underwent detailed line-by-line coding, with careful differentiation between first-order constructs (participant narratives) and second-order constructs (author interpretations) (Butler et al., 2016). The study used a coding manual to document definitional parameters and decision rules, ensuring analytical consistency and facilitating the translation of concepts across studies (McMahon et al., 2022) (See Tables 3 and 4).

In the second analytical phase, the study developed descriptive themes through iterative categorization of initial codes (Thomas and Harden, 2008) (See Table 6). The researchers conducted a detailed examination of categorical properties and interrelationships, particularly contextual variables relating to WLB issues (McMahon et al., 2022). The final phase involved generating higher-order analytical themes transcending descriptive categorisation (See Table 7). Here, the researchers compared thematic categories and identified patterns and relationships that extended beyond individual study findings (Butler et al., 2016; Thomas and Harden, 2008). The researchers maintained methodological rigour through regular investigator triangulation through team-based analytical discussions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018), maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail documenting methodological decisions (McMahon et al., 2022) and implementation of constant comparative techniques to ensure coding consistency (Butler et al., 2016).

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of Included Studies

Table 3 summarises the characteristics of the included studies. The included studies represent a qualitative exploration of women's entrepreneurship across the Middle East, specifically Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the UAE. The study sample sizes ranged from 12 to 50 participants, primarily focusing on female entrepreneurs aged 23-60, drawn from diverse sectors, including tourism, service industries, and online businesses.

Methodological characteristics include poststructuralist feminist perspectives, critical theory frameworks, and content analysis techniques. Most studies employed purposive sampling strategies, selecting participants based on entrepreneurial experience and gender. The research designs consistently emphasised in-depth, narrative-driven investigations that explore intersections of gender, work, family dynamics, and sociocultural constraints. Theoretical foundations varied, with some studies drawing on preference theory and others employing intersectional analytical lenses to examine women entrepreneurs' lived experiences and challenges (See Table 2: Quality assessment using CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme)

Table 2: Quality assessment using CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme)

Authors	Clear Aims	Appropriate Methodology	Research Design	Recruitment Strategy	Data Collection	Researcher-Participant Relationship	Ethical Issues	Data Analysis	Findings Statement	Valuable Research	Total Score
Tahir (2024b)	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	2	2	2	16/20
Rafiaie et al. (2023)	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	1	2	2	15/20
Borham et al. (2024)	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	18/20
Tahir (2024a)	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	2	2	2	16/20
Mehtap et al. (2019)	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	2	2	2	16/20
Tlaiss and Kauser (2019)	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	2	2	2	16/20
Tlaiss and McAdam (2021)	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	18/20
Tahir and Raza (2020)	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	18/20
Ghaderi et al. (2023)	2	2	2	1	2	0	1	2	2	2	16/20

Table 3: Characteristics of included studies

Author(s)	Tahir (2024a)	Tahir (2024b)	Mehtap et al. (2019)	Borham et al. (2024)	Tlaiss and Kauser (2019)	Tlaiss and McAdam (2021)	Rafiaie et al. (2023)	Tahir and Raza (2020)	Ghaderi et al. (2023)
Geography	UAE	UAE	Jordan	Egypt	Lebanon	Lebanon	Iran	UAE	Iran
Gender of Authors	Male	Male	2 Female, 1 Male	3 Male, 1 Female	Both Female	Both Female	1 Female, 2 Male	Both Male	3 Female, 1 Male
Implication of Author's Composition	Male perspective on women's challenges; cultural context emphasis	Male perspective on entrepreneurial challenges	Predominantly female research team; insight into informal entrepreneurship experiences	Mixed perspective with cultural sensitivity	Female perspective provides a better understanding of gender dynamics	Female perspective provides a nuanced understanding of Islam and gender dynamics	Balanced perspective with both gender insights	Male perspective on female online entrepreneurs	Balanced perspective with emphasis on tourism sector
Population and Sample	50 women entrepreneurs, ages 33-59	30 entrepreneurs (27M, 3F), ages 41-57	14 female informal entrepreneurs, ages 23-52	25 women entrepreneurs from 5 governorates	21 Lebanese women entrepreneurs, ages 30-60	21 Muslim women entrepreneurs, ages 30-55	15 Iranian women entrepreneurs	20 female online entrepreneurs, ages 31-56	12 female tourism entrepreneurs
Study Design	Qualitative; Semi-structured interviews	Qualitative; Semi-structured interviews	Qualitative; In-depth semi-structured interviews (Arabic/ English)	Qualitative; Semi-structured interviews in Arabic	Qualitative; In-depth face-to-face interviews	Qualitative; In-depth semi-structured interviews (60-180 min)	Qualitative; Semi-structured interviews	Qualitative; Semi-structured interviews	Qualitative; Semi-structured online interviews
Analytical Method	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis	Qualitative content analysis	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis	Thematic analysis

4.2 Line-by-Line Coding

Following Thomas and Harden's (2008) approach to thematic synthesis, the researchers conducted manual line-by-line coding of the nine included studies to maintain close engagement with the primary data. The studies were organised alphabetically by author and we systematically coded each paper's findings and discussion sections through careful reading of individual words and complete sentences/paragraphs (McMahon et al., 2022). To ensure consistency and rigour in our manual coding approach, a detailed working definition for each code was created, as shown in 4. These definitions helped clarify collective thinking and provided a reference point as articles were read. The team met regularly to discuss emerging codes and resolve any discrepancies in interpretation or application. Questions about relationships between codes and contextual variations in the coding log were documented, as shown in 5.

Table 4: Working Definition of codes (extracts)

Code	Definition/Description
Integration Strategy	Deliberately combining work and family domains through shared time, space, or resources
Segmentation Approach	Maintaining strict boundaries between professional and personal life spheres
Digital Boundary Setting	Specific practices for managing technology use between work and personal life
Cultural Role Navigation	Process of managing traditional role expectations while pursuing entrepreneurial goals
Support Network Cultivation	Active development and maintenance of professional and personal support systems
Time Sovereignty	Degree of control over work hours and schedule despite cultural/family obligations
Resource Optimisation	Strategic allocation of limited time, energy, and support across competing demands

The initial coding process generated 176 unique codes. Rather than prematurely merging similar concepts, the researchers maintained distinct codes to preserve nuanced meanings within the data. For example, when coding discussions of support systems, the researchers kept separate codes for "family emotional support," "family practical support," and "family resource access" to capture the different dimensions of family involvement in women's entrepreneurship.

Table 5: Coding Log Excerpts

Note type	Excerpt from Log
Code evolution	Initially coded "family support" broadly, but noticed distinct patterns between practical support (childcare, household tasks) versus emotional support (encouragement, understanding). Created separate codes to capture this nuance.
Contextual variations	Same phenomenon (e.g., working from home) coded differently based on urban/rural settings and country context. UAE participants frame it as strategic choice, while Iranian rural participants describe it as cultural necessity.
Relationship questions	How do "digital presence" and "cultural expectations" interact? Notice tension between online business opportunities and traditional visibility norms. Consider creating linking memo.
Definition refinement	"Professional identity" – originally focused on business role, expanded to include cultural identity aspects after coding Tlaiss and Kauser's data.

Pattern recognition	Technology themes emerging across multiple domains – enabler for boundary management but also source of conflict. Created sub-codes to capture this duality.

4.3. Development of Descriptive Themes

The 176 codes were organised into six major categories: boundary navigation (32 codes), resource management (28 codes), identity negotiation (34 codes), support systems (31 codes), digital engagement (25 codes) and constraint management (26 codes) (See Table 6: Descriptive themes 6). Each reviewer independently examined the codes, creating preliminary theme clusters based on conceptual similarities and relationships between codes. The reviewers then met to compare and discuss their preliminary theme structures, identifying areas of agreement and divergence. Where disagreements occurred, the reviewers returned to the primary data and coding framework to resolve differences through discussion until a consensus was reached. The refinement process involved multiple iterations. Initial themes were reviewed for clarity, coherence, and distinctiveness, with similar themes merged to avoid redundancy and overly broad themes split for clarity. Sub-themes were developed to capture differences within major themes, resulting in a hierarchical structure.

Table 6: Descriptive themes

Descriptive theme	Sub-themes	Example of underlying codes	Number of codes
Boundary navigation	Work-life interface management	Integration/segregation strategy implementation, physical workspace demarcation, time boundary setting	32
	Domain transition management	Role transition strategies, cross-domain communication patterns, buffer zone creation, transition ritual development	
Resource management	Time allocation	Schedule prioritization, time-blocking strategies, deadline management, emergency time buffers	28
	Energy distribution	Physical energy conservation, mental energy allocation, emotional resource management, recovery period planning	
	Support system optimisation	Family resource leveraging, professional network utilisation, community resource access, institutional support maximization	
Identity negotiation	Professional identity construction	Leadership role development, expert status establishment, industry positioning, professional brand management	34
	Cultural identity balance	Traditional value integration, modern practice adoption, cultural expectation navigation, identity authenticity maintenance	
	Role integration	Multiple role harmonization, identity conflict resolution, role priority management, identity transition strategies	
Support system dynamics	Network development	Professional alliance building, family support cultivation, community connection establishment, institutional relationship management	31
	Support quality enhancement	Support effectiveness evaluation, resource access optimisation, support network diversification, relationship maintenance strategies	
	Reciprocal support management	Support exchange balance, network contribution planning, mutual benefit creation, resource sharing protocols	
Digital engagement	Technology adoption	Digital tool integration, online presence management, virtual communication practices	25
	Digital boundary management	Online-offline balance, digital accessibility limits, virtual workspace organisation	

Constraint management	Cultural constraint navigation	Traditional expectation management, gender role negotiation, social norm navigation, cultural barrier mitigation	26
	Structural limitation handling	Institutional barrier management, resource limitation strategies, legal constraint navigation, system restriction workarounds	
	Personal constraint management	Capacity limitation recognition, skill gap management, time restriction handling, energy constraint optimisation	

5. Analytical Themes

Subsequently five overarching analytical themes that represent higher-order constructs were identified, moving beyond simple aggregation to generate new interpretive constructs (See Table 7). The first analytical theme, the paradox of entrepreneurial emancipation, captured the contradictory nature of entrepreneurship as a liberating and constraining force in women's lives. Forced integration as cultural adaptation emerged as the second analytical theme, highlighting how women entrepreneurs in the Middle East often adopt integration strategies not as a preferred choice but as a necessary response to cultural expectations and structural constraints.

Table 7: Evolving analytical themes from descriptive themes

Descriptive Theme/Sub-theme	**Analytical Theme**
Boundary navigation	
Work-life interface management	Theme 2: Forced integration as cultural adaptation
Domain transition management	Theme 2: Forced integration as cultural adaptation
Resource management	
Time allocation	Theme 1: The paradox of entrepreneurial emancipation
Energy distribution	Theme 2: Forced integration as cultural adaptation
Support system optimisation	Theme 5: Strategic responses
Identity negotiation	
Professional identity construction	Theme 1: The paradox of entrepreneurial emancipation
Cultural identity balance	Theme 4: The role of Islamic context
Role integration	Theme 2: Forced integration as cultural adaptation
Support system dynamics	
Network development	Theme 5: Strategic responses
Support quality enhancement	Theme 1: The paradox of entrepreneurial emancipation
Reciprocal support management	Theme 4: The role of Islamic context
Digital engagement	
Technology adoption	Theme 3: Technology as a double-edged sword
Digital boundary management	Theme 3: Technology as a double-edged sword
Constraint management	
Cultural constraint navigation	Theme 4: The role of Islamic context
Structural limitation handling	Theme 1: The paradox of entrepreneurial emancipation
Personal constraint management	Theme 5: Strategic responses

The third analytical theme, technology as a double-edged sword, captured the dual nature of technological solutions in entrepreneurial WLB. While technology enabled greater flexibility and market access, it simultaneously intensified work-life boundary blurring and created new forms of social pressure. The role of Islamic context emerged as the fourth analytical theme, showing how Islamic principles and cultural values fundamentally shaped the challenges and opportunities for WLB among women entrepreneurs. The fifth theme was strategic responses showing how women entrepreneurs actively navigate institutional constraints through identity management *(compliance, disregard, or defiance)* and resource optimisation *(financial management and support network utilisation)*.

5.1 Theme 1: The Paradox of Entrepreneurial Emancipation

Entrepreneurial emancipation has been understood as a pathway to greater autonomy, self-determination, and WLB (Laine and Kibler, 2022; Rindova et al., 2009; Welter, 2011). Early conceptualizations viewed entrepreneurship as a means of breaking free from traditional employment constraints and achieving greater control over one's work and personal life (Bacq et al., 2023; Patterson and Mavin, 2009). This perspective aligns with institutional theory (North, 1991; Scott, 2014), which suggests that individuals engage in entrepreneurship to overcome institutional voids or constraints (Bruton et al., 2018; Mair and Marti, 2009). However, this emancipatory narrative becomes more complex when situated within institutional contexts characterised by strong cultural and religious embeddedness. Recent developments have highlighted the intricate interaction between emancipation and institutional constraints (Jennings et al., 2016; Karlsson, 2024; Pergelova and Mandakovic, 2024), particularly in contexts where cultural and religious institutions significantly shape social and economic behaviour (Bastian et al., 2018). The intersection of gender with these institutional dynamics presents further challenges (Ahl and Marlow, 2012), as women entrepreneurs must navigate market-based challenges and deeply embedded sociocultural norms (Al-Dajani et al., 2015).

Building on this theoretical tension, the review reveals how these dynamics manifest empirically within the Middle Eastern context, where deeply rooted cultural expectations about men's and women's roles (traditional gender roles), religious beliefs and practices that influence social and business norms (Islamic values), and rapidly evolving economic and business systems interact to create unique institutional environments that shape women's entrepreneurial experiences (Bastian et al., 2018; Tlaiss, 2015). The study found strong evidence for this paradox emerging consistently across multiple studies (Borham et al., 2024; Tahir, 2024a; Tahir and Raza, 2020; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). Tahir (2024a) and Tahir and Raza (2020) documented how UAE-based women entrepreneurs face intensified work-life challenges despite choosing entrepreneurship specifically for better balance. Borham et al. (2024) identified

similar patterns in Egypt, while Tlaiss and Kauser (2019) found parallel experiences in Lebanon. This paradox manifests through the influence of formal institutional structures, normative pressures, and cultural-cognitive frameworks that collectively shape women's entrepreneurial experiences in the Middle East.

First, formal institutional structures created contradictory outcomes for women entrepreneurs seeking WLB. Notably, banking systems and financial regulations such as complex loan application procedures, collateral requirements, gendered restrictions on financial decision-making, and inconsistent interpretations of Islamic finance principles emerged as particularly significant barriers across multiple studies (Borham et al., 2024; Tahir, 2024b; Tahir and Raza, 2020). Drawing on recent research from Egypt, religious and institutional constraints on accessing formal financing often led women to rely on personal or family resources:

> "Bank loan still controversial matter between Islamic scholars... Therefore, I preferred to start the business by my own money" (Borham et al., 2024).

This illustrates how formal institutional constraints generate unintended consequences for entrepreneurial autonomy. This institutional constraint, similarly, expressed in Rafiaie et al. (2023) and Tahir (2024a), created a situation where women's pursuit of financial independence through entrepreneurship paradoxically reinforces their dependence on family networks and personal resources. Furthermore, we observed a paradox between entrepreneurial pursuits and normative institutions, particularly regarding role expectations and social legitimacy. The findings showed a recurring pattern across studies regarding the intensification of role conflict through entrepreneurship (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019; Rafiaie et al., 2023; Tahir, 2024a). This was vividly illustrated by a UAE-based entrepreneur who equated her business to having another child:

> "I have two children and a business. So, I tell everybody that it is my third child, as it requires all the attention and care that a normal child needs" (Tahir, 2024a).

This metaphorical equation of business to childcare exemplifies how entrepreneurship, rather than alleviating work-life tension, often created additional caregiving responsibilities within existing normative frameworks.

Furthermore, the review showed manifestations of cultural beliefs as significant institutional factors influencing how women entrepreneurs approach and experience WLB across the five examined countries in the Middle East. Studies from Egypt (Borham et al., 2024), Lebanon (Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021), and Iran (Ghaderi et al., 2023) revealed how cultural institutions shaped entrepreneurial challenges and women's responses to them. The reviewed studies showed varying levels of family support, with some families expressing concern about social perceptions (Borham et al., 2024; Tahir, 2024a; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). The influence of patriarchal social structures was particularly evident in

how families approached women's entrepreneurship. As illustrated by one participant's experience with family resistance:

> "My family is so rigid in this matter, it does not like woman doing job or business, my father was totally rejected this idea. He used to say 'what would people say about me?' " (Borham et al., 2024).

This concern with social reputation-pressure to conform to societal expectations and avoid criticism or negative judgment from the community reflects broader cultural patterns identified by Tlaiss and Kauser (2019) in Lebanon, where business ownership was traditionally considered "a man's job." In the UAE, Tahir (2024a) found that cultural expectations significantly influenced how women entrepreneurs managed boundaries between work and personal life, noting that "as per the UAE traditions and customs, all the responsibilities in the house belong to a woman." This finding aligns with broader patterns observed across the reviewed studies (Tahir, 2024b), where cultural institutions influenced but did not wholly determine entrepreneurial outcomes.

The synthesis also identified what several studies considered a 'double bind,' where showing too much agency in business could lead to social criticism (Banihani and Syed, 2020; Mehtap et al., 2019; Rafiaie et al., 2023; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). This was particularly evident in the Lebanese context, where women entrepreneurs reported struggling to maintain social legitimacy while pursuing business growth. Women entrepreneurs often found themselves in positions where business success could paradoxically undermine their social standing or family relationships.

In Jordan, Mehtap et al. (2019) documented this tension directly among informal entrepreneurs who concealed their business activity from disapproving husbands. One participant, who baked and sold sweets while her husband was at work or asleep, explained:

> "I am torn between something I do with passion and my responsibilities as a wife and mother. I don't know why I have to be so secretive. I am not doing anything bad. It's very tiring" (Mehtap et al., 2019).

Even where husbands were supportive, some entrepreneurs deliberately downplayed their earnings to avoid appearing to outperform their spouse, as one respondent described:

> "He thinks it's just a hobby, or something to keep me occupied during the day. I never tell my husband exactly what I earn" (Mehtap et al., 2019).

The manifestation of this paradox differs notably from Western contexts. While Western literature often frames entrepreneurial challenges in terms of individual choice and market conditions (Ivanycheva et al., 2024), our review revealed how Middle Eastern women entrepreneurs navigate more complex

institutional constraints. For instance, while Western women entrepreneurs might primarily face market-based challenges (Franzke et al., 2022), Middle Eastern women must simultaneously manage religious, cultural, and family expectations that fundamentally shape their entrepreneurial possibilities. The findings here demonstrate how different institutional pillars create interconnected paradoxical outcomes in entrepreneurial pursuits. Second, they revealed the dynamic interaction between structural constraints and individual action in shaping WLB strategies. This challenges narratives about entrepreneurship as a path to greater autonomy for women in the Middle East. Instead, they suggest a reality where institutional structures enable and constrain women's ability to achieve WLB through entrepreneurship.

5.2. Theme 2: Forced Integration as Cultural Adaptation

Building directly on the paradox identified in Theme 1, the findings further reveal how women entrepreneurs respond to these tensions in practice. One key response is the adoption of integration as a dominant WLB strategy. Integration as a WLB strategy relates to the blending of work and personal life domains, where individuals manage multiple roles simultaneously rather than maintaining strict boundaries (Clark, 2000; Kossek et al., 2023). Traditionally conceptualized in Western organisational studies as a strategic choice along a segmentation-integration continuum (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009), integration has been positioned as discretionary — individuals are theoretically free to choose their preferred approach based on personal preferences and work demands.

However, the findings challenge this discretionary view. Women entrepreneurs in the Middle East predominantly adopt integration not as a conscious choice but as necessary adaptation to institutional pressures. This forced integration describes a condition where integration is fundamentally shaped by institutional structures rather than individual preference. To explain this shift from choice to constraint, the findings highlight the role of institutional drivers across three pillars.

5.2.1. Institutional Drivers of Forced Integration

Three institutional pillars emerged as primary drivers of forced integration patterns among Middle Eastern women entrepreneurs.

First, regulative institutions, including formal regulations and policies, often necessitate integration approaches. Labour laws, business operation requirements, and formal institutional structures frequently lack provisions for clear work-family separation, creating what Clark (2000) termed 'permeable borders.' As evidenced in the UAE context:

> "As per the UAE traditions and customs, all the responsibilities in the house belong to a woman. In our culture, every woman and mother have all these responsibilities" (Tahir, 2024b).

Second, normative pressures manifest through family role expectations, community oversight of women's behaviour, and professional network dynamics. These pressures often result in 'border-crosser powerlessness,' where women entrepreneurs have limited authority to define and maintain boundaries between work and family domains (Clark, 2000).

Third, cultural-cognitive institutions shape how women entrepreneurs fundamentally conceptualize work-life boundaries. Across multiple Middle Eastern contexts, women consistently internalized cultural expectations about work-family integration, navigating what Tlaiss and Kauser (2019) described as "the intersecting web of patriarchal and sociocultural values."

While these institutional drivers are broadly consistent, their manifestations vary across national contexts. In the UAE, Tahir (2024b) found that women entrepreneurs frequently adopt integration due to societal pressures, resulting in exceptionally thin boundaries between work and personal life. In Lebanon, Tlaiss and McAdam (2021) found that Muslim women entrepreneurs drew on Islamic teachings around family duty and modesty to legitimise blending business responsibilities with their roles as wives and mothers, with some deliberately downplaying their business success to preserve family harmony. In Iran, Rafiaie et al. (2023) documented comparable patterns emphasising temporal sacrifice, with women prioritising family obligations over personal time. While all three contexts demonstrate forced integration driven by institutional pressures, manifestations vary: the UAE highlights simultaneous multitasking, Lebanon emphasises religiously-legitimised role blending, and Iran underscores personal time sacrifice (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021).

5.2.2. Dimensions of Forced Integration

Building on these institutional drivers, the findings further reveal how forced integration is experienced in practice. These institutional pressures manifested across three interrelated dimensions that emerged consistently across multiple studies (Rafiaie et al., 2023; Tahir, 2024a; Tahir and Raza, 2020).

Temporal integration emerged where women entrepreneurs experienced constant interweaving of work and family time schedules. While Clark (2000) suggested that temporal boundaries are malleable and actively managed based on individual preferences, our findings reveal that temporal integration often manifests as an institutionally mandated condition in societies with cultural expectations that women prioritise domestic responsibilities. In the UAE, Tahir (2024a) documented routine simultaneous task management:

> "When I go home, I help my children to do their homework. But, at the same time, I work on my laptop too or answer my WhatsApp messages."

Similarly, in Iran, Rafiaie et al. (2023) found women entrepreneurs consistently sacrificing personal time:

> "I am a very disciplined person... But in the end, I put myself last. When other ladies are shopping and hanging out, I dedicate my time to my family and doing unfinished house chores."

Spatial integration manifested as the dissolution of physical boundaries between work and personal spaces, particularly accelerated by technology and cultural norms (Adisa and Gbadamosi, 2021). Women entrepreneurs experienced significant blurring of spatial boundaries, with technology enabling but also enforcing constant accessibility (Borham et al., 2024; Tahir and Raza, 2020; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). This is particularly evident in online entrepreneurship, where traditional workplace boundaries become increasingly permeable. As UAE-based research noted, entrepreneurs often find that 'everywhere is my workplace,' indicating not just flexibility but the compulsion of spatial integration (Tahir and Raza, 2020), further reinforced by cultural expectations of simultaneous presence in domestic and professional spheres.

Role integration emerged through institutional pressures mandating women entrepreneurs to maintain traditional family roles while performing business responsibilities (Adisa and Gbadamosi, 2021). Women faced strong normative pressures to integrate business roles with traditional family responsibilities rather than treating them as separate domains (Tahir, 2024a; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). This was expressed through familial metaphors, such as describing their enterprise as 'my third child' (Tahir, 2024a), reflecting deeper institutional structures where entrepreneurial identities are expected to complement rather than compete with primary social roles as mothers and wives (Ghaderi et al., 2023; Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021; Tahir, 2024a).

Forced integration carried substantial psychological burdens. Iranian entrepreneurs reported persistent feelings of guilt and inadequacy (Ghaderi et al., 2023), while UAE-based women described constant mental preoccupation with multiple responsibilities (Tahir, 2024a). These findings suggest that forced integration, while appearing as a practical solution to institutional constraints, often created additional psychological strain (Borham et al., 2024).

These forms of forced integration carry psychological implications, including persistent guilt, mental preoccupation, and stress (Borham et al., 2024; Ghaderi et al., 2023; Tahir, 2024a). They also create asymmetric temporal permeability, where work demands readily spill into family time, but family obligations are less able to interrupt work, reflecting the unequal influence of institutional and cultural pressures on WLB. In sum, integration patterns among Middle Eastern women entrepreneurs are primarily institutionally and culturally driven rather than individually chosen, highlighting the unique challenges of WLB in these contexts.

5.3. Theme 3: Technology as a Double-edged Sword

Technology's role in WLB has been conceptualised in existing literature as a potential enabler of flexibility and boundary management (Cousins and Robey,

2015; Mordi et al., 2024). However, scholars have also highlighted its capacity to blur work-life boundaries and increase work intensification (Adekoya, 2022; Tahir, 2024b). The synthesis revealed technology's complex and often paradoxical role in shaping WLB experiences of women entrepreneurs across the Middle East. Technology emerged as an enabler of and a constraint to border management efforts within existing institutional frameworks (Borham et al., 2024; Tahir, 2024b; Tahir and Raza, 2020). For example, digital platforms such as messaging apps and digital marketplaces (Rafiaie et al., 2023), e-commerce platforms (Borham et al., 2024), and social media platforms for word-of-mouth customer generation (Mehtap et al., 2019), enabled women entrepreneurs to navigate institutional pressures while creating spaces for entrepreneurial activity. Multiple studies documented how online business models provided flexibility that accommodated institutional expectations regarding women's domestic responsibilities (Borham et al., 2024; Tahir, 2024b; Tahir and Raza, 2020).

Contextual differences emerged across countries. In Borham et al.'s (2024) Egyptian study, participants leveraged digital platforms to maintain business operations while fulfilling familial obligations. However, this technological enablement, where digital tools and platforms allow women entrepreneurs to manage business tasks while simultaneously attending to family responsibilities, often came at the cost of increased border permeability between work and personal domains (Adisa et al., 2017; Nagy, 2020; Mordi et al., 2024). Digital connectivity frequently led to the dissolution of traditional work-life boundaries — clear separation between professional tasks (e.g., office work, client meetings) and personal/family responsibilities (e.g., childcare, household management, leisure time), often structured around distinct times and spaces — creating 'border-crosser' challenges (Clark, 2000). This was particularly pronounced in the UAE context, where entrepreneurs reported that digital tools made it increasingly difficult to maintain distinct domains:

> "With these gadgets, I cannot have boundaries. It seems that everywhere is my workplace" (Tahir, 2024a).

This finding suggests that while technology enabled flexible border crossing, it also created pressures for constant availability that can undermine border management efforts. This challenge parallels Western experiences but is intensified by stronger cultural expectations regarding women's domestic responsibilities.

In contrast, Egyptian women entrepreneurs emphasised technology's role in overcoming regulative institutional barriers, such as limited access to markets or formal financing, reflecting structural constraints in their business environment (Borham et al., 2024). Iranian entrepreneurs, facing both structural restrictions and strong family-oriented normative pressures, used digital platforms to circumvent mobility limitations while maintaining family harmony. In Jordan, informal women entrepreneurs used Facebook to reach customers while

deliberately avoiding formal business registration, reflecting predominantly regulative institutional constraints rather than purely normative or cultural-cognitive pressures (Mehtap et al., 2019). These are considerations that are largely absent in Western contexts. In most Western countries, technology adoption is typically driven more by competitive advantage and operational efficiency than by cultural accommodation (Marlow and McAdam, 2015).

The psychological implications of technology-mediated border management emerged as a significant finding across studies. Women entrepreneurs consistently reported experiencing tension between institutional expectations for availability and personal border management needs. This tension manifested in what border theory describes as 'border-keeper conflicts,' where different stakeholders held competing expectations about border permeability. For example, a UAE-based entrepreneur noted:

> "Even if I am at home with my children, I feel obliged to reply to WhatsApp messages from clients immediately. It feels like my work never stops."

Although technology provided mechanisms for managing these conflicts, it often reinforced existing institutional pressures rather than alleviating them. Unlike how Western entrepreneurs typically report stress from general work-life boundary blurring (Mazmanian et al., 2013), Middle Eastern women entrepreneurs face additional pressure from managing technological boundaries in ways that maintain cultural legitimacy while pursuing business growth. The duality of technology, as observed in the study, reflects broader patterns of institutional entrepreneurship, where actors strategically use available resources to navigate institutional constraints (Mehtap et al., 2019; Tahir and Raza, 2020), though often at the cost of clear domain separation (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Cousins and Robey, 2015).

5.4. Theme 4: The Role of Islamic Context

The role of Islamic context emerged as the fourth analytical theme in our study. The review showed how Islamic context fundamentally shapes institutional arrangements and border management strategies for women entrepreneurs in the Middle East (Tahir, 2024a; Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021). Islamic influence emerged as a unique institutional force that simultaneously constrains and enables women's entrepreneurial activities and WLB efforts (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Althalathini et al., 2020). The analysis revealed that religious values and practices operated at multiple institutional levels — regulative (through formal religious laws), normative (through social expectations), and cultural-cognitive (through internalized beliefs) (Tahir, 2024a). Women entrepreneurs drew on these values in concrete ways to manage work-life boundaries: for example, through daily prayer for guidance, adhering to Islamic prohibitions on interest when making financial decisions, structuring business hours around religious obligations, and seeking male or family consent for certain business activities.

The analysis revealed that women actively draw upon religious values as psychological resources for managing institutional pressures, particularly in more conservative contexts (Borham et al., 2024). Borham et al. (2024) noted how women entrepreneurs frequently deployed religious values and practices when navigating business challenges, with one participant noting:

> "When I find myself in tough time, I pray for God, the response come fast and problem solved, as a Muslim I should leave everything to God and say Insha'Allah (If God is willing), after I do my best."

This finding demonstrates how religious institutions provide constraints and resources for border management. In addition, Islamic principles significantly influenced the establishment and maintenance of work-life borders through their impact on business practices and organisational structures (Borham et al., 2024; Tahir, 2024a).

Drawing on the border theory lens, Islamic requirements often served as border-keepers, defining acceptable parameters for domain crossing and integration (Clark, 2000). This played out in financial decision-making, where religious considerations shape border creation between personal and business resources. As one participant in Borham et al.'s (2024) study emphasised:

> "Bank loan still controversial matter between Islamic scholars, I believe that the loan is haram... Therefore, I preferred to start the business by my own money."

This was also evident in obtaining consent to start a business. As illustrated in Borham et al.'s (2024) study:

> "After weeping a lot, and too much efforts and insistence, I succeeded to extract his consent, under one condition that, the business must be operated indoor without needing to go outdoors."

This illustrates how religion influenced physical and psychological boundaries between work and family domains. The Islamic emphasis on family creates a distinctive institutional environment for border management. Extended family networks act as institutional actors and border-keepers, significantly influencing how women entrepreneurs navigate between work and family domains (Ghaderi et al., 2023; Tahir, 2024b). We observed this in the Iranian context, where family-based support systems reflect institutionalized patterns of childcare arrangement. As Rafiaie et al. (2023) highlighted, the preference for family-based childcare over formal services demonstrates how religious institutions shape the availability and legitimacy of different border management strategies.

Beyond family and financial decision-making, Islamic teachings also shaped how entrepreneurs understood the very meaning of their work. In Lebanon, Tlaiss and McAdam (2021) found that Muslim women entrepreneurs drew on the

association between merchants and martyrdom in Islamic teaching to elevate the status of their business activity, as one participant explained:

> "We as entrepreneurs are equated to martyrs… Martyrdom is the highest and most noble status in Islam… This status encouraged me to start my business" (Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021).

Religious teachings also functioned as a resource for contesting patriarchal expectations rather than simply reinforcing them, with entrepreneurs invoking Islamic precedent to justify their work against family opposition:

> "Islam gave me the power to fight the society… my in-laws and my parents spoke about our traditions and culture and how the place of the woman is her house… so I said that if the prophet allowed his wives to work and have businesses and go with him to war… why are you stopping me" (Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021).

The findings indicate that women entrepreneurs actively engaged with religious institutions rather than merely responding to them (Ghaderi et al., 2023; Rafiaie et al., 2023), using religious principles as resources for legitimising their border management strategies while navigating institutional constraints (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). These insights contribute to institutional theory and border theory by highlighting how religious institutions can simultaneously serve as border-keepers and border resources, creating unique challenges and opportunities for WLB in Islamic contexts. While the examples here primarily draw from Egypt and Iran, similar patterns were reported in UAE and Lebanon (Tlaiss and McAdam, 2021), suggesting broader regional relevance.

5.5. Theme 5: Strategic Responses

Strategic responses emerged as a distinct analytical theme from our analysis. Our study demonstrated how women entrepreneurs engage in strategic adaptations — a process where they consciously leverage forced integration to maintain legitimacy while pursuing entrepreneurial goals (Rafiaie et al., 2023; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). This extends our understanding of how women entrepreneurs exercise agency within highly constraining institutional environments. In the face of these institutional constraints, the following strategic responses were deployed by women entrepreneurs to integrate work-life boundaries: (1) identity management in terms of compliance, defiance and disregard while pursuing business goals and (2) creative resource optimisation within institutional constraints.

5.5.1. Identity Management

Identity management was a major mechanism through which women entrepreneurs navigated institutional pressures, manifesting through three distinct approaches: compliance, disregard, and defiance (Tlaiss, 2019). These

approaches represented different ways of constructing and maintaining entrepreneurial identities within institutional constraints. Compliance emerged as a conscious identity management strategy wherein women entrepreneurs deliberately worked within existing cultural frameworks while pursuing their business objectives (Borham et al., 2024; Rafiaie et al., 2023; Tlaiss, 2019; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). As evidenced in Tlaiss and Kauser's (2019) study of Lebanese entrepreneurs, some women strategically embraced compliance as part of their entrepreneurial identity:

> "I am a woman, and I live in a patriarchal culture. It is stupid for me to fight, so I decided to be smart... They want me to prioritize my family, and this what I did."

This approach enabled women to maintain social legitimacy while advancing their entrepreneurial goals. Compliant identity management often involved framing entrepreneurial activities through culturally acceptable metaphors. Tahir's (2024b) UAE study documented that women entrepreneurs described their businesses as requiring "all the attention and care that a normal child needs," thereby legitimising their entrepreneurial activities within existing cultural frameworks. While compliance allowed women to maintain social legitimacy, some entrepreneurs moved beyond this cautious approach by adopting disregard, focusing on their own priorities rather than societal expectations.

Disregard is the second identity management approach, characterised by conscious detachment from societal pressures while maintaining entrepreneurial pursuits. This strategy involved deliberately constructing an entrepreneurial identity independently of social criticism. As documented in Tlaiss and Kauser's (2019) study, women often actively chose to disengage from societal pressures:

> "I decided to stop listening... we decided to focus on our lives and on being happy...we stopped listening to others; I stopped paying attention."

The effectiveness of this identity management strategy was reflected in entrepreneurs' experiences:

> "Once I stopped paying attention, things were better for me; we were about to get a divorce and finally we decided to focus on our lives and on being happy."

This approach allowed women to maintain their entrepreneurial identities without direct confrontation with institutional pressures. In contrast to disregard, which involves selective disengagement, defiance strategies represent a more confrontational approach where women entrepreneurs explicitly and actively challenge societal norms and institutional pressures, often directly confronting multiple stakeholders. As illustrated by one Lebanese entrepreneur:

> "I had to fight society at large and their thoughts... I had to fight the suppliers.... I had to fight with competitors; I actually argued with everyone who interfered in my life... I was fighting, and sometimes I feel that I still am..." (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019).

This defiance extends to personal relationships, with some entrepreneurs willing to challenge even fundamental social institutions:

> "...but I was not willing to give up; I was not willing to accept that… eventually I got a divorce; I did not mind... I resisted all the pressure... I did not care that they said that I do not respect society" (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019).

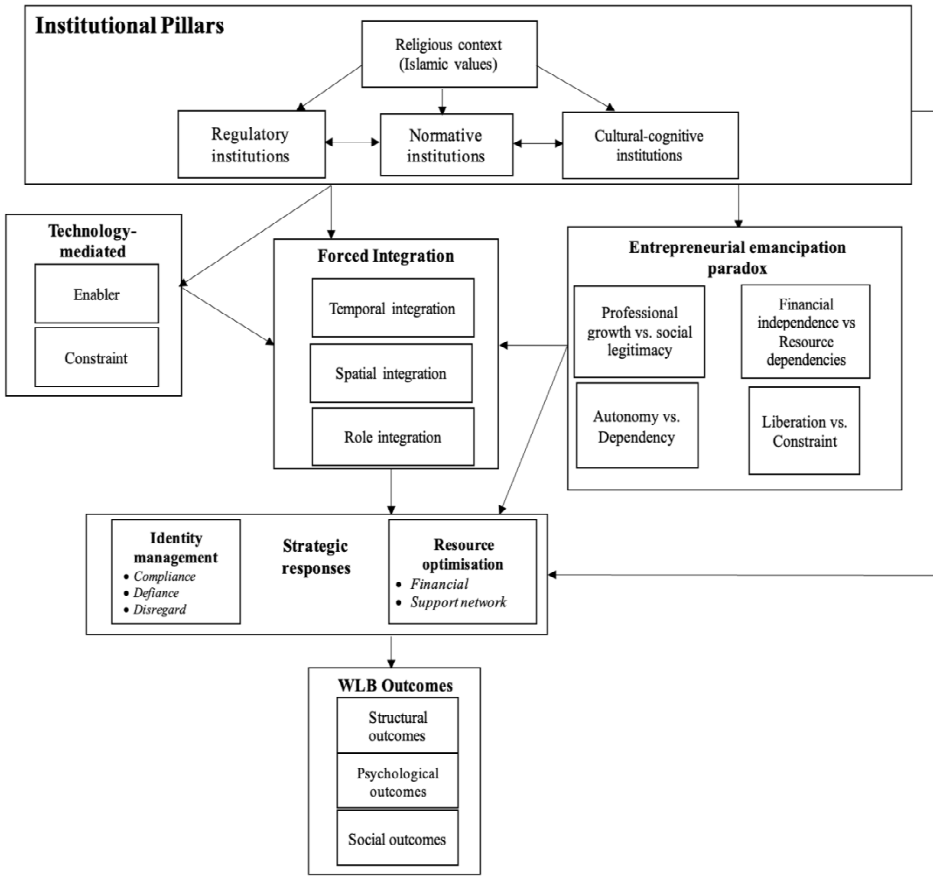
This strategy represents a radical departure from traditional compliance approaches, with women entrepreneurs consciously choosing to confront and challenge institutional pressures, often at significant personal and social costs. The findings suggest that those adopting defiance strategies prioritise their entrepreneurial identity over social legitimacy, actively resisting attempts to constrain their business activities through gender-based expectations or cultural norms (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019).

Overall, these strategies vary in their trade-offs: compliance preserves social acceptance, disregard prioritises personal autonomy with limited confrontation, and defiance maximises entrepreneurial freedom but often incurs significant social and personal costs.

5.5.2. Resource Optimisation

Resource optimisation emerged as another strategic response through which Middle Eastern women entrepreneurs navigated institutional constraints. The analysis identified two primary dimensions of resource optimisation: financial resource management and support network utilization. Regarding financial resource management, the synthesis revealed sophisticated approaches to navigating institutional constraints on formal financing. In Egypt, Borham et al. (2024) documented how women entrepreneurs developed alternative funding mechanisms when faced with institutional barriers to formal financing, mainly due to religious restrictions on interest-based loans. This finding was echoed in UAE-based studies (Tahir, 2024a; 2024b), where women entrepreneurs demonstrated strategic approaches to resource allocation, often preferring to start businesses with personal savings to maintain financial and decision-making autonomy (Tahir and Raza, 2020). The evidence suggests that women entrepreneurs transform institutional constraints into operational advantages by leveraging family networks and personal resources in ways that simultaneously fulfil business needs and social expectations.

Figure 2: Conceptual framework showing the WLB experiences of women entrepreneurs in the Middle East



Support network utilisation emerged as the second critical dimension of resource optimisation. Women entrepreneurs strategically cultivated and deployed support networks to overcome institutional constraints. In Iran, Rafiaie et al. (2023) found that women entrepreneurs actively built support systems aligned with cultural values, particularly in their preference for family-based childcare arrangements over formal services. This finding was reinforced by research from Lebanon (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019) and the UAE (Tahir, 2024a), where women entrepreneurs leveraged family networks for operational support and maintaining social legitimacy. Furthermore, the analysis revealed key patterns in how women entrepreneurs optimize their support networks. First, they demonstrate selective activation of support, carefully choosing when and how to engage family members based on specific business needs and cultural considerations (Borham et al., 2024; Tahir, 2024a). Second, they exhibit strategic reciprocity, often providing value to support networks through various means, thereby maintaining long-term access to resources (Rafiaie et al., 2023; Tlaiss and

Kauser, 2019). Third, they show adaptive network expansion, gradually building broader support systems while maintaining cultural legitimacy (Mehtap et al., 2019; Tahir and Raza, 2020).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This systematic review synthesised insights from nine qualitative studies to examine the WLB experiences of women entrepreneurs in the Middle East. We make a significant contribution by developing a conceptual framework mapping the dynamics of WLB experiences of women entrepreneurs (See Figure 2). The theoretical framework illustrates how institutional pillars, anchored in Islamic values, drive two key mechanisms: forced integration and the entrepreneurial emancipation paradox. The institutional pillars (regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive) directly induce forced integration across temporal, spatial, and role dimensions (Clark, 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009) while simultaneously generating paradoxical tensions in entrepreneurial emancipation (Rindova et al., 2009). These mechanisms interact with the entrepreneurial emancipation paradox, which emerges through four key tensions: professional growth versus social legitimacy, financial independence versus resource dependencies, autonomy versus dependency, and liberation versus constraint (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019; Borham et al., 2024). Technology mediates the relationship between institutional pillars and forced integration, functioning as both an enabler and constraint (Tahir and Raza, 2020). The forced integration patterns, shaped by institutional pressures, influence entrepreneurs' strategic responses through identity management and resource optimisation (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019). Additionally, institutional pillars directly shape these strategic responses, creating multiple pathways of institutional influence. These interactions influence WLB outcomes across structural, psychological, and social dimensions (Ghaderi et al., 2023), with structural outcomes encompassing boundary management and entrepreneurial autonomy, psychological outcomes relating to work-life satisfaction and role conflict, and social outcomes concerning legitimacy and network expansion (Kreiner et al., 2009; Ghaderi et al., 2023; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019).

This framework highlights how institutional pressures in Middle Eastern contexts create distinct WLB patterns and demonstrates the limitations of Western perspectives, which often overlook how deeply embedded cultural-religious values can force work-life integration and generate paradoxical experiences for women entrepreneurs.

The first research objective sought to understand the WLB experiences of women entrepreneurs within the Middle Eastern institutional context. The findings reveal that these experiences are fundamentally shaped by the paradox of entrepreneurial emancipation. While entrepreneurship is traditionally viewed

as a path to autonomy and WLB, in Middle Eastern contexts it simultaneously creates new constraints and challenges. Unique institutional pressures transform the entrepreneurial journey into a complex negotiation between personal autonomy and social legitimacy (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019; Rafiaie et al., 2023; Tahir, 2024a). Formal institutional structures, particularly in banking and finance, often reinforce traditional dependencies, challenging the assumption that entrepreneurship universally increases independence (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Patterson and Mavin, 2009; Carter et al., 2006; Welter, 2011). Normative institutions, including social role expectations, create a 'double bind' where success in one domain may undermine legitimacy in another, extending beyond traditional work-family conflict (Clark, 2000; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Adisa et al., 2021b).

A key finding is the emergence of forced integration as a dominant WLB strategy. Women entrepreneurs blend work and personal life domains not as a matter of personal choice but due to institutional pressures. This contrasts with Western conceptualisations, which frame integration as a discretionary strategy (Clark, 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009; Rothbard et al., 2021). Forced integration manifests through temporal, spatial, and role dimensions (Tahir, 2024a), creating 'border-crosser powerlessness' where women have limited authority to define and maintain work-life boundaries. Digital platforms further mediate this dynamic, enabling women to navigate institutional pressures while simultaneously intensifying boundary permeability, cycling work and personal domains in ways shaped by cultural and normative expectations (Borham et al., 2024; Tahir and Raza, 2020; Mazmanian et al., 2013).Islamic institutions play a central role in shaping these experiences, creating a distinct environment where religious principles influence regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive aspects of entrepreneurial activity. Religion can simultaneously constrain and enable women's agency, serving as both a border-keeper and a resource for legitimising strategic responses (Tahir, 2024a; Borham et al., 2024; Ghaderi et al., 2023).

Women deploy strategic responses through identity management — compliance, disregard, and defiance — and resource optimisation, demonstrating agency within constrained institutional contexts (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019; Borham et al., 2024; Rafiaie et al., 2023). Compliance allows women to maintain social legitimacy while pursuing business objectives, disregard enables detachment from societal pressures, and defiance represents active confrontation with restrictive norms. Resource optimisation transforms institutional constraints into operational advantages, including network utilisation and financial management. Unlike Western entrepreneurs, who optimise resources primarily for competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Barney et al., 2001), Middle Eastern women must simultaneously manage operational efficiency and social legitimacy.

These findings extend current understanding by showing how deeply embedded institutional pressures, including Islamic cultural norms, transform entrepreneurship from a path to autonomy into a paradoxical negotiation of emancipation and constraint. Middle Eastern women entrepreneurs navigate WLB through forced integration, technology-mediated boundary management, and strategic identity/resource optimisation — dynamics largely absent in Western-centric research on entrepreneurial WLB.

6.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this systematic review offer several significant theoretical and practical implications for understanding WLB among women entrepreneurs in the Middle East. From a theoretical perspective, this study extends institutional theory by demonstrating how religious institutions transcend traditional institutional pillars (Scott, 2014) to create a distinct framework that shapes entrepreneurial behaviour. The concept of forced integration as a cultural adaptation mechanism challenges existing work-life border theory (Clark, 2000; Kreiner et al., 2009), which typically conceptualises integration as a strategic choice. This finding suggests that border theory needs to be reconceptualized to account for contexts where institutional pressures, rather than individual preferences, determine boundary management strategies (Tahir, 2024a; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019).

The study also advances entrepreneurship theory by revealing how the paradox of entrepreneurial emancipation manifests differently in institutionally complex environments. While existing theory often frames entrepreneurship as a path to autonomy (Patterson and Mavin, 2009), the findings demonstrate how institutional structures can simultaneously enable and constrain entrepreneurial agency (Borham et al., 2024; Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019), creating unique paradoxical tensions that require theoretical refinement of current emancipation frameworks (Rindova et al., 2009). The role of technology as a mediating force between institutional pressures and WLB outcomes extends our understanding of how digital tools influence boundary management (Mazmanian et al., 2013). This contributes to border theory and institutional theory by highlighting how technological adoption can simultaneously reinforce and challenge institutional constraints (Mehtap et al., 2019; Tahir and Raza, 2020).

These findings fundamentally reposition WLB from an individual choice framework to an institutionally determined phenomenon, revealing that in contexts with strong normative and cultural-cognitive pressures, boundary management becomes a process of navigating externally imposed constraints rather than exercising personal agency.

From a practical perspective, the findings have implications for three key areas. First, policy support: interventions should move beyond Western-centric approaches to WLB and include family-inclusive business services, culturally sensitive networking opportunities, and mentoring schemes that facilitate

business growth while respecting social norms (Ghaderi et al., 2023). Second, training: programmes should be culturally tailored to address religious values and gender norms that shape business practices and work-life balance strategies (Bastian et al., 2018). Third, technology design: digital tools should support women entrepreneurs in managing business growth while maintaining cultural legitimacy, for example, by facilitating family involvement in operations or helping maintain appropriate boundaries (Tahir and Raza, 2020; Borham et al., 2024). These insights provide a practical framework for navigating institutional pressures through strategic responses such as identity management and resource optimisation (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2019; Rafiaie et al., 2023).

These implications point to future research directions, including investigating how context-specific policy, training, and technology interventions can be designed, implemented, and evaluated to support WLB and entrepreneurial success across diverse Middle Eastern settings.

6.2. Conclusion, Limitations and Future Directions

This systematic review has provided critical insights into how women entrepreneurs in the Middle East navigate work-life balance within complex institutional frameworks. The study reveals how institutional structures, particularly those anchored in Islamic values, create unique patterns of forced integration and paradoxical tensions in entrepreneurial emancipation. The findings demonstrate that women entrepreneurs employ sophisticated strategic responses through identity management and resource optimisation while leveraging technology as a mediating force in their WLB practices. The study's distinctive contribution lies in showing how institutional, cultural, and religious factors simultaneously constrain and enable WLB, extending both border theory and institutional theory while offering practical guidance for policy and support programmes.

While this systematic review provides valuable insights, the limitations should be acknowledged. First, the review's focus on qualitative studies, while providing rich contextual understanding, limits our ability to generalise findings across the broader population of women entrepreneurs in the Middle East. The sample size of 181 participants across nine studies, though substantial for qualitative research, represents a small fraction of women entrepreneurs in the region. The geographical coverage of included studies shows some imbalance, with certain countries (particularly UAE and Iran) being better represented than others. Similarly, the review's 2014-2024 timeframe and the exclusion of non-English publications may have omitted earlier or locally published research, limiting the diversity of perspectives captured.

The review highlights several significant gaps in current understanding, suggesting promising directions for future research (see Table 8: Future research directions8). In terms of institutional evolution, future studies can examine how institutional changes in the Middle East affect women entrepreneurs' WLB

strategies, particularly as countries implement economic reforms and modernization initiatives. Research is needed to understand how women entrepreneurs themselves influence institutional change through their WLB practices, potentially contributing to institutional entrepreneurship theory. The role of Islamic context in shaping WLB deserves deeper investigation. Future research should explore how different interpretations of Islamic principles influence WLB strategies across various Middle Eastern countries and how women entrepreneurs reconcile Islamic financial principles with business growth needs. The intersection of Islamic feminism with WLB discourse and practices presents another promising avenue for investigation.

Furthermore, research should examine how digital business models reshape institutional pressures on women entrepreneurs' WLB and how technology is used to maintain cultural legitimacy while pursuing business growth. The role of social media in negotiating professional and cultural identities represents an important area for future investigation. Intersectionality in WLB experiences is another crucial research direction. Studies should investigate how class, education, and urban/rural divides intersect with gender in shaping WLB experiences. Generational differences in WLB experiences and the influence of marital status and family structure on WLB strategies also warrant attention.

The psychological dimensions of WLB require further investigation, particularly regarding how forced integration practices affect psychological well-being over time and the role of religious coping in managing WLB-related stress. Understanding how women entrepreneurs manage identity conflicts across multiple roles remains an important area for future research. Finally, cross-cultural comparisons present valuable opportunities for theoretical development. Future research should examine how WLB experiences differ between Islamic and non-Islamic emerging economies, what Western contexts can learn from Middle Eastern approaches to WLB, and how immigrant Middle Eastern women entrepreneurs manage WLB in Western contexts. Diverse theoretical frameworks were identified in the study, including institutional theory, Islamic feminist theory, digital entrepreneurship theory, intersectionality theory, and cross-cultural theory, to develop a deeper understanding of women entrepreneurs' WLB experiences in the Middle East. Such research will be crucial for developing more effective support mechanisms and policies to promote women's entrepreneurship while respecting cultural values and institutional frameworks.

Disclosure Statement
The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Table 8: Future research directions

Research Area	**Potential Research Questions**	**Theoretical Anchors**
Institutional Evolution and WLB	• How do institutional changes in the Middle East affect women entrepreneurs' WLB strategies? • How do women entrepreneurs influence institutional change through their WLB practices? • How do different institutional configurations across Middle Eastern countries create varying WLB experiences?	• Institutional theory • Institutional entrepreneurship theory • Comparative institutionalism
Islamic Context and WLB	• How do different interpretations of Islamic principles influence WLB strategies across different Middle Eastern countries? • How do women entrepreneurs reconcile Islamic financial principles with business growth needs? • How do Islamic values shape the formation and evolution of work-life boundaries? • What role does Islamic feminism play in reshaping WLB discourse and practices? • How do different schools of Islamic thought influence entrepreneurial practices and WLB?	• Institutional theory • Islamic feminist theory • Islamic jurisprudence theory
Technology-Mediated WLB	• How do digital business models reshape institutional pressures on women entrepreneurs' WLB? • How do women entrepreneurs use technology to maintain cultural legitimacy while pursuing business growth? • What role does social media play in negotiating professional and cultural identities?	• Digital entrepreneurship theory • Boundary theory • Identity work theory
Intersectionality in WLB	• How do class, education, and urban/rural divides intersect with gender in shaping WLB experiences? • How do different generations of women entrepreneurs experience and manage WLB? • How do marital status and family structure influence WLB strategies?	• Intersectionality theory • Family systems theory
Strategic Responses	• How do women entrepreneurs develop and modify their strategic responses over time? • What factors influence the choice between compliance, disregard, and defiance strategies? • How do support networks evolve as women entrepreneurs gain legitimacy?	• Dynamic capabilities theory • Strategic choice theory • Social network theory
Psychological Dimensions	• How do forced integration practices affect psychological well-being over time? • What role does religious coping play in managing WLB-related stress? • How do women entrepreneurs manage identity conflicts across multiple roles?	• Conservation of resources theory • Identity theory
Family Dynamics	• How do family members' attitudes toward women's entrepreneurship evolve over time? • How do women entrepreneurs negotiate power dynamics within family businesses? • What role do extended family networks play in enabling or constraining WLB?	• Family business theory • Social support theory
Cross-Cultural Comparisons	• How do WLB experiences differ between Islamic and non-Islamic emerging economies? • What can Western contexts learn from Middle Eastern approaches to WLB? • How do immigrant Middle Eastern women entrepreneurs manage WLB in Western contexts?	• Cross-cultural theory • Cultural theory • Acculturation theory

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Appendix A. Full Database-Specific Search Strings

A1. Web of Science (Core Collection)
Search string (Topic Search: TS):

```
TS = (
  ("women entrepreneur*" OR "female entrepreneur*" OR "female business owner*" OR
   "woman-owned business*" OR "women-owned business*" OR "female-led business*" OR
   "women business owner*")
  AND
  ("Middle East*" OR "MENA" OR "Gulf" OR "GCC" OR
   "Iran" OR "Egypt" OR "Jordan" OR "Lebanon" OR
   "United Arab Emirates" OR "UAE")
  AND
  ("work-life balance" OR "work life balance" OR "work-life integration" OR
   "work family balance" OR "work-family balance" OR "WLB" OR
   "work-life conflict" OR "work-family conflict"))
```

Refined by: DOCUMENT TYPES: (Article) AND LANGUAGE: (English)
Timespan: 2014–2024
Indexes: SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, A&HCI, ESCI
Scopus
Search string (Title/Abstract/Keywords):

```
(TITLE-ABS-KEY(
  "women entrepreneur*" OR "female entrepreneur*" OR "female business owner*" OR
  "woman-owned business*" OR "women-owned business*" OR "female-led business*" OR
  "women business owner*")
AND
  ("Middle East*" OR "MENA" OR "Gulf" OR "GCC" OR
   "Iran" OR "Egypt" OR "Jordan" OR "Lebanon" OR
   "United Arab Emirates" OR "UAE")
AND
  ("work-life balance" OR "work life balance" OR "work-life integration" OR
   "work-family balance" OR "work family balance" OR "work-life conflict" OR
   "work-family conflict" OR "WLB"))
AND (LIMIT-TO(DOCTYPE, "ar"))
AND (LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, "English"))
AND (PUBYEAR > 2013 AND PUBYEAR < 2025)
```

EBSCO (e.g., Business Source Complete / Academic Search Complete)
Search string (Anywhere except full text):

```
AB ("women entrepreneur*" OR "female entrepreneur*" OR "female business owner*" OR
   "woman-owned business*" OR "women-owned business*" OR "female-led business*" OR
   "women business owner*")
AND
AB ("Middle East*" OR "MENA" OR "Gulf" OR "GCC" OR
   "Iran" OR "Egypt" OR "Jordan" OR "Lebanon" OR
   "United Arab Emirates" OR "UAE")
AND
```

AB ("work-life balance" OR "work life balance" OR "work-life integration" OR
"work-family balance" OR "work family balance" OR "work-life conflict" OR
"work-family conflict" OR "WLB")
Limiters applied in EBSCO:
Peer-reviewed: Yes
Language: English
Publication Date: 2014–2024
Document type: Academic Journal