

**Experiences of Iranian Women Entrepreneurs in the ICT (Information and
Communications Technology) Sector**

**by
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ABSTRACT

Despite the expansion of women's entrepreneurship in Iran, women still face many challenges that make it difficult to start a business. Barriers such as limited funding, gender biases, limited government support, and family responsibilities have been in the way of women entrepreneurs for many years and women face more barriers than men (Shinnar, Giacomini, & Janssen, 2012). Still, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are appearing as increasingly valuable business tools for women entrepreneurs. That being the case, I investigated the barriers to Iranian women entrepreneurs in the ICT sector as well as their resilience to those barriers. To conduct my research, I collected already published interviews with 12 women entrepreneurs in the media, prepared a codebook, and analyzed them through feminist content analysis. I found that challenges to women's entrepreneurship in Iran in the ICT sector include some obstacles. These obstacles contain those that are specific to Iran, such as the lack of foreign trade, economic instability, bribery, brain drain, sanctions, decrease in tourism, filtering, low internet speed, lack of cutting-edge technology, some Islamic laws practice in Iran. Obstacles also include the lack of trust in women for activities outside the home, gender role expectations (including family responsibilities and childcare), literacy and education, finance, a lack of professional human resources to be recruited for their companies, and time-consuming and inefficient bureaucracy. In terms of women entrepreneurs' resilience, I found that women tried to navigate their challenges by working hard, having motivation, perseverance, and self-confidence, conducting time management and responsibility, and acquiring related skills and knowledge. Women had resilience while receiving support from family members, reducing household and childcare pressures, as well as developing cooperation and assistance from others and practicing teamwork. Through a better understanding of their challenges, the findings of my research would benefit Iranian women entrepreneurs, especially in the ICT sector.

Keywords: Iranian women entrepreneurs, ICT, gender role, liberal feminism, resilience

GENERAL SUMMARY

Despite the growth of women's entrepreneurship in Iran, significant challenges persist, including limited funding, gender biases, and insufficient government support. Women entrepreneurs in the ICT sector face additional hurdles such as economic instability, lack of access to cutting-edge technology, and gender role expectations. However, they exhibit resilience by leveraging skills like motivation, perseverance, and time management, and receiving support from family. This research sheds light on these challenges, offering insights to empower Iranian women entrepreneurs, particularly in the ICT sector.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

My research investigates the experiences of Iranian women entrepreneurs in the Information and Communications Technology sector (hereafter ICT), focusing on the different challenges that may hinder their activities as well as on their resilience to the challenges. Iran is the case study of choice because it is my home country and I have professional and personal experience in areas related to gender equality in Iran through working for eight years at the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs of Iran, the national authority on women's affairs in Iran. I was a women's affairs consultant. As such, I collected data and information related to women's status from national agencies to ensure gender equality is realized in the public and private sectors. I also coordinated gender-inclusive projects and programs between the Vice Presidency and related ministries and organizations in different countries, primarily in order to exchange the latest information on women and family status. As a coordinator, I attended workshops on women's empowerment, defined by the Vice-Presidency for Women and Family Affairs as the process where women can control their choices in their own lives and gain social and economic power; this empowerment was facilitated through ICT, and in this way I became interested in the topic.

ICT has been a significant part of global life and also has a positive impact on human development. ICTs include the internet, computers, and mobile phone-related businesses, in all of which Iranian women are under-represented as they comprise only 23% of graduates in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics at universities (Iran population, 2023). In my research, the way women entrepreneurs use ICT includes using websites or mobile apps to sell items or skills online or to interact with customers, using servers, or using technologies to facilitate home working.

Given the importance of ICT in today's life and the patriarchal culture in Iran, my research investigates the experiences of Iranian women entrepreneurs in the ICT sector. More specifically, I identify additional challenges and obstacles that women in ICT experience, including their social and economic challenges in the context of a patriarchal society, and I examine the resilience and coping strategies of women entrepreneurs to overcome these obstacles and gender-based challenges. In this way, my research contributes to the existing scholarly literature (Arasti, Rezayee, Zarei, & Shariat Panahi, 2012; Arasti, Maleki, Valinejad, & Mobaraki, 2013; Javadian & Singh, 2012; Hosseinzadeh & Kazemi, 2018; Arasti & Bahmani, 2017; Modarresi, Arasti, Talebi, & Farasatkah, 2017; Niazkar & Arab-Moghaddam, 2011) and highlights the diversity in women's entrepreneurship in ICT. Based on my educational background, namely an undergraduate degree in Economics, I have selected to study specifically entrepreneurship as part of my research because I have familiarity and facility with that realm. To conduct this research, I collected already published interviews with 12 women entrepreneurs in the media, prepared a codebook based on the interviews, and analyzed the result through feminist content analysis.

In entrepreneurship, the under-representation of women is universal. According to research, women often feel the need to overcome social barriers that limit their access to funding, mentorship, and opportunities (Knight, 2014; White, 2001). As a result, they may place extra emphasis on their professional appearance to align with the perceived expectations of being a successful entrepreneur (Ahmed, 2012; Delmar & Holmquist, 2004). In the Canadian context, women continue to shoulder greater family-related responsibilities and emotional labor (Whitney, 2017). This burden is even more pronounced for racialized women (Heller, 2000; Bogenhold & Klinglmair, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989), who also face additional challenges due to the

racism that hinders their access to power and resources (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Orser & Foster, 1994).

According to a World Economic Forum report (2020), Iran ranked 148 out of 153 countries in 2020 in gender equality. Among Middle Eastern and North African countries, Iran ranks below the 10 top countries in terms of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2020). As of 2020, Iranian women reported spending 21% of their time on unpaid domestic responsibilities and care work. In comparison, Iranian men spend 5.2% of their time on unpaid domestic work (Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic work in Iran as of 2020, by gender, 2022). In reality, this number for women's domestic labour is likely to be underrepresented in terms of time actually spent (Luxton, 1980). According to these statistics, women appear to shoulder a greater burden of labour and, by implication, have less time for leisure but also less time to devote to paid work. This is particularly important with the demands of self-employment.

Previous studies show that in Iran, dominant gender ideologies rooted in the social norms of a patriarchal culture limit women's ability to initiate and develop their businesses across a range of sectors (e.g., Arasti & Bahmani, 2017; Hosseinzadeh & Kazemi, 2018), and these studies demonstrate that women entrepreneurs as a group commonly face distinct challenges to accessing infrastructure services, in particular services such as telecommunication networks and the internet (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2014). In addition to infrastructure access, women entrepreneurs in Iran also face additional challenges related to societal expectations about their familial responsibilities. These expectations are not necessarily unique to Iran and they exist in other places, but the challenges may appear in distinct forms in Iran because of the overtly patriarchal nature of the social world and the place of the family in that world. As well, these expectations may be both held up by women entrepreneurs and challenged by them at the same time. In Iran, the family is

positioned as the central identity marker in society, with expected gender roles for men and women, and where women are viewed by others, and often by themselves, as the primary homemaker and, in some instances, mothers; men are expected by others, and by themselves, to be breadwinners (Tlaiss, 2014). Men's roles as fathers are expected to be minimal. Moreover, Iranian traditional culture follows stereotypes that tend to view women as weak; for example, a woman's daily living expenses are paid by the man in the household through his wages. Therefore, it is considered socially that a woman does not need to work outside the home, and her employment is seen as unnecessary. Economic arrangements also support these gender-specific roles as separate and distinct from one another. For this reason, to participate in business and to achieve their business goals, women in Iran need to intensify their efforts to combat existing gender stereotypes (Javadian & Singh, 2012). These stereotyped beliefs towards women and particularly towards women in business are rarely questioned, a situation that negatively affects women's entrepreneurship by putting social, political, economic and psychological obstacles in the way of their success (Hosseinzadeh & Kazemi, 2018). However, limited studies (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2014; Mivehchi, 2019) have investigated the experiences of Iranian women entrepreneurs in the ICT sector, and to the best of my knowledge, no study has investigated women entrepreneurs' resilience in the face of their challenges in the ICT.

1.1 Primary research questions

Having this context in mind, my research will address the following questions: *What challenges do Iranian women entrepreneurs working in the ICT sector face? What resilience and coping strategies do Iranian women entrepreneurs use to navigate their challenges? Put another way, according to these Iranian women entrepreneurs, what explains their success? And how do Iranian women share their successes and challenges in the media?*

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Experts use a variety of factors in their definitions of and references to entrepreneurs (Julien, 1998). Each discipline may potentially have its definition of the entrepreneur, however, according to Léo-Paul Dana (2021), professor of entrepreneurship at Montpellier Business, entrepreneurship is defined as the creation of new business enterprises by individuals or small groups, and entrepreneurs are people who can translate thoughts into action, all of which means that entrepreneurs are people who engage in activities they have designed (Dana, 2021).

According to Dana (2021), entrepreneurs initiate, implement, and develop their projects trying to use a limited number of resources to generate surpluses and profits for their enterprise which are sometimes reinvested to achieve further development (Dana, 2021). Louis Jacques Filion (2004) introduced the definitions of entrepreneurs according to the three main pioneers who dealt with this subject, namely Cantillon, Say, and Schumpeter. He concluded that a definition of entrepreneurs should include at least these six elements: innovation, opportunity recognition, risk management, action, use of resources and, added value (p.40).

My research explores resilience, or the ways that women face and counter some of the barriers that exist in the ICT sector and the various coping strategies that women employ. Resilience is a dynamic process in which a person exhibits the skills of positive adjustment during exposure to mismatches (Windle, Bennert, & Noyes, 2011, p.15), and entrepreneurial resilience, according to Bernard and Barbosa (2016) is defined as a dynamic adjustment process which aids business owners' development in spite of the difficult and unsteady conditions of the market.

Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio (2004) think that the concept of entrepreneurship itself comprises a gendered subtext as entrepreneurship is historically placed as a male action (Bruni et al., 2004, p.420). According to Elam (2008), being a woman and an entrepreneur involves

learning competent performance in both the practices associated with entrepreneurial activity as well as those connected with exhibiting the gender behavior that is both appropriate to it and that exists in the context around it. Rubio-Bañón and Esteban-Lloret (2016) argue that one of the main variables of women's entrepreneurship is related to the assignment of gender roles based on cultural norms. As noted in the context of Iran and its status as an Islamic republic, gender regimes and gendered roles within the family remain central identity markers in Iranian society, with little overlap in expected binary gender roles (Tlaiss, 2014). In instances where women are employed, including employment in entrepreneurial roles, they are expected to engage in these roles without compromising their gendered responsibilities as mothers, daughters, or daughters-in-law. The reality is often a double-day of labour that is already recognized in the context of contemporary feminist scholarship (Luxton, 1980), but which has specific manifestations in Iran.

Bullough, Guelich, Manolova, & Schjoedt (2022) presented eight empirical papers about societal and cultural dimensions of entrepreneurship, investigating different aspects of the dynamic interaction between gender and culture in forming women's entrepreneurship. They collected and organized empirical research into a framework about women's entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial culture with three overlapping themes: gender role expectations and identities, societal cultural dimensions, and the entrepreneurial environment. The authors explain that a supportive environment for women's entrepreneurship necessarily includes opportunities for growth and provision of human and financial capital. The factors that influence women's entrepreneurship vary depending largely on circumstances and cultural influences (Bullough et al., 2022).

Eagly and Karau (2002) argue that sex-role stereotyping happens when men are more respected in positions of business leadership roles than women, partly because men are believed

in the business world to possess the masculine characteristics, such as bravery and innovation, characteristics that are deemed necessary for leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2004). Inconsistencies between female leadership and gender role expectations lead to discrimination when women are considered less favorable than men as potential leaders because the socially expected behaviors for their gender roles are inconsistent with the perceived attributions of leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Women who exhibit these same characteristics are not necessarily deemed as successful in business by patriarchal business culture, but nevertheless may instead be deemed as failures in the expectation of gender conformity. This situation limits the ability of women to be regarded as leaders and/or to be defined as successful because even if they are considered successful in business, the characteristics that make for business success imply social 'gender failure'. In my research, successful businesses by women contradicted social expectations; women were aware of this, but they chose an employment path that would appear to deviate from the gendered expectations. Women were aware of their main social responsibility, which is their domestic duties, but they tried to be norm-breakers.

The framework of liberal feminist thinkers, outlined by Rosemary Tong, guides my research. Tong's (2011) key point is that liberal feminists want to liberate women from their socially specific, oppressive gender roles, and from those roles that are used as explanations or justifications for relegating women to a lesser central social place than men. As Tong explains, in addition to this main objective, liberal feminism is a useful theoretical framework here because it is one of the tenets of feminist thought that is most widely understood, and in some contexts, embraced. This is because liberal feminism highlights the principle of women's equality with men, albeit without careful regard to differences among women and the continued presence of systemic disadvantages, such as social class, or region. However, I do not take into account the

differences among women in my research because I am not aware of their race or class; my main focus here is strictly on gender equity, as it is itself such a fraught field in Iranian entrepreneurship.

Liberal feminists hold that women are disadvantaged relative to their men counterparts because of gender-based discrimination and systemic factors which deprive women of essential resources required for business and economic participation such as finance, education, and training. This presumes that access to finance, such as capital, education, and training, will result in equal opportunities (Fisher, Reuber & Dyke, 1993). In relation to my research, women are given a lesser place in the employment environment in Iran based on their place in the gender binary as women, and by minimizing the role this binary plays in business practices, entrepreneurship opportunities can be more equitable .

In order to enhance my analysis by addressing the gendered limitations of liberal feminism, I use neoliberal feminism approach. In 2018, American scholar Catherine Rottenberg coined the term neoliberal feminism to describe a progressive blend of feminism emphasizing individual liberties and neoliberal principles. This brand of feminism pragmatically asserts the persistence of gender inequalities, particularly in the workplace, advocating for women to assert themselves proactively. According to Rottenberg (2018), the shift towards neo-liberalized feminism replaces political critique and collective efforts to enact societal change with an emphasis on positive psychology, confidence, and adopting an entrepreneurial mindset for self-transformation. This aspect can help my theoretical analysis to be stronger. In my research, women embody the concept of self-responsibility, no longer seeking support from the state, government, or men collectively. One of the goals of my thesis is to analyze the extent to which women's behaviors conform to liberal/neo-liberal feminism.

1.3 Literature Review

As per the report of Global Entrepreneurship Monitor's 2021 to 2022 on Women's Entrepreneurship in North America, women make up 42% of new entrepreneurs, in Europe 37%, in Latin America and the Caribbean 27%, in Asia 22%, in the Middle East and North Africa 10%, and in Sub-Saharan Africa 24%. Compared to the global proportion, the proportion of women entrepreneurs is much lower in Asia. Agrawal, Bakhshi, Chandani, Birau, and Mendon (2023) conducted a study on 31 women entrepreneurs from India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. They found that women entrepreneurs in South Asia face significant challenges to support and success because many women entrepreneurs lack formal education, entrepreneurship education, capital, skilled and trained manpower, as well as management skills, networking opportunities, infrastructural support, and they deal with fear of failure, gender discrimination, while they are loaded with family responsibilities. The authors discussed that women entrepreneurs usually face discrimination and are viewed socially as less competent than men. Access to finance is another considerable challenge for women, as they generally have limited access to financial resources including credit, making it difficult for them to commence or scale up their business. Women entrepreneurs also have limited access to education and training hindering their ability to develop the abilities and understanding necessary to commence and continue successful business. They also lack access to networks and resources, such as mentors, required associations, and other support services that help them overcome the challenges. Women entrepreneurs in South Asia also frequently face challenges in matching work and family responsibilities, which further makes it hard to raise their business (Agrawal et al., 2023).

Iran is an Islamic country and some researchers of Islamic cultures (Roomi & Parrott, 2008; Roomi, 2013) argue that disagreements in the family could impede the development of

women-owned businesses, disagreements that are primarily rooted in traditional beliefs or misinterpretation of religious principles. At the family level, in Iran, the main responsibility of a woman is to the family. Conventionally and based on Islamic law, a woman needs her husband's consent to work outside the home. Hence, Taghizadeh, Ebadi, Mohammadi, Pourreza, Kazemnejad, and Bagherzadeh (2017) argue that women in Iran typically prioritize family responsibilities, and it is often difficult for them to perform family and job roles at the same time. Taghizadeh et al. (2017) obtained data from 29 participants using individual in-depth interviews. The participants described achieving a number of advantages for themselves and their families as a result of working outside the home. However, they also had various difficulties due to the increased potential to have different problematic health issues, including physical, reproductive, and mental health challenges. So, due to the double day and double shift, the workload of Iranian women who earn money and also have domestic responsibilities that are unpaid cause some women to stay at home. Javaheri and Ghazarti (2004) suggest, in their research with Iranian women in employment, that the feelings of guilt and anxiety from the demands of these expectations is one of the main causes of damage to women's mental health.

As already discussed, in Iran, the man is considered the breadwinner of the house, so women's participation in the paid labour market and women's economic activities are regarded by men as unnecessary (Rafatjah & Kheirkhah, 2012). Even if the man's income is not adequate for familial support, the husband will decide if he wants his wife to do paid work or not. The woman is required to try her best to manage her husband's income and household expenses.

1.3.1 Women Entrepreneurship in Iran

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), the binarized female/male total early-stage entrepreneurial activity ratio in Iran in 2018 and 2019 was 0.5 and 0.63,

respectively, lower than the Global ratio of (0.71). In other words, the percentage of Iranian women entrepreneurs is only 8.23% (Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Attitudes, 2022). However, in my research, the media portrayed some women as successful entrepreneurs, possibly to show the opportunities open to women in Iran, as an encouragement to other women to initiate entrepreneurial activities, or maybe to show a good public image of women's progress in Iran. However, when only a minority of women engage in entrepreneurial activities successfully, the public representation can be misleading.

Capitalism in Iran operates within a unique framework due to the country's mixed economy, which combines elements of central planning with market forces. The government controls key sectors such as energy and heavy industries, while there is also a growing private sector involved in smaller businesses and services. Economic sanctions have had a profound impact, limiting international trade and investment opportunities, while domestic challenges include inflation, unemployment, and income inequality (Alizadeh & Hakimian, 2019).

In Iran, the inequality of labour opportunity is generated in part by patriarchal Iranian culture which pushes women to adopt perceived socially ideal roles as mothers and wives, and seeks to marginalize them from public life (It's a men's club, 2017). In Iran, in 2021, women constituted 49.25% of the population; however, based on the Statista Research Department, only three million Iranian women -- out of a total labor force of 21.3 million -- participate in the paid labour market (Female labour force participation rate, 2022). Due to the high rate of women's unemployment in Iran, some women are likely motivated to start their own businesses. This motivation may not be a reflection of how entrepreneurship is viewed, but rather it is chosen because there are limited opportunities for other paid employment and income. Public recognition of women's entrepreneurial successes likely masks structural inequalities in Iran, and

very likely, many other contexts where women as a group are disadvantaged in the paid labour force. Actually, the Government of Iran is behind this representation. The Government wants to use women's success as a cover for gender inequality in Iran (It's a men's club, 2017).

Some studies, which are of particular interest to my examination, have presented cultural norms and values as barriers to women's entrepreneurship; one of the main concerns regarding women's entrepreneurship throughout this study is the importance of these cultural barriers. According to Arasti, Rezayee et al. (2012), norms and values in Iran are identified by both the government and formal references such as religion and traditional social practices. For example, the government of Iran, based on Islamic laws, assigns the man or husband to be responsible for providing for his wife and children financially. Also, some beliefs -- such as that a woman's mind is limited, or that women are emotional -- are dominant social narratives directing the people's mindset and have nothing to do with the laws.

Arasti, Maleki et al. (2013) investigated the motivations of women entrepreneurs in starting a business and the effect of women entrepreneurs on business growth. They prepared 62 questionnaires for women entrepreneurs in Iran, giving the same questionnaire to 62 women. They found that women's main motivations were having economic independence and social prestige. They also discovered that due to the stereotypes about women, such that women must have children and must take care of children or that women do not need equal pay in Iran, women entrepreneurs must work harder to demonstrate their competency as business owners to customers, to suppliers, and to other stakeholders in the business world. These stereotyped beliefs form the prevailing dominant beliefs about women, their abilities, and about their employment, all of which may negatively affect women's entrepreneurship (Hosseinzadeh & Kazemi, 2018).

I worked to integrate the existing scholarly literature, especially studies conducted in Iran on the topic of women's entrepreneurship (Modarresi et al., 2017; Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam, 2011; Modarresi and Arasti, 2021; Bahramitash and Esfahani, 2014; Mivehchi, 2019) into my discussion. I focused on scholarly literature in journals in the fields of Gender Studies (in both Western and Iranian contexts), and in entrepreneurship, typically included in the disciplines of Business and Economics. Also, where possible, I focused on the challenges of women's entrepreneurship in Iran, especially in ICT.

Some studies were conducted on women's entrepreneurship in Iran in different fields. For example, in 2011, Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam conducted a study on barriers to women's entrepreneurship development among Iranian women who graduated from universities in Shiraz, the fifth-most-populous city in Iran. Their objective was to identify and evaluate barriers to the development of entrepreneurship among Iranian women who were graduated from universities. They did not focus on a specific field of entrepreneurship. They conducted seven in-depth interviews and prepared questionnaires for 37 women. The identified barriers were structural, socio-cultural, economic-financial, and personal-familial. Women were requested to rate the importance of these barriers as "less important," "almost important," and "very important" (Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam, 2011, p. 9). Socio-cultural barriers based on Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam's study (2011) include the negative attitudes towards women's entrepreneurship in Iran and the lack of national will of authorities to expand entrepreneurship. Fourteen women out of 37 considered these barriers as "very important." Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam (2011) suggest that women have multi-gender role expectations that lead to limited opportunities for them to create and expand their activities. Also, features required for entrepreneurship, such as leadership, risk tolerance, and desire to progress were influenced by the negative attitude toward

women which result in reducing women's entrepreneurship. Economic-financial barriers according to Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam (2011) include a lack of market stability, a lack of financial support by the government, and instability of foreign exchange. The significance of the economic-financial barrier was stated to be "very important" by twelve women out of thirty-seven.

One year later, Arasti, Rezayee et al. (2012) conducted a study to identify environmental factors affecting the growth of women entrepreneurs in Tehran, the capital of Iran, through conducting 10 semi-structured interviews. Their findings indicated environmental factors in three groups: economic, sociocultural, and legal factors. In terms of economic factors, access to financial sources and lack of skilled and trained labour forces are the most often mentioned barriers. Sociocultural barriers identified by Arasti, Rezayee et al. (2012) included cultural norms and values and work-home conflicts. For example, women in their research mentioned that it is too difficult for them to be good mothers, wives, and managers at the same time because of a lack of time and energy, as well as household support. Legal factors based on Arasti, Rezayee et al. (2012) include banking rules and regulations, and tax laws that delimit the independent involvement of women. For instance, women in their research deal with many challenges to get loans from banks, because of the complexity of the process of obtaining facilities, and the high interest rate in Iran.

Hosseini, Bakhtiari, and Lashgarara (2012) studied the role of micro-credit funds in developing entrepreneurship among rural women in the Lorestan Province of Iran and 188 respondents were selected by random sampling. According to them, micro-credit projects are a primary source of providing financial assistance to rural women. The establishment of a micro-credit fund would enhance women's capacity for starting entrepreneurship (they did not consider

the marital status of women). Hosseini et al. (2012) discussed that the potential in encouraging women to start a business depends on the enhancement of their economic situation and the alleviation of their poverty.

Also, Modarresi et al. (2017), studied the growth barriers to women's home-based businesses (HBBs) in Tehran in the handicraft industry. The purpose of their study was to identify the growth barriers of women's HBBs in Iran. They conducted 22 in-depth interviews with Iranian female home-based business owners/managers operating in the handicraft industry. A significant number of the interviewed women were dissatisfied with the masculine working environment in Iran, lack of trust in women, unequal opportunities for women, and negative stereotypes against women (Modarresi et al., 2017). They discovered that women suffered from a lack of marketing knowledge and a need for business marketing training. Most of the women in their study lacked sufficient previous experience in doing business. Almost half of them had not had high educational levels and were not graduated in management or business fields of study. Also, they found that the biggest barrier that most of the interviewed women in their study faced in terms of business growth was related to a lack of capital and difficulty in financing the growth of their business including receiving loans. They believed that the government's financial support for HBBs was too little. In Modarresi et al.'s (2017) study, most of the women talked about their family's support in expanding their businesses and only three women expressed that their families (spouse, children) were against their business.

1.3.2 Entrepreneurship and ICT

An increasing number of entrepreneurs are these days adopting social media, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, for more competitiveness in their businesses since these media can offer more tools for entrepreneurs to expand social interplays and sustain those

relations (Redd & Wu, 2020). A digital entrepreneur is someone who is involved in creating and delivering main business undertakings and tasks, containing production, marketing, distribution, and stakeholder management, using digital technologies (Ngoasong, 2018). In Iran, the contribution of digital technologies to women's entrepreneurship has been scrutinized by some researchers. Bahramitash and Esfahani (2014) conducted a study investigating women's challenges in entrepreneurship in the IT sector. They compared Iran to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions. Their main findings were: Iranian women-owned and/or operated businesses frequently face challenging conditions to access some infrastructure services in comparison to MENA regions, in particular telecommunications and the Internet including the slow and constricted Internet, followed by the unreliability of electricity supply. They also found that international economic sanctions were a major obstacle for women's businesses. However, economic sanctions were barriers to both men and women. According to their findings, there were few complaints among female entrepreneurs regarding other aspects of business, such as obtaining permits and paying taxes, in comparison to the rest of the MENA region.

Mivehchi (2019) also conducted a study on the role of IT in women's entrepreneurship in Iran. She gathered data through questionnaires from 40 sales representatives of Oriflame (a cosmetic company) on social media in Iran, all of whom were women. Her main findings were: IT plays a significant role in increasing the marketing and sales of products for Iranian women entrepreneurs. Over 95% of the Oriflame sales representatives believed that IT has a significant effect on access to a job opportunity. The reason for this, around 98% of the participants believed, was that IT has a significantly positive effect on the time-saving of sales agents or buyers and around 93% believed that IT has a significantly positive effect on their sales growth.

1.3.3 Entrepreneurship and Resilience

To date, there is some analysis of women's entrepreneurial resilience in the scholarly literature in Iran. Badzaban, Rezaei-Moghaddam, and Fatemi 2021 analyzed the entrepreneurial resilience of rural women in Iran by using a questionnaire (they did not mention how many questions it included, or how many questionnaires were distributed). They discovered that the resilience of rural women entrepreneurs was due to the characteristics and behaviours of individual competencies, accepting positive changes, trust in their own inherent talents, control, and faith. According to Badzaban et al. (2021), individual competencies include believing in attaining objectives, not being frustrated, not being disappointed after failure, believing in their own ability, lacking fear, and having pride in their achievements. Accepting positive changes includes adapting to changes, having a close friend, solving problems, being sure of progress, and returning to primary status after difficulty. Trust in their own inherent talents includes considering the positive aspect of problems, coping with stress, maintaining focus under pressure, being independent, making difficult and unexpected decisions, and controlling anger. Control includes having control during stress and crisis, following a specific objective, and controlling life events. Finally, faith includes believing in God or predestination during the lack of a solution, and expediency in each good or bad event. Another study, written in Persian, was conducted in 2020 by the same authors mentioned above, Badzaban, Rezaei-Moghaddam, and Fatemi. They analyzed the resilience of rural women entrepreneurs in the Fars province of Iran. They prepared 269 questionnaires for women entrepreneurs in the agriculture sector in three different villages in the Fars province. They discovered that the variables of entrepreneurial will (the willingness to be an entrepreneur), entrepreneurial motivation, and the number of family members respectively predict the changes in women's individual resilience. They found that in order to improve the resilience of women's entrepreneurship, it is necessary to grow and improve

their individual competencies. In detail, 38 percent of women have the will to be an entrepreneur. These women are people with high self-confidence, responsible, and future-seekers who are interested in activities that increase their capabilities to solve problems. Further, 28 percent of women have the motivation to start a business. The findings show that the most motivation in women is related to earning income and profit in order to be financially independent and answer to their financial needs. Also, based on the findings, there is a negative and significant relationship between the number of family members and women's individual resilience, which means that as the number of family members increases, the individual resilience of female entrepreneurs will decrease because they demand her time, attention, and labour even if those family members do support her entrepreneurial intentions in principle.

Based on the previous studies (Arasti, Rezayee et al., 2012; Arasti, Maleki et al., 2013; Javadian & Singh, 2012; Hosseinzadeh & Kazemi, 2018; Arasti & Bahmani, 2017; Modarresi et al., 2017; Niazkar & Arab-Moghaddam, 2011), in the conservative context of contemporary Iran, women entrepreneurs are seen as non-conforming by men since these women act against cultural norms by venturing out of the domestic realm -- such as household management and child and elder caring -- to pursue activities in the public realm, such as working outside the home. In reality, most are probably expected to occupy and to succeed in both of these realms simultaneously. By breaking into the public realm to engage in new ventures, business creation, and/or business ownership, women entrepreneurs may be limited by some barriers such as lack of or limited family support, and limited access to funding and networks. Also, based on the previous findings (Badzaban et al., 2021 & Badzaban et al., 2020), resilient entrepreneurs accept changes rather than resist them and demonstrate high risk-taking and tolerance for achieving goals and managing challenges. According to them, the main characteristics of women's

resilience in entrepreneurship in rural areas include improving self-confidence, not being afraid of problems and facing them, having support from family or friends, controlling life events, and believing and trusting in God's help. Resilience here means overcoming the obstacles Iranian society puts in the way of women entrepreneurs, rather than trying to change the social conditions that set the obstacles in the first place.

As explained above, many studies were conducted to examine different socio-cultural barriers to women starting and developing their businesses (Arasti, Rezayee et al., 2012; Arasti, Maleki et al., 2013; Javadian & Singh, 2012; Hosseinzadeh & Kazemi, 2018; Arasti & Bahmani, 2017; Modarresi et al., 2017; Niazkar & Arab-Moghaddam, 2011) and some studies investigated women's resilience to their challenges (Badzaban et al., 2021; Badzaban et al., 2020). However, some barriers were excluded in others' findings. For example, the obstacles that are specific to Iran include bribery, brain drain, decrease in tourism, filtering (e.g., political sites, news media), and some Islamic laws that are practiced in Iran, such as the month of Ramadan and the mandatory hijab. I dedicated a section to these barriers in the next chapters. Also, my study adds some findings to the existing literature. These include the ways women express their experiences in the media. My research goes beyond the academic contexts to address a public, non-academic context. In other words, my work is unique because it analyzes the content of public media on Iranian women entrepreneurs in the ICT sector, an analysis which has not been done before. To the best of my knowledge, limited studies have investigated the personal and structural challenges of women entrepreneurs in the ICT sector who are labeled as "successful" by the public media in Iran. The existing scholarly studies on women entrepreneurs' resilience in Iran are in the agriculture sector only. I examined the resilience of women entrepreneurs toward their challenges in the ICT sector which, as far as I know, was not investigated before.

1.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described the rationale for the study and the research questions it explored. I provided a brief discussion of the previous studies in this context. I provided definitions of entrepreneurship, entrepreneur, and the gendered aspect of entrepreneurship as well as explaining the liberal feminists' view of women in entrepreneurship and how that best reveals what is at stake in these studies. In the last section of this introductory chapter, I described the existing scholarly literature on women's entrepreneurship in Iran in different fields including the studies conducted on women entrepreneurs' barriers, such as financial, cultural, family, and personal obstacles to their success, in the context of the limited other literature that studies women entrepreneurs' resilience. In the end, what was excluded from the studies and what my study would add to the existing literature centre on the role of women in and use of entrepreneurship in the ICT sector. In the next chapter, I provide a detailed description of my methodology including my data collection, coding procedure, data analysis and my challenges and limitations.

CHAPTER 2- METHODOLOGY

2.1 Data Collection

In my research, I undertake a secondary data analysis. I analyzed the published interviews of women entrepreneurs in Iran from different publications and reports; I did not conduct the interviews myself. Although I intended initially to conduct interviews with Iranian women entrepreneurs, this did not prove to be the most fruitful route for exploring these questions because women were not forthcoming to participate in research interviews on their entrepreneurship. When I contacted one of the potential participants, for example, she said that she already participated in many interviews already and felt that no one had analyzed her ideas or their significance. For this reason, in choosing this secondary data analysis approach found in this thesis, I hope to be able to follow through at least on what the participants would like to see considered in relation to their words. Many of the women included in this research are already well-known in Iran. Some of them are household names and are regarded by various media outlets as “success stories.” I took the interviews from these public media outlets, which include a print publication report entitled “Economic Empowerment of Women with the Use of Information and Communication Technology” from the Iranian Entrepreneurship Development Foundation for Women and Youth (June 2019), online outlets including national news networks in Iran, and publicly published interviews from different Iranian websites such as women’s organizations. None of these materials are scholarly studies. In other words, there are no studies besides these reports and interviews. For this reason, they are important secondary sources of information about the experiences of women in entrepreneurship, and in ICT in particular. With no other access to data about the experiences of Iran’s women in entrepreneurship, and no women willing to discuss their experiences, these secondary sources allow for an analysis that can help explain the practice, obstacles, and resilience to obstacles these women.

I analyze the words of 12 women, based on a total of 26 interviews spanning a time period from 2013 to 2020. The Iranian Entrepreneurship Development Foundation for Women and Youth is a non-governmental and non-profit organization to develop the concept of entrepreneurship and employment freedom for Iranian women and youth. Its mission includes the right of access to fair and creative work for all members of society, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, formal education, and physical and mental ability. Its website contains many reports and information regarding women entrepreneurs in various fields, and is an important data source for this study. All the sources that I analyze are publicly available and accessible. In order to collect relevant interviews, as well as information regarding the experiences of women entrepreneurs, I searched for keywords to find the sources with interviews. Some keywords included: “information and communication technology,” “women entrepreneurship,” “challenges of women at work,” and “gender role and stereotypes in entrepreneurship.” I also searched these keywords in combination and in combination with the names of the women (both in English and Persian). I found the names from the Iranian Entrepreneurship Development Foundation for Women and Youth website.

Since I did not conduct the interviews myself, I am limited to the secondary data provided by media outlets. One of the advantages of this approach is that it helps to illustrate what government reports and media outlets define and therefore select as a “success story”. This “mediates” certain narratives over others about what women’s entrepreneurial success can or should look like. At the same time, a possible (and likely) disadvantage is that the retelling of this story can create and perpetuate a singular trope about what “success” looks like without sufficient room for variations in the relevant circumstances that shape these experiences, or recognition of the social conditions that led to those successes. Ultimately, another advantage of

this approach is that I put my emphasis on data analysis rather than devoting my time and energy to collecting primary data. I found (from the media outlets) more than one interview with all of the entrepreneurs, except for Fariba Yarahmadi I found only one interview, and the largest number of interviews I found was of three for Azadeh Danandeh. Finally, in the Appendix, I include profiles of the women in the interview study, including the descriptions of women's businesses, the name and educational background of the women entrepreneurs, as well as the name and location of their companies, the date companies were established, companies' type, history, and size. They are listed alphabetically.

Bahramitash and Esfahani (2014) used a secondary data approach in relation to studying women's entrepreneurship in Iran. As explained in Chapter 1, they conducted a study investigating women's challenges in entrepreneurship in the IT sector. They analyzed the findings from a survey that used the World Bank Enterprise Survey questionnaire. Other studies have used the primary data collection method (e.g., Modarresi et al., 2017; Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam, 2011; Modarresi and Arasti, 2021; Mivehchi, 2019).

I chose 12 women entrepreneurs all with at least five years of operational experience. This was an arbitrary cut-off and it was possible to include others with less than five years of experience, but five years of experience is considered a good foundation to build a career. A business that has been started for less than five years has a high chance of being canceled. Hopp and Sonderegger (2015) examined how pre-start-up experience and intentions influence the process of creating a new venture. They validated their hypotheses using longitudinal data spanning five years, which monitors the venture creation endeavors of nascent entrepreneurs, and discover supportive evidence for our predictions. Results show that both factors impact the progress entrepreneurs make in organizing their ventures, with experience and positive intentions

correlating with more organizing activities. Additionally, the timing of these activities influences the likelihood of successful venture creation (Hopp and Sonderegger, 2015).

In my criteria, I included only women entrepreneurs' businesses that are internet-based start-ups as my focus is exclusively on the ICT sector. The fact that I only consider 12 case studies is a limitation of the study that has to do with the social conditions of the focus of my study. That is, I do not have access to women entrepreneurs working in the field of ICT because those without a high profile are unlikely to attract the same media attention and/or may be regarded as less famous or less successful, and tend to be unwilling to talk on record. For this reason, my approach does not reflect the overall engagement of women in the ICT sector or their entrepreneurial engagement in this sector. Because this study analyzes the representation of the obstacles and resilience to obstacles in the media-based interviews of women entrepreneurs, I do not extrapolate from these 12 case studies to make broad observations about all women's employment or entrepreneurial successes. In some ways, reports and media already pre-selected all of these 12 women, whose interview data I examine more closely because they are already the subjects of profiles. In the contexts of existing reports and media, they have already been designated as public examples to provide for other women in Iran, perhaps with the intention of encouraging them to start their own businesses, albeit perhaps only in the ways that these women are represented to have done it. Therefore, the overall goal of my research is to investigate the challenges of Iranian women entrepreneurs in the ICT sector and their resilience strategies, in and through their portrayal in the media.

In order to organize the data, I generated data codes and a codebook from the materials published in the above public sources. Codes are defined as tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information listed during a study (DeCuir-Gunby,

Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011). They are themes produced by the researcher in order to assign meaning to recurrent themes in a text, and the codebook is the set of codes, definitions, and examples used as a guide and instruction to help analyze data (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011).

I generated the codes based on my research questions, so, I began with broad categories including challenges and barriers to women's entrepreneurship and then came up with the specific codes including gender role expectations (including family and childcare), lack of trust in women in Iran, human resources, literacy and education, laws, finances, and challenges specific to Iran. These codes emerged from the existing textual data. While all of them are related broadly to women's entrepreneurship in ICT, some of the codes are very different from one another. Some codes are related to personal barriers, such as education, finances, and challenges specific to Iran. Some are related to barriers on working conditions, such as lack of trust in women in Iran, human resources, and laws, and some are related to barriers related to domestic-specific circumstances, such as gender role expectations, including family and childcare. I defined each code. For example, the code of gender role expectations pays attention to how gender roles and stereotypes affect women in their entrepreneurial path at personal, family, and social levels. Thus, I looked for moments where gender roles affect the experience of women entrepreneurs. I conducted the coding process for each source line-by-line. Going through the texts, I identified words and phrases that met the criteria of the code inclusion. I read between the lines as Persian is my mother tongue and I can understand the implied meaning. I did the same procedure for each source separately with the same codes. I translated the pertinent sections intended for inclusion in my thesis from Persian to English. The time I spent on coding (excluding the translation process) was around one hour per page. Each interview consists of a

minimum of five pages and a maximum of ten pages. I ignored the data that did not fit my codebook.

2.2 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I performed content analysis using a feminist approach since the material I used was exclusively textual. According to Leavy (2007), content analysis is a systematic research method used to study text and other cultural products that are not living. In content analysis, the researcher does not generate the raw data through surveys or interviews, but rather gathers and analyzes preexisting data, such as newspapers, books, websites, magazines, pictures, diaries, literature, music, and television programs (Leavy, 2007). In this way, it is a method of analysis, not a method of collection.

Feminist content analyses adopt the same method as content analysis, with particular emphases on perspectives on race, gender, class, and sexuality. Gender was an integral part of reporting because it was assumed that entrepreneurs who were women were exceptional in some way and thus were regarded as worthy of consideration as women. I do not consider social class in my data, but the women entrepreneurs whose interviews I analyzed have university degrees, which means they had the means and support to attend university and, it seems, to develop entrepreneurial activities with that background. The media chose these women to show a good image of women in Iran as part of the dominant or intended message of these interview media stories. Within the realm of television news and current affairs programs, Hall (1980) contended that events needed to undergo encoding into televisual narratives that convey a desired meaning. The seemingly inherent nature of television codes masks their potential for promoting certain ideologies.

I interpreted the data relying on feminist lenses. More specifically, I analyzed the findings using Tong's (2011) framework of liberal feminism to examine understandings about the importance of women's liberation from oppressive societal gender roles. In relation to the entrepreneurship of women in Iran, when viewed through a liberal feminist lens, business success is regarded as a form of societal liberation, one that provides women in Iran with opportunities for decision-making, autonomy, and income.

Place-based knowledge production is integral to my research. I am specifically interested in the knowledge that is produced about women entrepreneurs in Iran and my own research is part of that knowledge production. I bring my own experience and interpretations, including my knowledge of feminist research methodologies, to this specific focus. Research that is conducted in other contexts about women entrepreneurs or about ICT sector participation is not as relevant to the conditions that I seek to better understand in contemporary Iran. This study is intended as a secondary-level analysis of public reports of Iranian women's entrepreneurship in ICT and its representation in media sources. While there is an existing scholarship on Iranian women's entrepreneurship (Modarresi et al., 2017; Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam, 2011; Modarresi and Arasti, 2021; Bahramitash and Esfahani, 2014; Mivehchi, 2019), to the best of my knowledge, this scholarship does not examine its relation to ICT nor how this employment is communicated, as a series of successes and challenges, through media outlets.

2.3 Limitations and challenges

In conducting this analysis, I had some personal as well as research-related challenges and limitations. In terms of research-related limitations, there are clear limitations to analyzing such a broad range of materials. I am also aware of the limitation of the data sources I use. As explained earlier, I worked only with interview data that was already generated and I had no

opportunity to follow up with more precise information, to request examples, or to ask for clarification. Also, in some cases, the questions that were asked in the media interviews I assess may have been intended to reflect a specific purpose, such as minimizing barriers, or shaping a particular definition of “success.” I take these variables into account in my analysis by considering how these narratives still reveal particular obstacles, intentionally (to follow a social narrative of women as primary careers and emotional) or unintentionally (as my analysis shows). For example, the tendency in media outlets to highlight one woman at a time underreported the likelihood of support among a community of women and may have equated success with personal attributes.

Moreover, as I did not conduct the interviews myself, my analysis is limited to the information that is provided by media outlets. Media outlets share information, but in doing so, they also have particular political meanings and agendas, and that the information that they share may not be objective or true to the experiences of the women interviewed. In this instance, media outlets may find it beneficial to promote entrepreneurship as an alternative for women and to make it appear accessible in ways that minimize the challenges they continue to face. This strategy would have the benefit of making the economy appear more robust and while minimizing public perceptions about the disadvantages of gender expectations. It is also likely that success stories were highlighted and that stories about entrepreneurial failures were unlikely to garner media attention through individual profiles. Given that the media only offered stories of success and only of individual women entrepreneurs, my analysis can consider both what women entrepreneurs do, the obstacles involved in their entrepreneurship, and how this is presented to give a certain message in Iran.

A significant limitation of this research method was the limited information available to me. There are limitations in all types of methods; in this research, I relied on media outlets to determine significance and to provide the secondary data I analyzed. In doing this research, there were a number of occasions where I needed to know more details about women's challenges as well as their companies' information, but the data available was limited. The brevity of media reports was a limitation and none of the sources I used provided in-depth analyses or traced lengthy trajectories for establishing and maintaining a business.

A further significant research-related challenge was language translation. All the data I gathered was in Persian and I translated materials into English. It was a very time-consuming task and there are some cultural and linguistic differences that had the potential to cause misunderstandings. For example, when women talked about bribery in Iran, I could not totally understand what they mean and its cultural significance (or insignificance), even when they did not explain it thoroughly. Bribery is something that Iranian people talk about always because it happens in their everyday life. But it is important to explain it carefully in my research to convey the women's point of view, and how bribery relates to obstacles and resilience with women entrepreneurs. Not all contexts translate easily into the predominantly Western spaces in which they might normally be read and considered because the meaning of cultural acts differs.

A personal challenge for me was that I conducted this study remotely. First, I live in Calgary due to my husband's job and I could not attend the graduate courses or the meetings with my supervisor in person. Therefore, the lack of instant communication and lack of access to resources, such as working with hard copies of books from the library or discussing my work with colleagues, were challenges. Also, I am a mother of a 10-month-old girl, which means I have childcare and family responsibilities that can take precedence to my studies. Secondly, I had

personal research challenges that were technical. During periods of my study, I traveled to my home country, Iran. There, I had many difficulties joining the meetings and classes due to the low internet speed and filtering of the websites. However, despite the long physical distance, my supervisor supported me with an additional effort for virtual communications. We had virtual meetings through Webex whenever needed and she provided me more flexibility in her schedule to exchange emails.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented an explanation of my research methodology and method. I provided the rationale for choosing secondary data analysis as well as its limitations. Also, the sources I used and the coding process is carefully explained. The data analysis procedure including feminist content analysis is described. In the end, I clarified my personal as well as research-related challenges and limitations. In the next chapter, I provide a discussion on my findings using the above-mentioned methodology.

CHAPTER 3 - DATA FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

I categorized the research findings into two sections: women's entrepreneurial barriers, and women's resilience and coping strategies to those barriers. Section 1 outlines and analyzes some of the barriers that are evident in already published media interviews with women entrepreneurs. Section 2 examines women's resilience to the barriers found in this data. Section 1 reflects the barriers that are often performative in nature; in other words, they are mentioned so that there is an opportunity to discuss how they are overcome, and in particular to demonstrate the personal traits that were important for overcoming them. This is a neoliberal strategy. That is, this type of discussion serves to limit the structural barriers that persist and may serve to prevent a more favorable environment for future women's entrepreneurship. Some examples of barriers include: gender role expectations, including women's family responsibilities and childcare in Iranian culture. Another example of a barrier includes a lack of trust in women in Iran by men in the context of a patriarchal culture with a strict gender division, where men's business engagement is the norm and women's engagement in businesses is regarded as secondary. Section 2 discusses women's personal as well as collective resilience strategies to deal with, overcome, or negotiate their challenges.

In the following, I provide a discussion of women's barriers as reflected in the publicly available interviews. Moreover, some women talked about experiences beyond their own. That is, they talked about the experiences of their female employees as well, narrations of experiences I take into account as well because they bespeak what women entrepreneurs value, expect, endure, and deal with.

Section 1: Women's Entrepreneurial Barriers

3.1.1 Gender role expectations

In discussing gender role expectations, the literature refers to paying attention to how gender roles affect women in their entrepreneurial path. According to Brush, Edelman, Manolova, and Welter (2019), some women who own and operate businesses may face double responsibilities for family and paid work. It is often expected that these are incompatible responsibilities and that the demands of one area negatively impinge on the other area, a zero-sum game of time and attention between family and career. The stereotype of “think successful entrepreneur – think male” still exists (Eddleston et al., 2016, p.497). The same questions tend not to be asked about men's activities because it is often presumed that heterosexual relations are the norm, that labour is divided by gender roles, and that men who own and operate businesses have no responsibilities for unpaid labour in households (Eddleston et al., 2016, p.499). This kind of polarization upholds gendered roles in public and private spheres and maintains concomitant social expectations.

In the context of gender and entrepreneurship, Brush et al. (2019) argue that entrepreneurship is predictably characterized as masculine activity and its characterization in this way can discourage women more. Bird and Brush (2002) also discuss that ambitious, courageous, and risk-taking behavior as well as pursuing high-growth businesses are the gendered attributes that are associated with masculine behaviors of entrepreneurship. Orser, Elliott, and Leck (2011) describe the masculine entrepreneurial character as the competitive, active, independent, decision maker, not giving up easily, feeling superior, self-confident, and standing up under pressure. Meanwhile, feminine entrepreneurial characteristics include being emotional, sympathetic, and warm, devoting oneself completely to others, being kind, a supporter, and understanding others' feelings. Likewise, Gupta, Wieland, and Turban (2019)

argue that the male–female stereotypes, biases, and gender role expectations make entrepreneurial achievement and success more difficult for women than for men. In general, the traits of successful entrepreneurship have come to be defined as those traits that are more likely to be associated with men and socially desirable male behavior, including ambition, courage, and risk-taking behavior. However, there is nothing innate about these as gendered behaviors. It may be the case that when these same behaviors and/or traits are exhibited by women, they are regarded as aberrant or undesirable because they do not conform to gender stereotypes. On the other hand, Brush et al. (2019) suggests that the female entrepreneurial prototype is described by men to be motherly, caring-giving, child-raising, less innovative, and struggling to balance work and family responsibilities (Brush, 1992). Based on the continuation of these gender stereotypes, entrepreneurial characteristics for women may include emotional, sympathetic, warm, devoting self completely to others, being kind, supportive, and understanding others' feelings. Not only are women and men considered to be (socially constructed as) different, but their forms of entrepreneurship differ according to those same gender differences.

Nine of the twelve women (Golmar, Mahdis, Arezoo, Azadeh, Faezeh, Atefeh, Shaghayegh, Tabassom, and Nasim) whose narratives were examined in media sources, said they faced challenges related to gender role expectation. This is not likely to be a sum of all of those who faced gendered expectations, but they do dominate the experiences of this sample. These expectations could be taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life in Iran, and as such, may not have been warranted as topics of interest. It could also have been the case that women being interviewed were aware that their comments were public and they did not want to be seen as negative or to be judged harshly. Similarly, women as well as men, may also face gendered

expectations about entrepreneurship. However, given the gender-based restrictions in Iran, it is likely that women and men face very different gendered-based experiences.

Modarresi et al. (2017) studied the growth barriers to women's home-based businesses (HBBs) in Tehran, the capital of Iran. They found that having work interactions with men was a barrier to women-owned HBBs. It may have been the case that women moved to home-based work environments because they were dissatisfied with the masculine working environment in Iran; also, a lack of trust in women, unequal opportunities for women, and negative stereotypes against women were women's barriers. In Modarresi et al.'s (2017) study, one of the women participants, Zahra, said that her husband says women should not be financially independent and that if they are, they will become rude. His view was that a woman has the responsibility of taking care of her husband and children in the best manner, not working outside the home for pay. This affected her work by discouraging her at the beginning of her work.

Arasti, Rezayee et al. (2012) conducted a study to identify environmental factors affecting the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs in Tehran. Women in their research mentioned that it is too difficult for them to be good mothers, wives, and managers as well as entrepreneurs. These selected groups of women reported using special strategies to manage both, such as limiting the growth of their business so that it did not interfere with expected domestic responsibilities. This strategy serves to limit business growth and/or personal potential and does not shift the burden of responsibilities. It doubles the responsibilities, and likely the stresses, of women as business owners.

Nine of these 12 women (Golmar, Mahdis, Arezoo, Azadeh, Faezeh, Atefeh, Shaghayegh, Tabassom, and Nasim) whose accounts I analyzed reported that dominant social expectations dictate that women in Iran are expected to work at home and they need their

husband's permission to work outside the home. According to Article 1117 of the Civil Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a man has the right to oppose his wife's employment, and without his consent, a woman is banned from work. The need for permission from men to work outside the home runs contrary to the liberal principles of individual freedom and autonomy, and it may or may not be accepted by individual women. The dominant social expectation is that women's main responsibility is to be good mothers and wives. Similarly, it is expected in Iran that men are the breadwinners and responsible for paid labour, the provision of household expenses, and have decision making responsibilities. In this way, women entrepreneurs oppose existing social conventions because through their ingenuity and resourcefulness they are able to earn money. The stories of women entrepreneurs in my research are meant to deflect attention away from gender inequality in Iran. While it is tempting to suggest that women also have decision making responsibilities for household money, this is often an intensely personal area and for that reason, it is often difficult to determine how decisions are actually made. However, in the media interviews, some of the women may be reticent about their accomplishments, particularly their financial accomplishments, downplaying them in relation to their gender-based family roles.

In my data, there was some recognition of dominant gendered expectations. In the following citations, I refer to the women entrepreneurs of the interviews by their first names. Further, although marital status and the presence of children may be relevant, information about these can be accessed in the Appendix. In the first example, the entrepreneur discusses the family expectations of her employees who are women.

Arezo, a 39-year-old entrepreneur in a company that sells carpets online, said:
Some of my [women] employees resigned from their jobs and stayed at home due to pregnancy or lack of permission from their spouses (2022).

This juxtaposition between permission and autonomy affected the ability of entrepreneurs to locate and retain employees. While it is the case that women may be supportive of other women's employment, their responsibilities for domestic responsibilities are also recognized.

Similar to Arezoo, Atefeh, the CEO of Afarinesh Technology Network, a company that does business management and start-up consulting services, expressed her awareness of gender-based restraints that limit her ability to employ women,

Many people tell me that a woman should not work outside and the most important role of a woman is being a mother. So, in addition to the problems of the government's structures, the thinking of our people is also old-fashioned. For example, two weeks ago I was on the live program of radio, a man called radio and said women must only be good mothers. This is their only responsibility (2022) (the interview was conducted in 2019). However, the success of Arezoo's business also contradicted these social expectations and to a limited extent, these obstacles. She was aware of them but had also chosen an employment path for herself and for others that would appear to deviate from them. In her comments, she challenged the dominant social ideas by classifying them as "old fashioned" and by suggesting an expanded role for women. While her views may be shared by others, there may a limited space for voicing them. Nine women felt that the general idea of people in Iran is that women should stay at home and should have and care for children. While some women may do so, others are challenging the idea that they should not be both. However, the abilities of some women to challenge dominant social expectations have not changed those expectations and they likely remain firmly entrenched. Expectations about motherhood were not upheld by all of the women examined, including those six women who were not mothers. In the interviews, I realized that one of the ways that women rationalized the dissonance that they felt from their employment

was to question their own mothering abilities. In three instances women questioned their own abilities when their children were left in the care of other women. Golmar, the founder of Atena Company that provides protection against cyber threats, said:

I have twins, at first, I felt that I am not a good mother, I hired a babysitter for my kids, and my mom also took care of them, but when I came back home from work, I spent the whole time with my kids. For example, the children go to bed at 9:00 PM and I cook until 12:00 PM and clean the house and then I answer a series of emails (2019).

In this instance, gendered societal expectations seem to have created an additional source of labour, as Golmar continues to maintain responsibility for domestic labour. In this instance, Golmar's second day of labour is unremunerated and, in the long term, its demands may detrimentally affect her paid labour. Tabassom, the founder of MamanPaz Company, a catering company, said:

Women in Iran are not forced to cover their living expenses and this causes women to remain weak because men are responsible for providing living expenses (2019).

It is likely that this is not only a comment on societal expectations, but it can also be read as a critique about a lack of women's autonomy. In Iran, women's occupational advancement is tentative and the labour laws that exist uphold the social norm in terms of gender role expectations. Women's expenses of daily living are paid by the man in households through his wages, either the husbands where women are in heterosexual relationships and marriages, and for unmarried woman it is her father who pays her expenses. It is not expected that women will work outside the home, or that she will contribute towards household wages. In this situation, her employment may be detrimental because it provides no financial benefit to the joint household. However, in a marriage, a husband can say that if his wife does not pay the household expenses,

she will not be allowed to work at all. Thus, a husband and wife who both go out to work and earn an income should come to some agreement concerning the living expenses. For these reasons, even women who are founders of their businesses likely underestimate the economic worth of their domestic labour. The society does it as well. The consequence of this is that labour inside the house becomes invisible and that labour outside of the house acquires a greater value. This is especially the case when that outside labour is done by men, who are assumed to take on the financial responsibilities of others.

In my research, a lack of gendered opportunity was evident. Four women (Mahdis, Golmar, Arezoo, and Ani) mentioned that they were dissatisfied with their previous job and felt that they had no opportunities for progress in their previous situations. Mahdis, the founder and CEO of Iran Interview Company, working in the evaluation and development of human resources said,

I resigned from a public company because, in the public sphere, it is not possible to be promoted and become a manager due to being a woman. I remember as soon as I started my Master's degree, I told the CEO every day that I don't want to do paperwork and that I want to be promoted, but my manager refused to promote me because I was a woman. After years, I was promoted, but a number of colleagues (mostly men) {told the manager why this woman should take such a position} so my manager demoted me. Then, I decided to be an entrepreneur. People do not trust young women because they think we were inexperienced because we are women (2020).

It is asserted that government and private sector employers usually prefer to hire men over women, especially for technical and managerial positions. Employers in both the public and the private sectors routinely specify gender preferences when advertising position vacancies and do

so according to arbitrary and discriminatory criteria (It's a men's club, 2017). Three women said they could not find acceptable employment so they started their own businesses in a model of entrepreneurship. Golmar, founder of Atena Company that provides protection against cyber threats said,

Being a young woman, entering the ICT field is a big challenge because people do not trust women. People prefer to hire a man rather than a woman. I searched for a good job for two years but then I gave up. I decided to start my own business (2019).

In this case, the decision to start her own business was related to a lack of opportunity as a result of gender discrimination. According to Sarfaraz, Faghieh, and Asadi Majd (2014), as economies develop, the rate of entrepreneurial activity decreases, regardless of gender. In more developed economies where both men and women have different options for employment, both women and men seem to be more interested in having secure jobs rather than starting their own businesses, which incur risk. However, they also found that societies that have closer rates of gender equality are also likely to increase the support for women's entrepreneurship. In economies where women are more likely to have similar opportunities as men, the rate of women's entrepreneurial activity is higher compared to the economies where women face a higher rate of gender inequalities. So, maybe if opportunities were more equal in terms of gender equality in Iran, the rate of women entrepreneurs would not be likely to fall. It is because more equitable societies likely provide women with more financial security for start-up.

Nine women of the 12 women (Golmar, Mahdis, Arezoo, Azadeh, Faezeh, Atefeh, Shaghayegh, Tabassom, and Nasim) whose interviews were examined discussed that gender role expectation was a challenge for them. Their challenges were specifically related to paid work and domestic responsibilities, negative stereotypes towards women's employment, and unequal

labour opportunities in Iran. The presence of children and childcare responsibilities constitute a significant part of unpaid household responsibilities, and childcare, as is the case in many other contexts, is a challenge for women in paid work.

3.1.1.1 Family

In Iran, before marriage, the term “family” refers to parents and their children, but after marriage, family may imply a spouse and may include children. When women say, in the media, ‘I receive support from my family’, they are likely to mean their husband after marriage or their parents before marriage. This may also be to support dominant social and media expectations and it also supports dominant expectations that parents support their children and spouses are supportive of each other. In most of the interviews in my data, when asked, women did not specify which family member supported them. This made it difficult for me to determine with accuracy, the extent and kind of familial support. These expectations also make it difficult for women in acknowledge when familial support is not present and participants may have chosen to be vague to cover up the possibility of a lack of familial support.

In the interviews I examined, two women (Lena and Mahdis) said that they faced challenges from their families to start their own businesses: they had traditional parents who wanted their daughters to work at home. Lena, the founder of Peeyad, an online platform for offering entertainment in cities, said:

I had to convince my family to support my idea, they thought I am not making a good decision because I was quitting the university. I was studying Architecture in the United States (2018).

However, it is a normal reaction. It seems reasonable that many would be concerned if someone gave up an opportunity to study in a professional program, to study overseas, or to train in a

widely recognized and prestigious profession. What might be important here is that Lena did not enter entrepreneurship because of a lack of employment opportunities, but rather because it was her choice to work for herself and to work in the entertainment sector. This implies that Lena is not typical of Iranian women.

Mahdis, the founder and CEO of Iran Interview Company which is working in the evaluation and development of human resources, said,

My father did not want me to work because he believed women should only work at home (2020).

However, five women (Golmar, Arezoo, Nasim, Ani, and Atefeh) talked about their fathers' support. Eight women out of ten women (Golmar, Arezoo, Azadeh, Atefeh, Shaghayegh, Tabassom, Fariba, and Nasim) who were married said they had their husband's support. Family may be supportive of some decisions, but not others, may come at different stages of business development, or familial formation, and may be affected by social perceptions and expectations about family support stability, which might differ at various life stages. For example, it may be a social stigma to admit a lack of family support and there may be shame for business owners and their families by admitting this in public. It may be a platitude to credit parents as supportive because that's largely an expectation of the parental role. Women talk about their parents' or husbands' support maybe because their support is acknowledged in the media and it is a way of saying thanks. In Iran, it may be a default position to feel thankful to others for the ability to work outside the home.

Some of the elements that disrupt women's entrepreneurial activity are rooted in common cultural norms in families. For instance, some cultural norms emphasize women's responsibility at home, and the control of women by men, such as in applying for a passport, choosing a job, or

choosing where to live. These are matters of both law and custom. In the interviews I examined, five women talked about their fathers' support. This is contrary to assumptions that men's financial responsibilities are upheld by other men. That is, married women said they received their husbands' support rather than their fathers. Golmar, the founder of Atena Company that provides protection against cyber threats, said,

My family supported me, especially my father. His advice to me was very helpful. When I started working, my father told me if you want to be a manager, take finance courses because managers need to know finance to become successful (2019).

Golmar's father offered advice and advised an educational route. The attainment of education supports the liberal view that education is a form of self-investment and that this self-investment will generate financial returns. This is the neoliberal belief in the construction of a woman's own individual identity, as neoliberalism emphasizes the value of individuals who are responsible for their own actions over, for example, that of the collective. Success here is when one woman can overcome the social obstacles to success in society.

Three women, Golmar, Arezoo, and Fariba have family businesses and work with their husbands in the family business. Marriage may have provided an acceptable route for women to work in entrepreneurship because men were involved directly, including in the business assets. In this way, men may have retained some decision-making abilities and access to financial assets. This arrangement also supports the dominant view that marriages are partnerships. In these instances, the involvement of men could also mask the extent of women's involvement and underestimate her responsibility for the business and its operations.

Nasim, the founder of The Horizon of the Third Part Company, a social entrepreneurship project on "Fabric Bag Manufacturer" (they produce fabric bags to replace plastic bags) said that

she started her business with her husband. Nasim and her husband both hold PhDs in entrepreneurship. She says they support each other. She also had a family history in this business and her father was also involved in these fields. Nasim's father was a natural resources engineer (Buy a green bag to help these women, 2016).

Opposition to entrepreneurship also came from within family units. An example of this is in my data, opposition was expressed by parents and by fathers in particular in two specific cases, Mahdis and Lena. Although both women said relatively little about it, it may have been the case the women who were interviewed were not prepared to expose it publicly. Many people would be hesitant to admit that their own parents underestimated them. Two women faced family opposition to their entrepreneurship (in one case father and in the other the parents). This is due to the cultural norm that exists in the Iranian family, specifically the expectation a woman should not be in paid work because she is not responsible for living expenses.

3.1.1.2 Childcare

Four of the 12 women in my research, Golmar, Arezoo, Fariba, and Azadeh have children while six women, Shaghayegh, Nasim, Tabassom, Nasim, Ani, and Atefeh are married and do not have children. One woman, Lena, is single and one (Mahdis) did not talk about her marriage status. In Iran, a married couple is expected to have children some years after their marriage. Living alone is extremely unusual for unmarried women in Iran. People usually only leave home to attend university in another town or for work. The unity and honor of the family are very important in Iranian culture. Iranian families tend to be small, with only 1 or 2 children. According to Statista Research Department, a woman on average gives birth to 1.5 children during her reproductive period and the two-child norm prevails in the country (O'Neill, 2022).

All four women in my research who had children (Golmar, Arezoo, Fariba, and Azadeh) said that they had childcare difficulties. In their interviews with the media, they conveyed the challenges of childcare and its gendered expectations. It would appear that despite liberal ideologies about shared domestic responsibilities, including in feminism, this has not been an arena of change for these women. For example, they said that they are responsible for taking care of their children and their husbands refused to share the responsibility. It is clearly part of the gendered social expectations in Iran that have not changed, for women or for men. Liberal feminists advocate the belief that women's domestic duties inherently put them at a disadvantage, and they support policies that promote men taking on an equitable portion of family responsibilities (Carbone, 1994). Arezoo, who has two sons and is the founder of Farshonline Company which sells carpets online, said,

My main concern is that I cannot leave my kids with anyone and I cannot trust the kindergartens since they are not very safe in Iran. In my company, I know eight women who quit their jobs because of marriage and there were three women who could not continue their work after having children (2022).

Arezoo faces a distrust of childcare from others, especially the daycares. It is a general idea among Iranians that moms should not send their children to daycares because it might be unsafe. Only children who can talk must go to daycares because they can tell their moms what happened there. Therefore, mothers prefer to leave their children with their family instead. This can increase the burden for family members and it maintains childcare as women's responsibility.

Azadeh, Chair of the Board of Directors of Baharan Information Technology Company, operating in the services, technology, and software sectors, said,

My mother and my sister helped me to work while having children. They took care of my children (2019).

This also implies that childcare is a familial responsibility and should not be paid as a skilled service. The majority of feminists contend that the gendered allocation of labor, where men typically focus on careers and paid employment while women predominantly undertake unpaid domestic and caregiving roles, represents a significant form of gender injustice (Chambers, 2024).

Golmar, the founder of Atena Company that provides protection against cyber threats, said,

Having a baby was a big challenge for me, I had been married for ten years and it was in the ninth year that we decided to have a child because I was afraid of the responsibility, as the main responsibility is for me, not my husband (2019).

Having a baby necessitates additional labour, both physical labour but also mental labour, such as having to make appointments, schedule care, and address infant needs. This labour may contribute towards ideas about women's unavailability, but also to ideas about their capabilities as entrepreneurs. The same assumptions are not made about men and their ability to engage successfully in business. Overall, it may serve to build distrust of women as entrepreneurs, among men, among other woman, and socially, because their employment is seen as secondary to unpaid responsibilities.

Arezoo, the founder of Farshonline Company which sells carpets online, talks about the lack of government-based social programs, which is part of the larger issue of a lack of suitable infrastructure,

There is no law to protect women entrepreneurs to encourage them to have children. For example, there is no insurance for pregnant moms (2022).

Women employees are entitled to 90 days of maternity leave. But this is only valid if a woman has a long-term contract. However, most employment agreements in Iran are short-term agreements. When a woman employee takes maternity leave, the employer will likely recruit another staff member and will not renew her agreement (Mehrinfar & Fadakar, 2023). Thus, it childcare responsibility can present itself as an obstacle to women's entrepreneurship

Childcare was reported by all of the women for whom it was relevant as hurting their perceived and actual abilities. It contributed to the atmosphere of distrust of women entrepreneurs. but this may also be a reflection of the context and its societal expectations, which is not likely to be specific to Iran alone. However, it remains a notable barrier. Discriminatory attitudes towards women entrepreneurs with children likely make strong contributions to existing gender inequalities in Iran.

In Modarresi et al.'s (2017) study of the growth barriers to women's home-based businesses in Tehran in the handicraft industry, most of the women talked about their family's support in expanding their businesses and only three women (out of 22) expressed that their families (such as a spouse or children) were against their business. I found the same result in examining these representative interviews, namely that most of the women enjoyed their families' support and only two women had not. I also investigated childcare challenges that are not included in the study by Modarresi et al. (2017). They discussed the gender barriers but childcare is not included maybe because it is a broad topic and needs careful integration.

Eight married women out of ten in my sample said they had their husband's support, and five women talked about their fathers' support. Four of the 12 women in my research have

children and talked about childcare challenges. They believed that the main family responsibility was for them, not for their husbands. As I understood from the interviews, having children is one of the biggest impediments to entrepreneurship for women in Iran and men's support of women is a significant factor in removing this barrier. In the next section, I will analyze the evidence of a lack of trust in women in the context of Iran including the negative attitudes towards women's entrepreneurship.

3.1.2 Lack of trust in women in Iran

The lack of trust in women in Iran is translated to the world of business, and especially to ICT. The pressure for gender-specific domestic responsibilities in Iran leads to a lack of public confidence in women's capabilities in paid employment especially in arenas that are further masculinized and considered not the domain of women, such as entrepreneurship and ICT. According to the Statista Research Department as of 2021, the rate of women's labour force participation in Iran was 14.35 percent. When compared to some other Middle Eastern countries, Qatar is 60.46%, UA Emirates is 54.85%, Syria is 16.83%, and Iraq is 11.49%. Also, it appears that the majority of women are employed in the services sector. The percentage of women in industry labour sector is 24.1 percent, agricultural labour is 23.4 percent, and service sector employment is 52.5 percent. The female labor force participation rate in Iran had a sharp decrease from 2019 (16.93%) to 2021 (14.35%) because of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the lack of job opportunities for women as a result of a weak economy, in part due to sanctions and the country's isolation from global markets, and to internal "mismanagement" (O'Neill, 2022). While all of these factors were likely to have affected men in employment, women were already disadvantaged relative to men in paid employment opportunities. Therefore, as of 2021, out of a total labour force of 21.3 million, only 3 million Iranian women are employed while

there are 18.2 million employed men (Female labor force participation rate in Iran from 1990 to 2021, 2022). Statistics clearly demonstrate that workplaces are male-dominated. Also, the ratio of businesses run by women to businesses run by their male counterparts is 2 to 10 (Kelley, Brush, Greene, & Litovsky, 2012). For every 10 businesses owned by men, there are 2 owned by women. Clearly, women are in the minority as business owners and as such, are likely to be less visible in the paid labour force, particularly as owners and decision-makers.

Eleven women (all except Fariba Yarahmadi) whose interviews I analyzed cited a challenge of a public lack of trust in women in Iran. This lack of trust can include few employment opportunities for women, refusing to promote women at work, and not believing in women's abilities. Atefeh reported that some men refused to promote women to managerial positions for which they were qualified at work. Atefeh the CEO of Afarinesh Technology Network Company, a company that does business management and start-up consulting services, made an observation based on her own personal experience,

Many times, people did not take me seriously because I am a woman. I had to spend a lot of time and energy and prove that I can. When I wanted to open a bank account for my company, the manager who was a man, refused to do it at first because he did not trust that I could [return the financial installments] because I am a woman and I am not as capable as men (2020).

Ani, the founder of PooyeGaam Company which works in the field of informatics and ecosystem analysis, was conscious that women and men were treated differently in paid employment. She suggested that this resulted in a difference in the effort required in the workplace. For women, this effort was in addition to their responsibilities and efforts in unpaid labour in the home. She said,

A woman needs to work harder than a man to become a successful entrepreneur (2020).

By suggesting this, she might also be implying that not all women are equally able to become entrepreneurs. They may be the suggestion that only those whose efforts are exemplary are likely to be successful.

Azadeh, Chair of the Board of Directors for Baharan Information Technology Company, operating in the services, technology, and software sectors, said:

People in Iran do not believe that a woman is as capable as a man (Azadeh, 2014).

In this case, she is not referencing her own personal experiences, but is pointing to societal limitations to which she, and others have likely been subjected and she points to the persistence of gendered differences in defining capabilities. The onus, in her remarks, seems to be on men to change their perceptions and ideas about women, but she does not suggest how this might be possible, or why it might be desirable in a context where gender equality in terms of opportunities is not valued.

Tabassom, the founder of MamanPaz Company which is catering, said:

The prevailing perception of women in Iran is that they don't have to do [big activities] hard tasks and huge projects while this thinking is the opposite in the men and they always seek to be the best.

Women entrepreneurs who were interviewed by select Iranian media outlets expressed their belief that people of any gender trust men much more easily than women. In these select interviews, this was offered as a possible explanation for women's exceptionalism in entrepreneurship, but few explanations were provided to change the status quo. It is likely that by expressing this idea publicly, they were acting to challenge the legitimacy of this idea. What is interesting is that one woman did not agree, or was reticent to express her public agreement.

Mahdis, the founder and CEO of Iran Interview Company which works in the evaluation and development of human resources, said,

When I started my start-up, I was the only woman in the company and my other colleagues were men, so, people trusted us [because mainly men were employed] and we could attract some customers. Also, we took our men colleagues with us to the meetings so that the group we were negotiating with would see that we have men in our group and then they trusted us (2020).

In this instance, women acknowledged the ways in which they were understood by men to be less capable, but used this for their business advantage. However, they would not want to challenge the notion of men's superior capability. It could even be considered an example of resilience.

Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam (2011) conducted a study on barriers to women's entrepreneurship development among 37 Iranian women. They suggest that women have multiple gender role expectations that lead to limited opportunities for them to create and expand entrepreneurial activities, although this is not likely to be a new finding. They surmised that some aspects of entrepreneurship, such as leadership, risk tolerance, and desire to progress, were likely to be influenced in detrimental ways by the negative attitude held by men towards women in relation to all four categories and that a likely result was reducing women's entrepreneurship. It is the case that if workplaces are viewed as inhospitable environments for women, fewer women will elect to enter them.

In my research, Golmar, the founder of Atena Company that provides protection against cyber threats, said,

When business clients found out that I am a woman, they first refused to have a technical meeting with me. Lack of trust in women was the most important issue I faced in my first year. For many men, working for a company managed by a woman is not quite acceptable, and people refused to have an interview meeting with me (2019).

Modarresi et al. (2017) studied the growth barriers to 22 women's home-based businesses (HBBs) in Tehran. All of the women acknowledged public gender inequalities between men and women as well as the lack of equal opportunities for women entrepreneurs. One woman said when she attended meetings, some men ignore her, but when her colleague who is a man attended the same meeting, he was welcomed by the same people. Thus, people trust men more than women. In this case, her knowledge, but also her presence was dismissed in ways that prevented her from making business contributions.

In my research, the lack of trust in women may have been an obstacle for everyone and only one woman in my research did not talk about trust, as she did not talk about her challenges at all. Fariba Yarahmadi, the founder of Didehban Company, may not have mentioned this for any number of possible reasons, including that fact that she did not experience this as a challenge, or the fact that she was cognizant of upholding existing gender scripts. In her interview, she did not mention any other barriers related to gender as well.

3.1.2.1 Self-confidence

Self-confidence is another topic which was a concern for three women. It seems very likely that those who have already been profiled in reports and media outlets as being successful would report relatively high degrees of self-confidence. It also seems likely that those who have obtained higher levels of education would report themselves to be self-confident. Based on my findings, some women entrepreneurs said that in Iran women do not believe in themselves, they think that they always need others' support. The notion that women can thrive independently without relying on others aligns closely with feminist neoliberal ideology. Neoliberal feminism encourages individual women to prioritize their own goals and aspirations and promotes women's autonomy in taking full responsibility for their lives. Neoliberal feminism primarily focuses on establishing a feminist individual who embodies self-responsibility, who no longer seeks support from the state, government, or even men collectively (Brown 2006).

Many women in my research report getting support of their families, implying that they indeed need other people's supports. They refer to themselves as having self-confidence (explicitly stated in their interviews), but they believe in general that women in Iran lack self-confidence. This, however, was an overarching assumption and one that was not likely to have been applied to these women, primarily because they were defined by their successes. This narrative of unique success may have been a way to direct attention away from structural changes needed by the public media outlets and/or to highlight their own accomplishments as personal successes, also, in line with neoliberal ideological reasoning. Nasim, founder of The Horizon of the Third Part Company which is a social entrepreneurship said,

In Iran women do not believe in themselves; they think that they always need other's support. A lack of self-confidence is prevalent among Iranian women. So, finding a job is more difficult for women than for men in Iran (2019).

While she notes this is relation to women's employment, she may regard her own ability to secure employment as exceptional.

Lena, the founder of Peeyade application which specializes in citizens' entertainment said,

In the working environment, women have much less self-confidence than they should and men have much more self-confidence than they should (2018).

Golmar, the founder of Atena Company, said,

A woman should have self-esteem and self-confidence so that she is not tired of the insulting or threatening words of others (2019).

This places the onus on women to possess and exhibit desirable characteristics, even in a social environment that may be hostile to their exhibition. The women who were selected for public media interviews do not appear to lack self-confidence themselves, a fact which they emphasize. Rather, they assumed this lack for women other than themselves. What might be read into this is an expectation that women should display the confidence of men and should behave like men in order to be successful in entrepreneurship, but that not all women can (or potentially should) do this. It may be implied, in liberal feminism that women replicating the behaviors of men will result in success. Importantly, however, it is not necessarily considered that women may not be regarded the same way as men and that their environments are not equal. This strategy requires change for women but requires no change for men to work towards equality. Because the interviews reproduce a sex/gender binary, it is difficult for me as the researcher to challenge it and to avoid inadvertently reproducing it myself. Still, it is a difference that is noted amongst these women entrepreneurs celebrated in the media interviews.

To summarize, eleven women whose interviews I analyzed (out of 12) mentioned the challenge of a public lack of trust in women who work outside the home. The lack of trust may very well result in fewer employment opportunities for women, as well as in curtailed advancement for women in the workplace regardless of their skills, in refusals to promote women at work, and in the societal beliefs held by some men and women that women do not have the necessary capabilities or self-confidence to engage successfully in paid employment. These beliefs are largely constructed as individualized traits that are the responsibility of individual women which is another characteristic of liberal (and neoliberal) feminism. A disadvantage of framing them in this way is that women are at fault when they are not present; for example, when women are not seen to exhibit the appropriate self-confidence, they are considered unfit for paid work. In this framework, the onus for change is placed on women and relatively little change is required of men. In the next section, I analyze another structural challenge for women entrepreneurs: Iranian law. In the next section, I elaborate on this challenge. Finally, after analyzing the challenges, I examine women's resilience to their barriers and their coping strategies in the next section using examples and quotations from the media interviews.

Section 2: Resilience and Coping strategies

After analyzing the challenges and obstacles Iranian women face in entrepreneurship, I also scrutinized their coping strategies. I categorized these strategies into two main codes: individual and collective. Individual code includes some themes including hard work, motivation, perseverance, self-confidence, time management, responsibility, acquiring related skills and knowledge. Collective code consists of some themes including receiving support from family members, reducing household and child care pressures, and teamwork. Coping strategies

means the strategies women use to subvert their challenges. As previously mentioned, resilience is a dynamic process in which a person exhibits the skills of positive adjustment during exposure to mismatches (Windle, Bennett, & Noyes, 2011), and entrepreneurial resilience is defined as a dynamic adjustment process which aids business owners' development in spite of the difficult and unsteady conditions of the market (Bernard & Barbosa 2016).

3.2.1. Individual strategy

All 12 women interviewed in Iranian media about their own businesses noted a reliance on their individual coping strategies to deal with their challenges. Their interviews clearly show that they tried hard to be successful in entrepreneurship and wanted to be proud of themselves. Some of their examples of such pride in their work included emphases on their own hard work, motivation, perseverance, self-confidence, time management, responsibility, and acquired related skills and knowledge. For example, they stress that:

Perseverance and hard work are the key points of my success. I always relied on my own abilities (Azadeh, 2014).

My father is very rich but I never received financial aid from my family because I wanted to be strong and independent. I always had the motivation and wanted to be creative. Also, I am an ambitious person. I never give up (Mahdis, 2020).

Seven women in my research (Mahdis, Arezoo, Lena, Nasim, Golmar, Tabassom, and Azadeh) said that they needed to gain knowledge and skills regarding entrepreneurship and ICT.

I took some courses for industrial management and MBA before starting my business (Lena, 2018).

It wasn't like I suddenly started sewing bags with the female heads of the household. I gained related skills and knowledge (Nasim, 2016).

I took these quotations from a report published in the “Iranian Entrepreneurship Development Foundation for Women and Youth.” The audience of the report are researchers, policy makers, and women who want to start their own business (Azimi, 2019). Lena and Nasim want to motivate other women to entrepreneurship. They want to show other women that they have an equal opportunity. The whole report is about women’s success in entrepreneurship, so, it aims to encourage and motivate other women in this path.

Six women (Lena, Arezoo, Golmar, Ani, Mahdis, and Faezeh) expressed the necessity of these traits for others, including self-confidence, time management, and responsibility. All of these were promoted as desirable traits in business owners and there was little recognition of the ways that some of these traits were also gendered. For example, self-confidence in women could be viewed as a lack of humility.

Self-confidence is another important issue that helped me when starting my new business because many times people discouraged me and I needed to be strong (Lena, 2018).

Arezoo, a 39-year-old married woman with two sons, the founder of Farshonline Company which sells carpets online, said:

Having skills and self-confidence is really important for women. The first skill they should strengthen in themselves is self-confidence (2022).

In some ways, women provided few positive suggestions for other women business owners about how to balance their multiple and often conflicting responsibilities. They provided no guidance for those, for example, whose husbands and other family members, opposed their business involvement and did not add public pressure for the public provisions of services, such as childcare,

I managed my time at home and outside the home. I also managed the relationship between myself and my husband and children. I try to spend time with my family when I am at home. We enjoy our weekends. I even used to go to conferences in other cities with my family, because I want to continue my work and keep my family at the same time (Arezoo, 2022).

In some ways, their accounts of their daily practices could add pressure on other women to emulate them,

When I came back home from work, I spent the whole time with my kids. For example, the children go to bed at 9:00 PM and I cook until 12:00 PM and clean the house and then I answer a series of emails (Golmar, 2013).

In their words, success was defined in the context of personal, acquired traits that inherently led to business success. That is, their success is presented in neoliberal feminist terms. There was relatively little recognition of the advantages of social capital, family situation, wealth, and support by others in ways that were managed collectively. Sandberg (2013) suggests that when individual women prioritize their professional advancement and actively engage in their careers, they are more likely to achieve a more effective work-life balance. The feminist ideal presented here is not solely focused on women sacrificing family for career success, but rather on achieving a balance between a successful career and a fulfilling home life. Neoliberal feminism not only encourages women to take responsibility for their own self-care but also normalizes the desire for both professional achievement and personal fulfillment, often including motherhood.

Five women (Ani, Mahdis, Lena, Nasim, and Tabassom) said they were motivated to identify new opportunities through entrepreneurship. In other words, they wanted to create new opportunities for themselves. They were seeking prestige, power, and job satisfaction. Ani, a 43-

year-old married woman with no children, the founder of PooyeGaam Company which works in the field of informatics and ecosystem analysis, said:

I love entrepreneurship and I am really satisfied with my business. I also feel that I am a powerful woman. I enjoy my social status (2020).

In this case, Ani contradicts the idea of gendered expectations and asserts feelings of power that are contrary to ideas about women's social expectations. It may be that what is being asserted here is a strong sense of individualism that is consistent with the meritocratic beliefs of liberal feminism. In this single, short quotation, Ani refers to "I" five times, suggesting that her achievements are due to her own accomplishments. This is also the case in the brief comments offered by Mahdis. She attributes her successes to her personal traits, including independence, creativity, and ambition. By citing these as desirable attributes, it is possible to imply that those who do not share these attributes are not likely to share in her successes. In both instances, of Ani and Mahdis, they provide no context for their attributes, including whether they have been acquired through education and/or a privileged familial position. This serves to highlight the achievements of some women but also masks the likelihood of inequalities among women. Emphasizing individual attributes can be a form of empowerment and assertion of agency. In contexts where women face societal barriers and gender stereotypes, highlighting personal qualities and accomplishments can reinforce their sense of autonomy and competence in challenging environments. Mahdis, a 38-year-old woman, the founder and CEO of Iran Interview Company which is working in the evaluation and development of human resources, said:

I always had the motivation to be independent and wanted to be creative. Also, I am an ambitious person. I never give up (2020).

3.2.2. Collective strategy

Ten women (Golmar, Mahdis, Ani, Arezoo, Azadeh, Faezeh, Atefeh, Shaghayegh, Tabassom, and Nasim) said they relied on others' collaboration which included receiving support from family members, reducing household and childcare pressures because of cooperation and assistance from others, teamwork, and infrastructure support in the surrounding environments. They mentioned that their parents' and husbands' support was very helpful in their entrepreneurial path. Supportive friends and family will help one's success simply because it is more difficult to be successful in entrepreneurship when you also have family and social responsibilities, as well as a lack of social trust that works against you (Modarresi et al., 2017). While education is often cited as an individual achievement, it almost always relies on the cooperation of others, and while a wealthy family may be noted as not influential, an environment shaped by wealth is almost certain to be advantageous in some ways (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2014). Three women talked about teamwork specifically, including Shaghayegh,

I always rely on teamwork. In Iran, no one gets used to teamwork. It means joining a team and making efforts for the team. In Western countries, this issue is very important at work, but in Iran, it is not so important and things go individually (Shaghayegh, 2019).

Teamwork was sometimes acknowledged without a clear idea about what it entailed, other than a common interest and benefit,

Teamwork was very helpful for our company's success. We always worked in groups and we had hours of consultations among us. Also, we had a common goal that gave us motivation. Our goal was to benefit others and ourselves from our work (Faezeh, 2020).

Even when teamwork was acknowledged, positive individual traits were highlighted,

Two of my close friends support me. We work together and have good teamwork. But the initial idea was mine. They only accompanied me for launching the company (Lena, 2018).

In some places, teamwork was more challenging than in others. For example, it may have been expected in business, but not in individual households. Where husbands or fathers were noted as supportive, this may have been regarded as exemplary and/or unusual behavior,

My husband helped me in housework and he never asked for dinner. He spends time with the children and helps with the children's work (Golmar, 2013).

My husband has my back, especially in doing the housework. I am in my office many nights and I do not prepare dinner for my husband. He never complains about it (Shaghayegh, 2019).

Also, even familial support was likely to be gendered, with mothers and sisters upholding gendered responsibilities for caregiving,

In order to be able to work, I took my kids to kindergartens. Also, some days my mother and my sister took care of my children (Azadeh, 2014).

Family support was noted, but it may also have been expected. There may have been a social stigma in describing families as uncooperative and/or unsupportive in a public interview,

My husband has a Master's in Computer Science and we started our work together. He helped me a lot as he knew IT-related concepts better than me. My parents also encouraged me in my education (Ani, 2018).

Tabassom, a 34-year-old married woman with no children, the founder of MamanPaz Company which is catering, said that she received money from her father in order to start her business and, her parents encouraged her to continue her higher education. She said continuing

education was very important in her family, one of her sisters is a doctor and the other is a dental student. Her husband also supported her and joined her company (A trip to MamanPaz, 2019).

In some instances, those who were supportive also benefitted as partners in businesses and may have benefitted directly and/or indirectly:

Our business is family and I work with my husband. The companionship of my husband plays a key role in my success (Azimi, 2019).

In summary, women entrepreneurs in the media-presented interviews I analyzed, talked about their resilience and coping strategies including hard work, motivation, perseverance, self-confidence, time management, responsibility, acquiring related skills and knowledge, receiving support from family members, reducing household and child care pressures, and teamwork. Overall, although most women credited the entrepreneurial success to their individual coping strategies including hard work and the ability to overcome obstacles, they also relied, in contradictory ways, on other's support, especially their parents' and/or husbands' support.

CHAPTER 4 - DISCUSSION

I organized my discussion of my findings based on the initial research questions. First, I review the challenges Iranian women entrepreneurs in the ICT sector face, including the challenges women entrepreneurs talked about which are not specific to women, that is, those challenges that are not gender-related, but they are still a barrier to women's entrepreneurship. Then, I consider their resilience and coping strategies and finally, I discuss the way they share their experience in the media.

4.1 Research question 1: What challenges do Iranian women entrepreneurs working in the ICT sector face?

According to the findings, women face challenges that are gender-related and some challenges that are not gender-related. First, I am bringing a summary of the challenges that are specific to women including gender role expectations (family responsibilities and childcare) and lack of trust in women in Iran (previously elaborated in Chapter 3, Section 1). In the next section (4.1.2), I am bringing the challenges which are not gender related.

Eleven women (out of 12) had the challenge of lack of trust in women in public life. They believed that people in Iran (mostly men) do not trust women at work. They refused to give them any managerial position or refused to promote them at work. They do not even take women seriously. Moreover, nine women faced gender role expectation challenges. These women said that women in Iran are expected to be at home and they need their husband's permission to work outside the home. Therefore, women's main responsibility is to be good mothers and wives. The patriarchal culture of Iran attributes certain gender roles to men and women. Iranian society defines the role of women primarily in terms of family and household responsibilities, and the role of men as the breadwinners. Also, four women had childcare difficulties. For example, they said that they are responsible for taking care of their children and their husbands refused to share

the responsibility. Finally, two women said that they had challenges with their families to start their own businesses. They had traditional parents who wanted their daughters to do easier tasks such as educating or working at home.

This discussion of gender roles is significant because gender roles continue to be used as reasons or justifications for giving women a lesser place than men in society, especially in the marketplace (Tong, 2011). Tong (2011) suggests that a patriarchal society creates “masculine and feminine gender identities” which makes men empowered and women disempowered (p. 77). Of course, it is rarely this straightforward and dichotomous and Tong’s broad observations do not account for the ways that individuals operate outside of the expectations for them, and it does not factor in the importance of privilege that some people possess and others do not, even in a liberal society. It may be broadly observed that women and men do not have the same opportunities but it is also the case that some men have better opportunities than other men, and that some women have better opportunities than other women. As an ideal, liberal feminism advocates for a society woman to have the same freedom as men to express themselves and where gender equality is attainable. The idea that it can be achieved as an end goal is likely one of the reasons for the popularity of this particular perspective. It is also likely to widely embraced, as an acceptable position by many, and in these instances, may be embraced across media outlets. Both men and women should have the same access to the benefits, resources, and opportunities that are in a society and women must be given equal liberty, including in paid work. Evidently, equality of rights for men and women, as central to liberal feminism, is not in place in Iran. According to the Statista Research Department, Iran ranks in the bottom five of the global gender-gap index for 2022 (Female labour force participation rate, 2022). However, its ideals, represented through women’s achievements, may be subtly in place in the media.

4.1.2 Challenges that are not specific to women

In this section, I analyze the challenges women face which are not gender-related. These include recruiting human resources, education and literacy, laws, finance, and challenges specific to Iran. First, I discuss women's challenges in finding skilled employees for their companies which is a barrier that emerges in my data and scholarly literature. Challenges for women in workplaces exist for entrepreneurs as owners and decision-makers and also for women as employees in women-owned businesses. In this case, a significant factor is likely to be power in the workplace, with employees having less power than business owners.

4.1.2.1 Human resource

Seven women (Azadeh, Shaghayegh, Atefeh, Ani, Lena, Fariba, and Mahdis) suggest that they experienced difficulty recruiting women as employees. According to them, some characteristics of professional human resources are reliability, teamwork, problem-solving skills, communication skills, and conflict resolution. It is likely that the low rate of employment for women in Iran will likely have a negative effect on the ability to recruit and retain women as employees. Similarly, the public lack of trust in women's capabilities may help to define the company as less successful and may not help to make it an attractive place of employment.

Azadeh, Chair of the Board of Directors at Baharan Information Technology Company, suggests,

The biggest problem in my company is the supply of experienced and specialized human resources, especially women employees (2019).

She implies that women are not suitably qualified for employment, although she provides no specific insight into the reasons for their scarcity. It could be that they lack previous experience, education, opportunities for specialization, or all of these.

Shaghayegh, the founder of Laneh Company, an online handicraft company, also notes issues of availability and employability as concerns,

Having a professional human resource is critical. By professional, I mean observing ethics, being a good team member, being positive, putting in effort and not having false pride, but unfortunately, we barely can find these characteristics among Iranian people because it is not their culture. For example, many people have claimed that they saw themselves as CEOs, but they couldn't even use Excel (2019).

Unlike Azadeh, Shagheyegh is expressing something different. She implies that there is a culture of dishonesty around employment (that may or may not be specific to women) that makes it difficult to hire employees. This is the case because of the Iranian cultural trait.

Atefeh, a CEO of Afarinesh Technology Network Company concurs that employees are limited, by attributes there lack of availability to another reason altogether,

Human resource is my major problem because after our staffs become skilled, they go to bigger companies for more salary. We train them, we allocate time and money for them but they leave us for their benefits (2020).

The reference above is specifically to employees and retention. There is a shortage of suitable qualified individuals for employment. Employees would prefer to work for large corporations that can ensure some workplace stability, rather than for smaller companies. Also, some people may not want to work for, or with women as mentioned in some interviews (Golmar said that explicitly).

Issues related to employee retention in Iran may be related to emigration from Iran. The Stanford Iran 2040 Project, an academic platform dedicated to the study of Iran's development, reported in April 2020 that the population of Iran-born emigrants increased from about half a

million before the 1979 revolution to 3.1 million in 2019. Top destination countries for Iranian migrants include the United States, Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Currently, 130,000 Iranian-born students are believed to be enrolled in foreign universities, which is the highest since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 (Ziabari, 2023).

Modarresi et al. (2017) found that some of the interviewed women stated that they had encountered problems both in supplying raw materials and in employing workers. Arasti, Rezayee et al. (2012) also found the environmental factors in three groups: economic, sociocultural, and legal factors. In their examination of economic factors, they discovered evidence for access to financial sources and lack of skilled and trained labor forces. For example, women entrepreneurs believed that employing a qualified and skilled labor force is more difficult for women than their men counterparts and this is not only due to a lack of skilled workforce in the market but also due to the gender stereotypes as people are not so willing to work with woman managers. Golmar stated that men refused to work with her.

In my data, five women talked about the migration of their employees. Lena, the founder of Peeyade application which business is citizens' entertainment (an application which is an online platform for offering entertainment in a city), said:

Today, the rate of immigration in Iran is high, so, it is hard to find an expert in every field (2018).

She is suggesting that there are few experts and expertise in her area.

Ani, the founder of PooyeGaam Company which works in the field of informatics and ecosystem analysis, suggested that,

Those who are specialized in IT, migrate to other developed countries (2020).

It may be the case that those with high levels of education and in-demand skills are better able to relocate outside of Iran and find employment elsewhere. According to Ani, for many young Iranians seeking to build better lives overseas, post-secondary education in developed countries is often identified as a pathway and many Iranians migrate for the specific purposes of education.

4.1.2.2 Education

Iranian women comprise only 23% of graduates in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics at universities (Iran population, 2023) and are underrepresented in technology-related fields. These positions seem more suitable for men because women are aware that they will hardly find a job in these fields as employers prefer to hire men. So, women are discouraged from STEM.

Today, women represent the majority of test takers in the national university entrance exams and comprise 60 percent of all university students (Iran population, 2023). Although women comprise around 60 percent of university graduates, their participation in the labour force is only 14.35 percent as of 2021. One out of every three women with a bachelor's degree is currently unemployed (Iran population, 2023).

All of the women whose interviews comprise my data have university degrees. Five of 12 women have Bachelor's degrees, four women of 12 have Master's degrees, and three women have Ph.Ds. Six women (half of them) are educated in IT-related fields. Four women have degrees in business-related fields and two women studied the field of entrepreneurship. In this way, there are a select group and their education levels and fields of study are not representative of the education opportunities open to women in Iran.

However, nine of the women (Ani, Mahdis, Arezoo, Azadeh, Atefeh, Lena, Nasim, Golmar, and Tabassom) whose interviews I analyze stated that they believed education is a challenge in Iran and/or that they were concerned about the quality of education in Iran. In particular, they were concerned about the lack of education about entrepreneurship. It means the lack of knowledge and skills of university staff in Iran, the lack of appropriate hardware facilities, and the lack of coordination and cooperation between individuals and systems. However, this is rather universal, the lack of knowledge and training about entrepreneurship generally,

Azadeh, Chair of the Board of Directors, Baharan Information Technology Company, operating in the services, technology, and software sectors, claims,

Universities teach old knowledge about entrepreneurship (2019).

In this instance, the issue is not a lack of education, but rather the currency of the education that is provided. Azadeh based this observation on the fact that course materials used in her education were outdated. She suggested that there are many new and modern technologies in ICT that can be practiced, but that her university lacked them. Ani, founder of PooyeGaam Company suggests that entrepreneurship is not prioritized over more other fields that are regarded as more financially lucrative,

Iran's education system only appreciates medical fields, not IT or other fields and it is believed that if anyone is a physician, s/he is very smart and successful, otherwise, s/he is unsuccessful. Other challenges include technological education related to business, such as familiarity with e-commerce (2020).

The medical field, for example, is not only regarded as lucrative but it also carries a relatively high degree of social status and prestige. The issue of e-commerce, only touched on by Azedah, was raised by Atefeh, CEO of Afarinesh Technology Network Company suggested that,

People in Iran lack knowledge and awareness of e-commerce. For example, when the bank card entered Iran, the government had to teach people how to use it and not to give its password to anyone. There are many people in different villages and cities who are IT graduates and have no skills in IT because universities do not teach the required skill (2020).

There was a prevailing view among some of the entrepreneurs that ICT knowledge and training was not up to date in Iran and that this may it difficult to secure suitable employees.

Seven women whose interviews were highlighted in the media said that they needed to gain knowledge and skills in entrepreneurship in ICT. They are suggesting that their own knowledge was inadequate at the beginning of their work.

One of the entrepreneurs who was dealing with rural women, Faezeh founder of Dastadast Company which works in empowering and preserving Indigenous arts, remarked, Many women, especially in rural areas, lacked some technical skills (e.g., using technology) because the family's priority is to train boys, not girls (2020).

This is a comment about education, but also about the persistence of gendered ideas that prevent or limit women's education, particularly in certain fields.

While this may be the case for women with whom Faezeh works, it is contradicted by the fact that women who have achieved entrepreneurial success have acquired these skills. These observations about the persistence of gendered roles in rural locations are also important for pointing out rural and urban differences in terms of access to education and readiness for

employment. Most of the women whose interviews I analyze are based in urban areas and two-thirds of them are based in Tehran or other large, urban centers. Nine women out of 12 work in urban cities (mostly Tehran). Three women work with rural people, including Arezoo, Faezeh, and Shaghayegh, all of whom work in handicrafts and specifically with carpet weavers and other traditional crafts. Faezeh helps women in rural areas of Iran to sell handmade handicrafts including carpets, traditional marquetry, or wood inlay. Shaghayegh owns an online handicraft company in which she works with rural women to sell Iranian handicrafts.

Modarresi et al. (2017) found that women had a lack of marketing knowledge and were in need for business marketing training and lacked previous experience in business. This finding is expected, given the rates of women's underemployment in Iran. Almost half of the women had not had high educational levels and were not graduated in management or business fields of study. I think this is because women worked in the handicraft industry and had skills rather than education. They may have chosen a sector for which post-secondary education was not required and therefore, women were found to be lacking. It could also be the case that by engaging in a field considered appropriate socially to their gender, like craft, more support or at least fewer challenges or expectations were made to these women.

4.1.2.3 Literacy

According to Iran population clock 2023, as of 2023, the literacy rate for the adult male population is 91.19%, and for the adult female population is 82.52% in Iran. There has been a significant increase in the female literacy rate which was 24 percent in 1976 and this increase can be explained by the increase in people's awareness and the more affordable and accessible universities nowadays.

Literacy, and technological literacy specifically, is regarded as a particular concern in rural Iran, with implications for women's employment. Ani, founder of PooyeGaam Company which works in the field of informatics and ecosystem analysis, said:

People in Iran, especially in rural areas have low digital literacy. For example, when they receive a message saying if you click, you will get \$100, they click. Also, people in rural areas do not know how to use technology to avoid natural disasters, for example, they are unaware of the coming floods. For the children's sector, security in cyberspace is very important, they should not have access to inappropriate websites, also, they need to learn many things through the internet at the same time. In our company, we created a platform to inform and create awareness for children and create a series of games for them so that they can learn what entrepreneurship looks like and learn many things such as sports or cooking. (2020)

Some of her comments help to form differences between urban and rural areas, and at times, do not hold rural skills in high regard. While this is the case, she also references the development of gaming technology to help build technological literacy, in ways that highlight the necessity and successes of her own business and ingenuity and comment on rural and urban differences. These differences may be significant, but their observation alone does not address their inequalities, or improve the situation of rural women. A gap affecting women in rural areas that hinders engagement with digital technologies is related to the digital skills and capacities needed to use these devices, services, and platforms. In keeping with classic ideas of liberalism, these comments assume that there is a level playing field and that everyone, regardless of their circumstances is able to work hard towards individual improvement. This is the context of a

group of women entrepreneurs who note, publicly, the significant amount of support that they received for their own business ventures.

Liberal feminists advocate for reforms in women's education, training, and employment in order to reduce women's burden, improve their living conditions, and promote financial self-sufficiency, albeit without careful regard to the social contexts in which this might be constrained (Fisher, Reuber & Dyke, 1993). Liberal feminism argues that equality between men and women could not be achieved by mere regulations but by the mindful effort of the governments to ensure that the obstacles and barriers that women encounter are reduced. However, liberal feminism does not have a role in Iran's law. In some ways, women entrepreneurs who have been successful echo the tenets of liberal feminism. While acknowledging the limitations of their social circumstances, they expect that women will have sufficient opportunity, education, and experience for employment in the ICT sector.

In summary, women entrepreneurs in the media are a fairly well-educated group and they do not include themselves among those who lack education, training, and employment skills. However, nine of the women believed that education is an obstacle in Iran and were concerned about the quality of education in Iran. Another structural challenge for women entrepreneurs was Iranian law. In the next section, I am elaborating on this challenge.

4.1.2.4 Laws

My findings show that five women, Arezoo, Faezeh, Lena, Atefeh, and Shaghayegh, expressed their reservations about the lack of efficient laws in Iran. For example, some laws for entrepreneurship are not yet established. Also, laws between husband and wife are creating limits for the wife. Furthermore, women faced bureaucratic difficulties.

Iranian law considers the husband the head of the household, a status that allows him to control his wife's economic choices. As I previously mentioned, according to Article 1117 of the civil law of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a man has the right to oppose his wife's employment, and without his consent, a woman is banned from work. For example, a husband has the right to prevent his wife from working and, in practice, some employers require husbands to provide written consent for women to be allowed to work alongside them. A husband also has the right to forbid his wife to travel abroad at any time, even if she has her own passport. This matter of law and may be some of the reasons why some employers are unlikely to hire women where extensive travel is required. Restrictions on travel limits women's employment and future employment opportunities.

Eight of the interviewees with husbands said they had their husband's support in their employment, although three women did not talk in interviews specifically about their husbands' support. In some of these interviews, they may not have been asked about this topic specifically. This may be because it is considered a default position for women to have their husband's permission to work outside the home. In other words, the assumption by interviewers, and perhaps those being interviewed, was that this system did not have to change, or was unlikely to be subject to change. If it was unlikely to change, both men and women may have been resigned to a status quo that limits not only women's employment but also the potential household income.

Only one woman in my research was unmarried. Those who had their husband's permission for employment also noted their husband's support, which is consistent. It seems unlikely that women's employment without spousal support would be highlighted in Iranian

media outlets. I think a decision not to marry may could have opened up employment possibilities for women.

Faezeh, a 35-year-old, founder of Dastadast Company that works in empowering and preserving Indigenous arts, said:

Lack of protective laws and regulations for entrepreneurship in Iran is an issue. My business is a kind of social entrepreneurship, but in Iranian law, it is not yet established. So, my company has to follow all the rules and guidelines and terms and conditions that are expected from non-profit organizations (NGOs) (2020).

This is a problem since social entrepreneurship differs from NGOs. The source of funding is the central difference between non-profits and social enterprises. Non-profits depend on public funding through donations from companies, individuals, or even governments, while social enterprises are businesses that generate their profits by selling a product or service. There should be two different laws in order to deal with social enterprises and NGOs.

According to Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam (2011), structural barriers include the instability of commercial laws. Nineteen of 37 women in their research considered these barriers as “very important.” The structural barriers were the same for men as it is related to the structure of society. Structural reform in the national system can cause entrepreneurship development. I found that four women discussed bureaucratic difficulties with interviewees. They may have done so to provide information to other women or entrepreneurs, or in the hope of having these issues addressed. Together, they conveyed that Iran’s bureaucracy is very time-consuming and inefficient. The common organizational structure in Iranian public organizations is the

bureaucratic structure. According to the study done by Vardinejad (2010), in Iran, public organizations are known for their chaotic and complex processes, their lack of attention to the needs of customers, their strict and unclear rules, and their relationship-oriented procedures.

Bureaucracy in Iran is explained by Vardinejad (2010), as the conservative and public administration exists in Iranian public organizations. An instance of the bureaucratic difficulty in my research is that Faezeh, Atefeh, Shaghayegh, and Tabassom said it takes a minimum of one year to obtain a license from the government for start-ups and this was a challenging process. The process is not related to gender necessarily. Faezeh, the founder of Dastadast Company which works in empowering and preserving indigenous arts, said,

Iran's administrative bureaucracy is inefficient and time-consuming. It took a year for us to get a license to operate (2020).

In summary, five women talked about the laws in Iran as an obstacle towards their growth. These include a gap in the laws regarding entrepreneurship, bureaucratic difficulties, and the laws between wife and husband. In the next section, I am investigating another key structural challenge which is financial.

4.1.2.5 Financial / Economic

Since the late 1980s, the Iranian government decided to expand and diversify non-oil exports (in the context of Iran's rich oil and gas reserves) by facilitating export goods and procedures. The export of handmade carpets was an idea for the government. Persian (Iranian) carpets are treasured as magnificent works of art and they provide employment for about one million people before the sanctions, mainly women in cottage industries. More than 90 percent of women workers in Iran's textile sector in rural areas are carpet weavers (Nomani and Behdad, 2006). However, after the US sanctions against Iran 2003, the production and exports of Persian

carpets declined significantly (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2011). Although the expansion of trade provides women with more employment opportunities, they are often in inferior working conditions, where, for example, they receive lower wages or simply do not receive the same opportunities. Women are mostly working in a narrow range of sectors including textile, garments, and in the informal sector having long hours, insecure employment, and sexual harassment. Bahramitash and Esfahani (2011) argue that there is a growing diversity of employment opportunities for women in Iran, but that this rapid area of growth does not necessarily ensure women's financial stability. They also point to Iran's disadvantaged position in global markets as a factor that limits the country's financial stability and likely limits opportunities for women entrepreneurs.

In my research, the most frequently mentioned financial barrier was the high inflation rate and exchange fees in Iran, followed by difficulty in receiving loans, access to microcredit, and a lack of capital. Eight women (Golmar, Ani, Arezoo, Azadeh, Faezeh, Atefeh, Shaghayegh, and Nasim), in media interviews, identified and discussed economic and financial obstacles. These varied and were likely related to both domestic and international considerations. Some obstacles include high rates of inflation and poor global exchange rates and difficulty in receiving loans including access to microcredits, which is likely to have specifically gendered dimensions. Obstacles also include a lack of capital, travel expenses, insurance, and federal taxes. While some issues, such as access to loans and the ability to travel overseas freely, may have been specific to women, many of these issues, including the high rate of inflation and exchange rates, were global in scope and were likely to affect all business owners.

Fariba, the founder of Didehban Company, an institute of public relations in the field of IT, said,

The economic condition of Iran became such that it is very difficult to work, everything is so expensive now. The inflation rate is high. There is no economic stability as well. When I started my work in 2007, business was done much more easily and smoothly (2019).

She expressed financial challenges over time, although these are not likely to be specific to women-owned businesses. These changes may be important, however, because they may discourage other women from initiating similar business ventures.

There was a specific mention made, by all of the women entrepreneurs, that they lacked government-based financial support for their business ventures. It may have been assumed that because this model exists elsewhere, it should also exist in Iran. This is perhaps unsurprising but is notable where two incomes are likely to be required to cover the daily costs of living. There may have also been an expectation of government support in the current period of financial challenges.

Five women (Golmar, Azadeh, Faezeh, Shaghayegh, and Arezoo) said they faced difficulties in access to microcredit to start or expand their businesses. In Iran, where women typically have low income and in women-headed households, have no support from men (mostly women-headed households), can receive microcredit from two governmental organizations, the Imam Khomeini's Relief Foundation, the Welfare Organization. They are only for living expenses.

Most women in my research are married (ten women out of 12), one is single, and one did not mention her marital status, so they are ineligible to receive microcredits from governmental organizations. Thus, women are intended to rely on husbands. This decision is a move to keep women out of the paid labour force, and perhaps to encourage marriage as a form

of support that does not cost the state. Loans should be available only to women-headed households. According to Hosseini et al. (2012), micro-credit projects are a primary source of providing financial assistance to rural women. The establishment of a micro-credit fund would enhance women's capacity for starting entrepreneurship (they did not consider the marital status of women). They discussed that the potential in encouraging women to start a business depends on the enhancement of their economic situation and the alleviation of their poverty.

Azadeh, the chair of the board of directors of Baharan Information Technology Company, operating in the services, technology, and software sectors, said that she needed financial help from the government, but was refused support for her company and that she had difficulty receiving loans. She did not have enough money to go on a training course abroad, so she recruited a teacher from England for her employees which was also very expensive (Life story of Azadeh Danandeh, 2014).

A lack of necessary capital to start businesses was a recurring theme; only one woman reported that she received money from her parents to start her business,:

My business's capital was provided by my parents (Lena, 2018).

Others received less support for business startup and capital,

I only had a laptop when I started my entrepreneurship, nothing else, because I did not have enough money; I even put the laptop on the ironing board because I did not have money to buy a table. Also, I did not have enough money to rent a place to work, so I worked from home and one of our bedrooms was our office (Ani, 2020).

The lack of government support and a lack of resources for women's entrepreneurship was reiterated by Arezoo,

In the beginning, we started working from home because we did not have enough money to rent a place and no one supported us, even the government (Arezo, 2022).

Since 2012, Iran has faced oil and banking sanctions. Following the imposition of US sanctions and instability of the exchange rates, the Rial (the basic monetary unit of Iran) has sharply lost its value; for example, the Iranian Exchange Rate against the US dollar has increased 12 times from 2011 to 2019.

International sanctions were a significant barrier for some businesses,

Lack of enough money is a major issue in our work. We cannot be present in different villages and places and we do not have the financial ability to do so. It is very beneficial if we see our customers in person, but unfortunately it costs a lot. We did not have financial support from anywhere. For example, we currently do not have the ability to use international grants because international banks do not work with us since we are from Iran. Also, the problems in transferring money have taken away many development opportunities for the production and sale of handicrafts because of international sanctions (Faezeh, 2020).

Business owners also expressed their dissatisfaction with the tax rules in Iran, which were not specific to women-owned businesses, although women business owners likely had less access to capital.

Most of the time, the tax percentage that I have to pay in my training company is the same as those who do business, also, the government always changes the rules and I must pay a fine because I am unaware of the new law (Atefeh, 2020).

Atefeh has been fined because she was unaware of the new tax law the government imposed. She followed a previous tax regime. She complained that the government always changes the laws

without any clear announcements. Although this is not about gender, this is the case, for instance, that women are less likely to be aware of these changes because they have less access to business environments. Atefeh is also concerned about the amount of tax she has to pay. She says that her company which is a kind of training should not pay as much as tax other businesses pay.

Some of these, such as a lack of capital, may have affected women disproportionately, but others, like high rates of inflation, affected all business owners. A lack of gender-specific initiatives to encourage women's participation and leadership (regardless of marital status) in business was a recurring theme. Although women did not say it explicitly,

I wanted to provide my services in different cities of Iran but the government did not provide me with any financial aid such as loans, microcredits, capital, etc. (Ani,2022).

Modarresi et al. (2017) found that a lack of skills and experience, financial barriers, as well as the problems of having work interactions with men are the most barriers women-owned HBBs mentioned. Modarresi et al. (2017) also found that the most commonly mentioned barrier that most of the interviewed women in their study faced in terms of business growth was related to a lack of capital and difficulty in financing the growth of their business, including receiving loans. Evidence from their study show that business owners believed that the government's financial support for HBBs was too little. In my research, while media interviews with women highlighted a lack of government support, there was a clear indication of familial support, especially from parents and husbands and which may have been expected. This support is expected to compensate for a lack of support in other areas. Women who could not receive any financial support from the government, they expected their family to support them (their father, before marriage and their husband after marriage).

Arasti, Rezayee et al. (2012) conducted a study to identify environmental factors affecting the growth orientation of women entrepreneurs in Tehran. They conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with a sample of women entrepreneurs and the data indicated environmental factors in three groups economic, sociocultural, and legal factors. Legal factors based on Arasti, Rezayee et al. (2012) include banking rules and regulations, and tax laws. For instance, women in their research deal with many challenges to get loans from banks, because of the complexity of the process of obtaining facilities, and the high interest rate.

Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam (2011) conducted a study on barriers to women's entrepreneurship development among Iranian women who graduated from universities in Shiraz by preparing questionnaires for 37 women. Their objective was to identify and evaluate barriers to the development of entrepreneurship among Iranian entrepreneur women who were graduated from universities. Economic-financial barriers according to Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam (2011) include a lack of market stability, a lack of financial support by the government, and instability of foreign exchange. The significance of the economic-financial barrier was stated as “very important” (p.9) by twelve women out of thirty-seven.

Eight women whose interviews I analyzed, identified and discussed economic and financial obstacles, including high rates of inflation and exchange fee, difficulty in receiving loans, access to microcredits, lack of capital, travel expenses, insurance, and taxes. Just because the others did not mention them does not mean that they did not experience them. While some of these barriers were specific to women, some were not. In the next section, I am analyzing some challenges that are specific to Iran. This is the last structural barrier and a significant factor that, while not specific to women, has implications because of the enforcement of everyday gendered

environments within Iran. At the end of the section, I am comparing the challenges more generally with some other places in the world.

4.1.2.6 Challenges Specific to Iran

Some specific challenges pertained to Iran and were a reflection of past and/or current politics. While the challenges were often identified as specific to Iran, some of these factors, such as the idea of a ‘brain drain’ occur in other countries as well and are articulated as declines in national resources.

In media interviews, a range of obstacles that were assumed to be specific to Iran was raised, including a lack of foreign trade, economic instability, bribery, brain drain, sanctions, decrease in tourism, filtering, low internet speed, lack of cutting-edge technology, some Islamic laws including the effects of Ramadan on workdays and the law for mandatory hijab. For example, Tabassom, the founder of MamanPaz Company noted the restriction of Ramadan on her catering business,

During Ramadan, my restaurant was forced to be closed. This caused many difficulties for me as I did not have income (2019).

While this closure would not pertain specifically to women, it is the case that more women are likely to be involved in commercial catering, which may be regarded as a public extension of their domestic skills and responsibilities. Through commercial catering, women sell the foods online. They manage the menu, recipe, and orders using different software.

The enforcement of a religious dress code limited future product development, I know that I cannot produce a short-sleeved coat for women in Iran, because in due to the mandatory hijab in Iran, women must cover their hair and body (Mahdis, 2020).

Bahramitash and Esfahani (2014) found that Iranian women-owned and/or operated businesses frequently face challenging conditions to access some infrastructure services, in particular telecommunicationns and the Internet including the slow and constricted Internet, followed by the unreliability of electricity supply. They also found that international economic sanctions were a major obstacle for women's businesses. However, according to their findings, there were few complaints among female entrepreneurs regarding other aspects of business, such as obtaining permits and paying taxes, in comparison to the rest of the MENA region. I think Iranian women, compared to women in MENA region, mostly talked about the issues specific to Iran, rather than some general concerns. For instance, they talked about the low internet speed in Iran and the international sanctions rather than talking about getting a license. My collected data is almost in line with Bahramitash and Esfahani's (2014) findings that except for the fact that obtaining permits is a challenge for women entrepreneurs in my research. Bahramitash and Esfahani (2014) compared Iran with the MENA region in terms of obtaining permits and paying taxes. In my research, four women declared that getting a license is very challenging.

Bahramitash and Esfahani (2014) found international sanctions as an obstacle for women entrepreneurs. These would only have arisen from the time that international sanctions were imposed. According to them, due to the sanctions, many companies need a third party in order to import or export. For example, goods from Europe must be shipped to Turkey, Dubai, or Malaysia before they reach Iran. This will increase the cost for the companies. Also, transferring money is an issue as foreign banks do not work in Iran. In my research, five women complained about international sanctions against Iran. Arezoo, a 39-year-old woman, the founder of Farshonline Company which sells carpets online, said:

We had very good exports but now it is decreased because of the international sanctions. Many international banks do not work with Iran and trades with Iran are now limited (2022).

These sanctions were not specific to women-owned businesses, but they may have limited possible start-ups by women who experienced underemployment and/or discrimination in other arenas for paid employment. It may have been viewed as a financial and professional risk to develop a new business concurrent with international sanctions and access to limited global capital and markets,

I cannot travel to some countries because of visa restrictions due to international sanctions against Iranian (Shaghayegh, 2019).

Bribery was also noted as a common business practice and women, even as business owners, experienced this practice and its expectation as a barrier,

Bribery is prevalent in Iran among government organizations. They give loans to whom they want, not to one who deserves (Atefeh, 2020).

Although education was highly valued, its location was significant and it was viewed as problematic when it was used outside of the borders of Iran. This was in the context of business owners who perceived that their staff had migrated to developed countries,

Most of our staff migrated to Australia and Canada and we had to train the new workforce which takes a minimum of one year, also one of our shareholders has emigrated and left the company. So, immigration is a major concern in Iran. People immigrate because Iran does not have a stable situation (Azadeh, 2014).

This situation highlighted the insecurity of staffing issues, required additional training costs, and was perceived as a loss. None of the women talked about moving their businesses elsewhere. It is

maybe because they had a long way to get here. That loss was also experienced in relation to tourism and tourism revenue.

Due to some rules in the country, for example, the mandatory Hijab (which means women should cover their hair and body), people are not interested in visiting Iran. Also, the political situation in Iran is not stable, so, the number of tourists decreases every year. Our work would be much more if tourists also used our application – (her application is called Peeyade application which is an online platform for offering entertainment in a city) (Lena, 2018).

This lack of tourist revenue was an issue for businesses and it also affected global visibility and engagement. This made business ventures in countries that experience sanctions (such as Iran and Russia) risky propositions.

Government censorship, expressed as filtering, was also a concern and while it is experienced in Iran, it is also not unique to this context.

Because we are Iranian, a series of websites have banned us and do not allow us to enter, so, we have to use filter breakers. Iran has also banned a series of websites and we have to use the filter breaker either. The fact that we are constantly facing the filter creates limitations for us.

In terms of the challenging condition for women to access cutting-edge technologies and IT, I realized some women entrepreneurs who work with people in rural areas, mentioned that women in rural areas in Iran commonly have difficulty access to the internet (Atefeh, 2020).

Women in rural areas do not have smartphones, the Internet, or computers. A lack of technological advancement, infrastructure and its inequitable distribution in rural areas was noted

as problematic, but this was compounded by existing issues in gender relations that exist and are upheld in Iran,

Some women in rural areas are not familiar with how the Internet works because their husbands do not allow them to have access to technology (Faezeh, 2020).

Some old people in deprived areas are not familiar with using information technology, also they do not have enough money to buy cell phones (Lena, 2018).

Since we do e-commerce, our basis is to use internet platforms, and the more these platforms expand, they will help our business grow a lot, but unfortunately the internet speed is not good in Iran which makes our job much more difficult (Arezo, 2022).

The life of our work and the livelihood and income of hundreds of our partners and producers depend on the internet, but sometimes in Iran we do not have access to the internet. Internet outage is a terrible thing that occurs due to some political conditions. For example, when people protest, the government limits access to the internet so that they cannot contact each other (Faezeh, 2020)

However, overall, the internet helped women in their business growth. Leila Mivehchi (2019) conducted a study on the role of IT in women's entrepreneurship in Iran. She gathered data through questionnaires from 40 sales representatives of Oriflame (a cosmetic company) on social media in Iran all of whom were women. Her main findings were: IT plays a significant role in increasing the marketing and sales of products for Iranian women entrepreneurs. Over 95% of the Oriflame sales representatives believed that IT has a significant effect on access to a job opportunity. Around 98% believed that IT has a significant effect on the time-saving of sales agents or buyers and around 93% believed that IT has a significant effect on their sales

growth. The significant of their findings is the emphasis on the importance of the internet on women entrepreneurship's growth.

I came to the same conclusion as all 12 women asserted that the internet undoubtedly affected their business in a positive way. Realistically, they also pointed out that the internet provided some significant challenges, such as a lack of familiarity with it and poor infrastructure issues. Some of the women who I examined through secondary media interviews launched and developed their business through the Internet and this was likely a means to counter some of the effects of international sanctions.

I cannot travel to other cities because it is very expensive, but through the Internet, I can be in touch with our company's producers as well as our customers (Nasim, 2016)

Six women mentioned that they use social networks such as Instagram and Telegram for the sale of their products.

I had launched an Instagram page and I walked around the city every day and introduced Tehran's attractions to people. This way, my company got introduced (Lena, 2018).

While this was the case, Lena's business was also likely to have been affected detrimentally by a downturn in international tourism.

In Modarresi et al.'s (2017) study, who studied the growth barriers to women's home-based businesses (HBBs) in Tehran (the capital of Iran) in the handicraft industry, having no place to offer products is another problem that half of the women complained about. In my study, thanks to the Internet, women did not need a physical place to sell their products. They used the internet as a place for marketing.

In summary, eleven women out of 12 stated that some obstacles are specific to Iran. For example, most of them said that sanctions negatively affected their companies. Also, the

economic and political conditions of Iran are not stable, so, it is hard for them to work in such a situation. Some of them talked about the brain drain in Iran. They said that many of their staff migrated to developed countries. Also, nine women believed that literacy is an obstacle in Iran. They said that universities in Iran do not teach useful material about entrepreneurship. Besides, eight women faced economic and financial obstacles. All of them mentioned that the government never provided them with any financial support. They said that Iran faces inflation, thus, everything became much more expensive. Therefore, they have had economic difficulty, especially in recent years. Seven women suffered from a lack of professional human resources to be recruited for their companies. Also, four women pointed out that there is no efficient law in Iran regarding entrepreneurship and they faced bureaucratic difficulties. They believed that Iran's bureaucracy is very time-consuming and inefficient. It takes a minimum of one year to get a license for start-ups.

4.2 Research question 2: Resilience and Coping Strategies for Iranian Women Entrepreneurs

My second research question was: *What resilience and coping strategies do Iranian women entrepreneurs use to navigate their challenges? Put another way, according to these Iranian women entrepreneurs, what explains their success?* Based on my findings, women used individual and collective coping strategies to deal with their challenges. Individual code includes some themes including hard work, motivation, perseverance, self-confidence, time management, responsibility, acquiring related skills and knowledge while collective code consists of some themes including receiving support from family members, reducing household and child care pressures, and teamwork. All 12 women interviewed in Iranian media about their own businesses noted a reliance on their individual coping strategies to deal with their challenges. While ten women said they relied on others' collaboration.

In Iran, people – and mostly women -- live with their parents' household until marriage, assuming that they will marry; some will not. Parents are expected to play an important role in the lives of their children. Six women indicated that they received support from their parents. The types of support include emotional support and advice and one woman received financial support as well. After marriage, it is expected that women are dependent on their husbands in a legally binding obligation. It is not surprising then, that eight women said they had their husband's support. This expectation of care by others is likely to shape ideas about individualism and independence and its gendered realities in contemporary Iranian society. It is also likely to shape dominant ideas about women's capabilities. In other words, individualism and independence are not ideals in Iran and women are expected to receive support from their families.

Liberal feminism pursues to improve the skills and abilities of women (Tong, 2011). All women in my research put emphasis on their individual success. They believed that they owe their success to their own efforts. So, they explain their successes first, as their own achievements. This is suitable to Tong's (2011) general purpose of liberal feminism. Women have to stand on their own to show their strength and ability. Although women were unaware of this, they have absorbed and follow liberal feminist tenets.

In Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam's (2011) study, half of the women considered lack of motivation as a personal barrier to women's entrepreneurship growth. Contrary to Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam's (2011) study, women in my research had the motivation to start and continue their entrepreneurship. Four women out of 12 talked about motivation specifically but half of the women in Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam's (2011) study said they sometimes lose their motivation.

Arasti, Rezayee et al. (2012) realized that women who have the support of their close friends and family members tend more to start a business. Remarkably, women entrepreneurs could change some negative attitudes to positive ones through their performance in business over time. For instance, only 60% of husbands support women entrepreneurs at the early stages of start-up, while this is 82% after launching a business. This is maybe due to the flexibility of working hours in entrepreneurship compared to a full-time job that has a fixed eight-hour working time. So, women can balance their work and family responsibilities.

Badzaban et al. (2021) analyzed the entrepreneurial resilience of rural women in Iran by using a questionnaire. They found that the resilience of rural women entrepreneurs included individual competencies, accepting positive changes, trust in their own inherent talents, control, and faith, respectively. According to them, individual competencies include believing in attaining objectives, not being frustrated, not being disappointed after failure, believing in their own ability, lacking fear, and priding in their achievements. Accepting positive changes includes adapting to changes, having a close friend, solving problems, being sure of progress, and returning to primary status after difficulty. Trust in their own inherent talents includes considering the positive aspect of problems, coping with stress, maintaining focus under pressure, being independent, making difficult and unexpected decisions, and controlling anger. Control includes having control during stress and crisis, following a specific objective, and controlling life events. Finally, faith includes believing in God or predestination during the lack of a solution, and expediency in each good or bad event.

4.3 Research question 3: Modes of Sharing Women’s Entrepreneurship Successes and Challenges

My last research question was: *How do Iranian women share their successes and challenges in the media?* The platform through which I examined this topic is the media,

specifically the online published interviews. Obviously, due to the lack of freedom of expression in Iran, the media would not publish sensitive topics. For example, women entrepreneurs barely talked about gender role challenges in detail. They just mentioned it as a general point. They were not asked to elaborate on this topic more. They mostly talked about their other challenge because they were aware that the media would censor their discussion. In addressing the representation of women in her research on entrepreneurship in Iran, Nafiseh acknowledges the critical role of narrative control and the limitations it imposes on her study. She points out that women participants may not fully control the narratives during interviews, which can influence the breadth and depth of insights gathered. This lack of control over the interview narrative means certain topics or challenges pertinent to navigating a patriarchal society may not be adequately explored or voiced. In a patriarchal setting like Iran, women entrepreneurs may not always disclose challenges related to gender discrimination or familial expectations, fearing repercussions or cultural stigma (these were not asked by interviewers and were not said by interviewees).

All the interviews included women's challenges and barriers except one (Fariba Yarahmadi). She only talked about her business background, which was not related to the scope of my research. Entrepreneurship is not a sensitive topic for the media. Sensitive topics in Iran mostly include political ones. For example, if a woman complains about the lack of women's freedom in Iran, it is a taboo in the media and ultimately will not be represented in the media. In the context of activism, particularly by women in Iran, the desire for structural change puts women at risk. However, the challenges women mentioned in their interviews were some points that were not taboo or a sensitive topic. Sensitive topics were not even asked by the interviewer.

In my research, certain women were depicted by the media as successful entrepreneurs, possibly to illustrate the available opportunities for women in Iran, encourage other women to embark on entrepreneurial endeavors, or showcase positive strides in women's advancement in the country. Also, several women entrepreneurs mentioned receiving support from their parents or husbands. This could align with prevailing social and media norms, as well as the expectation that parents assist their children and spouses support each other. Women may discuss the support of their parents or husbands as a gesture of gratitude, especially considering the acknowledgment of such support in the media. In Iran, expressing gratitude to others for the opportunity to work outside the home may be a common response.

Among the 12 women whose interviews I examined, eight women work in the fields that are more often attributed to men in the media, such as, for example, networking and security consultancy, or protection against cyber threats. However, this is likely to be because I concentrated on the ICT sector specifically. The idea that women can have success in these areas is another subtle presentation of liberal feminist ideals in Iranian society. According to Tong (2011), for over two centuries, liberal feminists have argued that societal norms, employment practices, and legal frameworks hinder women's participation and achievement in the public sphere. When women are either excluded from fields like business, law, medicine, engineering, and information technology, or are perceived as less competent than men, they experience discrimination. Unless women are welcomed into the public sphere with the same level of enthusiasm and expectations as men, they will not thrive to the same extent.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the research questions in detail. That includes the challenges Iranian women entrepreneurs working in the ICT sector face, their resilience strategies, and the

way they demonstrate their experience of success and challenges in the media. I also discovered the challenges that are not gender-related. In the next chapter, I discuss the conclusion which includes an overview of my research objective and findings as well as my research benefits.

CHAPTER 5- CONCLUSION

I investigated the challenges as well as the resilience of 12 Iranian women entrepreneurs in the ICT sector. I used public interviews in the media as my source of data. I identified some codes to organize the collected data regarding women's challenges. These codes include gender role expectations including family and childcare, lack of trust in women in Iran, human resources, education, laws, finances, and challenges specific to Iran. Some of these challenges were specific to women, including gender role expectations and lack of trust in women in Iran, while others did not have gendered dimensions, such as including human resources, education, laws, finances, and challenges specific to Iran. Gender does not always seem to be a primary factor in the barriers these women face. Perhaps it is because the women themselves avoid certain topics. Or, it is maybe because of the media outlets who published the interviews. I also scrutinized the resilience, or the coping strategies, of women entrepreneurs to their challenges.

I found that the most significant challenge mentioned by women was those which are specific to Iran as 11 women out of 12 complained about it. These challenges include a lack of foreign trade, economic instability, bribery, brain drain, sanctions, decrease in tourism, filtering, low internet speed, lack of cutting-edge technology, and some Islamic laws, such as Ramadan and the hijab. Exports and imports both fell sharply after the international sanctions were imposed against Iran which clearly affected women's businesses. Many companies need a third party (because international companies and banks do not work directly with Iran) in order to import or export (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2014). As far as I know, the challenges of bribery, brain drain, decrease in tourism, filtering, and some Islamic laws are not already identified in the scholarly literature in this context. According to the World Bank, Iran faced as of July 2023 extreme drop in the number of foreign international tourists. These could be due to the recent political crisis in Iran as well as the already existing issues such as international sanctions,

mandatory hijab, and negative imagery. Also, the government of Iran controls internet access through censorship and filtering on some websites including news websites, and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, and so on. This causes many difficulties for almost everyone, including women entrepreneurs. Most of the women interviewed in my research, use social media platforms for selling their products. Thus, they not only face slow internet speed but also filtering issues.

Additionally, some women entrepreneurs talked about some Islamic laws which affected their business including the month of Ramadan and the mandatory hijab. This is unique to Iran because in other Islamic countries, during the Ramada, restaurants are not closed. Moreover, wearing the hijab is mandatory only in Iran and Afghanistan. Also, Iranian law (which is based on Islam) considers the husband the head of the household, so, he is responsible for all the expenses of the household. The husband is obliged to pay for his wife's housing, food, and clothing. However, this law, at the same time, can help or facilitate women's entrepreneurial activities. For example, a woman is not required to cover the living expenses of her family or even herself. Thus, she does not need to work at any cost. Some men in Iran do exhausting or even dangerous work due to the stigma that men are responsible for family expenses. If they do not have an income, they have no manhood. On the other hand, a woman can think of her entrepreneurship with peace of mind. She can choose to work for a decent job or start her own business; it is her own choice. Unless she does not have her husbands' or fathers' approval. Even if she fails in her entrepreneurship, she does not fail her whole life. On the contrary, a man cannot take the risk to be failed. He must have a secure job as he is the breadwinner.

Nevertheless, none of the women entrepreneurs being interviewed talked about their peace of

mind of the lack of responsibility for family expenses. It seems that they do not have this concern at all. Maybe because it is part of the Iranian culture and people are used to it.

In Iran, high inflation has lowered both the purchasing power of middle- and lower-class households, thus, more women are encouraged to seek paid employment (their men easily allow them to work). Also, women have the aspiration for financial independence and intellectual autonomy, so, they choose to work (Kian, 2014). However, choosing to work is not a decision made by a woman unless her guardian (father or husband) allow it. In other words, a woman's independence and freedom to make choices for herself (e.g., to work, get an education, marry, divorce, bear children or not) changes depending on the attitude of her husband or closest male relative (Evason, 2016).

The next significant challenge was the lack of trust in women in the work public sphere. Eleven women out of 12 believed that there are few employment opportunities for women, employers refuse to promote women at work, and people (mostly men) do not believe in women's capabilities. Negative attitudes toward women's capabilities in outside work (anything other than domestic work) can reduce women's entrepreneurship (Niazkar & Arab-Moghaddam, 2011). Additionally, women faced gender role expectation challenges which include women's domestic responsibilities, lack of gendered opportunity, childcare, and family opposition. Some women had childcare difficulties and a few women faced their families' opposition to their entrepreneurship. Work-home conflicts due to cultural norms and values have a negative effect on the growth of women's businesses. They try to keep their business small to be able to handle both outside and inside responsibilities (Arasti, Rezayee et al., 2012). Also, the negative stereotypes against women (e.g., women are not as competent in the workplace as men) are barriers for women to start their own businesses (Modarresi et al., 2017).

Women entrepreneurs in the media are fairly well-educated but they were concerned about the quality of education in Iran at universities including the lack of knowledge and skills of university staff, the lack of appropriate hardware facilities as well as the lack of cutting-edge technologies. This causes difficulty for women entrepreneurs in finding and recruiting skilled, educated, knowledgeable, and experienced workforce for their companies. Also, employing a qualified and skilled labour force is more difficult for women than their men counterparts due to the stigma that men do not want to work for a woman manager (Arasti, Rezayee et al., 2012). Furthermore, most women faced economic and financial obstacles which consists of high rates of inflation and exchange fee, difficulty in receiving loans, access to microcredits, lack of capital, travel expenses, insurance, and taxes. Most women entrepreneurs consider the financial barrier as one of the most significant challenges (Modarresi et al., 2017; Arasti, Rezayee et al., 2012; Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam, 2011). Women who have good economic conditions are more encouraged to start a business (Hosseini et al., 2012).

The 12 women entrepreneurs whose interviews I analyzed have university degrees. The media chose these women to show a good image of women in Iran. They are merely exceptions in the way that they did not face some of the obstacles that could be common among Iranian women. For instance, they had their fathers' or husbands' permission to work. Also, they received their family's financial or emotional support, including childcare support.

In terms of the resilience of women entrepreneurs, I found that women tried to navigate their challenges by working hard work, having motivation, perseverance, self-confidence, time management, and responsibility, and acquiring related skills and knowledge while receiving support from family members, reducing household and child care pressures, because of cooperation and assistance from others and practicing teamwork. All the 12 women interviewed

in Iranian media tried to show that they owe their success to their own effort. This could also be due to the reluctance of people to talk about gender-based issues, thus, women prefer only to discuss their own personal traits rather than the gendered nature of them. Therefore, they might avoid speaking about gender-based issues which is itself a kind of resilience. The demand for self-realization and self-transformation is an indication of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018). However, maybe due to the social appreciation in describing the family as cooperative, 10 women said they received support from their families. This does not completely negate the importance of that support. Though, I am not sure to what extent they received the support they mentioned. Perhaps they exaggerated as receiving support is greatly appreciated in Iran.

Eight women said they had their husband's support. By support, they mean encouragement by their husbands or when the husband does not expect his wife to take care of all domestic responsibilities. Also, when a husband allows his wife to work, the wife considers it as support. Because the default (based on Iranian law and culture) is that a woman needs her husband's permission to work. Thus, when a man gives this permission, he gives a favor to his wife. In terms of parents' support, six women indicated that they received support from their parents. In the Iranian culture which is rooted in Islamic ethics, respecting parents is a value. This might be the reason why women expressed their appreciation to their parents in the media which they knew would be published publicly. However, women who have the support of their close friends and family members more often start their own businesses (Arasti, Rezayee et al., 2012), especially in a culture like Iran where women are seen as inferior, making their success all the more remarkable. For example, a woman cannot have a passport without the permission of her father (before marriage) and her husband (after marriage). All 12 women interviewed in Iranian media about their own businesses noted a reliance on their individual coping strategies to

deal with their challenges. While ten women said they relied on their family members' collaboration. Generally, although all the women credited the entrepreneurial success to their individual coping strategies including hard work and the ability to overcome obstacles, they also relied, in contradictory ways, on other's support, especially their parents' and/or husbands' support.

I am aware that media outlets in Iran disseminate information with specific biases and agendas, potentially compromising objectivity. In this case, it may be advantageous to promote entrepreneurship as a viable but special option for women and to portray it as accessible for certain individuals, downplaying the ongoing challenges they encounter by making their success a matter of personal talent rather than the collaborative overcoming of structural inequities. This approach could bolster the perception of a robust economy and mitigate public awareness of gender-related hurdles. Additionally, success stories probably received more attention while profiles of entrepreneurial failures were overlooked by the media.

In Iran, men dominate the public sphere and hold more decision-making power, and women's authority is mostly limited to the domestic space. Moreover, men are considered financially and legally responsible for supporting the women of their families. Thus, women usually get passed over for jobs, earn less, and receive lower allowances as it is expected that their male family members will support them. Those who are employed usually do desktop-based office work and also rarely get the same management opportunities (Evason, 2016). Previous studies (e.g., Modarresi et al., 2017; Niazkar and Arab-Moghaddam, 2011; Modarresi and Arasti, 2021; Bahramitash and Esfahani, 2014; Mivehchi, 2019) demonstrated that gender-specific challenges and obstacles that are rooted in cultural norms in Iran, negatively affect women's entrepreneurship. It includes women's domestic responsibilities, or the idea that

housekeeping and child care are the most important responsibilities of a woman. It includes family disagreement , where a primary value is that a woman's employment is considered unacceptable if her family does not need her salary), and it includes a women's lack of access to human and financial capital, and a lack of trust in women, where the public does not believe in women's skills and abilities. My study demonstrates the same, except that most women had their families' support (only two women had challenges with their families). Moreover, based on previous findings, access to human and financial resources are barriers to women's entrepreneurship in Iran. According to my findings too, most women had difficulty in access to bank loans and human capital. Thus, most of my findings echo the existing scholarly literature. However, I also realized some obstacles that are specific to Iran that are not already identified in the scholarly literature to the best of my knowledge. These obstacles include bribery, brain drain, decrease in tourism, filtering, some Islamic laws including Ramadan (a month in which people are fasting and all the restaurants must be closed during the day), and mandatory Hijab (which means women should cover their hair and body).

After the Islamic revolution in Iran, women's rights and family law were shaped by a traditionalist interpretation of Islam. This involved mandatory veiling, restrictions on women's ability to gain custody of their children after divorce, child marriage, etc. Despite the challenges women were facing in society, the government did not implement any economic, social, or cultural initiatives specifically aimed at addressing their needs. As a result, women have been advocating for equality, freedom, and justice by mobilizing at the grassroots level to challenge conservative religious governance. Iran's feminist movement has challenged the theocratic regime since its inception, with women leading the first anti-theocracy protest in 1979. Despite crackdowns by hardliners labeling feminist involvement as a threat to national security, feminist

resistance has persisted and gained recognition. The latest spark of feminist resistance occurred in September 2022 following the killing of Kurdish-Iranian Mahsa Jina Amini from injuries she sustained while in police custody for allegedly violating Iran's conservative hijab laws. Women spearheaded extensive street demonstrations for months under the rallying cry of woman, life, and freedom, demanding fundamental rights and liberties despite the perilous risk of a violent government crackdown. Drawing from years of women's rights activism, women throughout Iran united to voice their discontent with entrenched gender bias enshrined in Iran's legal framework and their deliberate exclusion from political participation.

While the Iranian government does not acknowledge feminism, women in Iran draw upon a rich legacy of feminist activism. Liberal feminism does indeed have a place in Iran, at the very least as an ideal pursued by women, including women entrepreneurs. All 12 women in my study indicated that they depended on their abilities. They credited their achievements to personal qualities such as independence, creativity, and ambition, aligning with the principles of neoliberal feminism. Also, women entrepreneurs in my research navigate numerous challenges that intersect with feminist concerns, such as women's domestic responsibilities, traditional gender roles, and societal mistrust in women's abilities outside the home.

Considering the diverse barriers to women's entrepreneurship in Iran, a comprehensive approach to women's entrepreneurship development is necessary which could include actions taken by the government to stop the existing gender stereotypes, mostly through education from an early age in schools to later in universities. Another supportive area is to assist women entrepreneurs balance their work-home responsibilities by providing more affordable childcare facilities and revising some laws regarding women's domestic duties. Also, there should be a supportive environment for women's businesses start-up and growth, training programs, and

development of entrepreneurial awareness among women. Awareness raising could promote social trust in women. Women's awareness of entrepreneurship could be developed by showing more role models of successful women entrepreneurs in different fields in the media, books, etc.

While my research sheds light on the barriers, it also prompts broader questions about gender discrimination in Iran and strategies to combat inequality effectively. These questions extend beyond the scope of this study but warrant future investigation to drive meaningful societal change. For instance, there are some questions that I cannot answer as my data are limited: Does education make some assumptions about social class? To whom might formal education be inaccessible? Was education connected in any way to familial status? For example, was it possibly easier to obtain when husbands recognized its benefits (i.e. dual household incomes)? Was it more difficult to obtain when husbands or father opposed it? Is education a form of individual credentialism? That is, knowledge may be shared with others, but the recognition of attainment is individualized. Also, there are some questions beyond the scope of the research: How are women discriminated against in Iran? what are the areas of gender discrimination in Iran? And, how women in Iran can combat gender inequality?

Finally, the findings of my research would benefit Iranian women entrepreneurs, especially in the ICT sector. Through a better understanding of their challenges, I hope I can raise public awareness of the existing gender norms and stereotypes in Iran and other social and economic challenges in women's entrepreneurial path.

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APPENDIX

Women's Profiles

Below are the descriptions of women's businesses including the name and educational background of the women entrepreneurs as well as the name and location of their companies, the date companies were established, companies' type, history, and size. They are listed alphabetically.

Ani Khachikian

Ani Khachikian is the founder of PooyeGaam Company which works in the field of networking and security consultancy (it is a knowledge-based start-up). It was launched in 2006. It is based in Tehran. Ani holds a Bachelor's in Electricity and Telecommunications from the Iran University of Science and Technology (Azimi, 2019). In PooyeGaam Company, they teach companies what are the different kinds of security in their IT sector. For example, network quality, network security, and network expandability. They provide consultancy when an organization's IT infrastructure face obscure and complex problems. Computer network and intelligent hardware support experts of PooyeGaam Company first remotely diagnose the cause of the problem by using technological tools such as solar winds and try to solve it without being present in the organization. However, in the required cases, they solve the problems in person by obtaining the necessary information through computer network support tools and smart hardware.

Ani and her husband started their work together by receiving different projects from various organizations. Most of the clients they had were large organizations that needed someone to come to check the system and solve the problem due to the complexity of their system. Therefore, they offer consultancy regarding IT to different organizations. In 2011, the

government of Iran put special emphasis on cyber security, so, they decided to start this business. At that time, they did not register their company, until they got a project from a company that told them they only make a contract with a company, not a person, so, they registered the company. They first had two employees, but now they have 26 (Interview with Ani Khachikian, 2020).

Arezoo Khosravi

Arezoo Khosravi is the founder of Farshonline Company which sells carpets online. It was launched in 2010. It is based in Tehran. Arezoo holds a Master's in International Law and Ph.D. in Business Management (Azimi, 2019). Arezoo launched the Farshonline Company together with her husband. Currently, they have at least 15 direct employees and about 100 weavers and producers working with them directly and indirectly in different cities in Iran. In the beginning, they started working from home, but now they have an office. Their main activity started in 2010 with machine-made carpets, and then they expanded it to hand-woven carpets. They have been involved in the Iranian handicrafts organization for about 4 years now. For three years, they have entered the field of home decoration such as curtains and parquet. Their work is an online business of selling and marketing (Interview with Arezoo Khosravi, 2022).

Farshonline started its business in handmade carpet trading over 50 years ago but gradually became one of the best carpet markets among online marketplaces in 2010. The market strategy was to provide not only carpets of different types but other related products like moquettes, curtains, decoration, and bedroom supplies. Now, this market has the most completed collection of carpets in Iran, both handmade and machine-made carpets all from great workshops and factories. Today, the market is placed among the premier online marketplaces in Iran.

Customers can reach whatever their heart desires in the Farshonline market from machine-made carpets of non-allergic yarns in different reeds and designs to handmade rugs, Persian Kilim rug, and Persian Gabbeh rug from any region and style (Challenges of women's entrepreneurship, 2021).

Atefeh Rahmati

Atefeh Rahmati is the CEO of Afarinesh Technology Network Company which does start-up consulting services. It was launched in 2007. It is based in Tehran. Atefeh holds Bachelor's in Computer Engineering, but she also took some courses in MBA (Azimi, 2019). They were five in their group when they started the business, but now they are 15 people working for Afarinesh Technology Network Company. Currently, Afarinesh Technology Network Company, mostly outsources. They had two main goals in their company when they launched it. First, they wanted to empower those who want to enter the labour market. It means university graduates who do not have enough skills to be attracted to the market. Second, they wanted to carry out the projects that they implemented in the cities with local and indigenous labourers, so, they don't have to send labour from Tehran which is the capital city of Iran for the projects to different cities. A large part of their work is training (Interview with Atefeh Rahmati, 2020).

The services provided by Afarinesh Technology Network Company include providing management consulting and business development services in cooperation industries in designing, setting up, managing, and monitoring all types of start-ups, providing information and communication technology facilities and communications required by companies including equipping technological units, providing support and procurement services based on information and communication technology, providing management services to governmental and non-

governmental organizations and institutions in the fields of management and Information and Communications Technology and etc.

Azadeh Danandeh

Azadeh Danandeh is the chair of the board of directors of Baharan Information Technology Company, operating in the services, technology, and software sectors. It was launched in 2005. It is based in Tehran. Azadeh holds a Bachelor's in Computer Science (Azimi, 2019). Baharan Information Technology Company's specialty is management in the IT field. For example, they do project management and had projects in many cities in Iran. Their job is to understand why the business and its customers and personnel are unhappy and their expenses are high. They assess their situation and then give them a solution. They produce different software to solve their problem. Currently, they have 50 employees (Life story of Azadeh Danandeh, 2014).

Their services include creating and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of management systems in the process of supply, procurement, development, operation, and support of plans and projects by developing systems and methods, training, evaluating and auditing systems, selecting and accepting products, as well as performing monitoring and project management with an emphasis on information and communication technology (Azimi, 2019).

Faezeh Derakhshani

Faezeh Derakhshani is the founder of Dastadast Company which works for empowering and preserving indigenous arts. It was launched in 2013. The head office is based in Tehran. Faezeh holds a Bachelor's in Computer Engineering and she is studying Master's in social sciences (Azimi, 2019). Dastadast Company is a social entrepreneurship. They are nine people in Dastadast Company. Their main activity is to support the producers of handmade products and

the marginalized groups of society including rural women, people with disabilities, female heads of households, etc. Their goal is to educate them, improve their products and help them to sell their products. Their place of activity is the Internet, but their staffs live in different cities of Iran in order to be in touch with those women. They used the internet to be able to communicate with people in villages and remote areas without having to go there. Currently, they work with around 500 people in 15 provinces of Iran. In fact, they are not sellers, but they help to sell. In general, Dastadast is a social business dedicated to empowering handmade producers while helping with Crafts restoration. They help producers from designing the product to selling them. Also, women empowerment and fair trade are their core values (Let's believe the handicraft startups, 2020).

Fariba Yarahmadi

Fariba Yarahmadi is the founder of Didehban Company, an institute of public relations in the field of IT. It was launched in 2007. It is based in Tehran. Fariba holds a Bachelor's in Computer Science and a Master's in Management. The number of her current employees at Didehban Company who are on the insurance list is about 12 people, but the number of employees with whom Fariba works as a contractor is about 35 people. The company's main activity is content production. It is a public relations agency in the field of IT. The company presents many services like consulting services, public relations, advertisement, and branding. Now Didehban Media Holding has more than 12 subsidiaries and based on its creative and well-educated team, it works in all media-related fields, content development, and consultant, especially in the Information Technology zone.

The company's services specifically include conducting news research, informing, analyzing content, and publishing them through licensed media; setting up, establishing, and operating news bases and news agencies; publishing general, specialized, and exclusive media,

both written and electronic or domestic publications (after obtaining a special license); providing public relations and information services and providing media advice to all governmental and non-governmental organizations (About me, n.d.).

Golmar Bahri

Golmar Bahri is the founder of Atena Company. A company in IT services that provides protection against cyber threats (it is a knowledge-based start-up). It was launched in 2006. It is based in Tehran. Golmar has a Master's degree in Information Technology and Artificial Intelligence from the Iran University of Science and Technology. Currently, she has 43 employees in her company. They work in the field of security. Her company sells security solutions to government organizations and other huge organizations. The customers of Atena company are other IT companies that procure goods through them and sell to their customers all over the country. They have more than 380 agents. They established a system in that all of their business work is automatic and mechanized. They completely made the system operator base. In fact, their knowledge dependence is not on people. She says that when they started working in the field of security, it was a very new field (Interview with Golmar Bahri, 2013).

Atena group of companies consists of 4 companies, each of which has specific tasks. First, Athena Communication Technology Company, which operates in the field of network and security. Second, Pars Athena Dej, which sells products such as Kaspersky Anti-Virus; third, Force Technologies, whose head office is located in Dubai and performs international activities, and the fourth company, Samaneh Nagar Athena Company (Sena) that Abrino is a product of this Sena company (Female managers have to prove themselves a thousand times more than men, 2019).

Lena Vafaei

Lena Vafaei is the founder of Peeyade application which is citizens' entertainment. It was launched in 2014. It is based in Tehran. Lena holds Bachelor's in Geotechnical Engineering from Canada. She started her graduate studies in Architecture and Urban Planning in New York but she dropped out of university and went back to Iran to start her idea on entrepreneurship (Azimi, 2019). In 2014, she started her own business. She has 40 employees in Peeyade. They started their activity with the aim of positive communication between the city and the citizen. They work on citizens' free time and entertainment in the city. What they do is actually an online platform for offering entertainment in a city. They have several departments including a technical department that actually takes care of the website and application. They have a content section that offers entertainment suggestions. They also have a marketing department that does marketing. They also have a sales department that follows up on advertising.

Lena and her friend had no IT experience, so it was difficult to work in this field and their first application did not work very well. At the same time, they had launched the Instagram page, that's why she used to walk around the city every day and introduced Tehran's attractions to the people with a positive view along with good pictures, and that's why the audience gathered and this work got fans. Since they had received good reactions in the virtual space, they decided to revive their app once again. They designed and produced the second application based on the needs of the community. Peeyade application is a new and attractive media that helps people to discover places of interest, sightseeing, artistic places, restaurants, and etc. (Interview with Lena Vafaei, 2018).

Mahdis Parpanchi

Mahdis Parpanchi is the founder and CEO of Iran Interview Company which is working in the evaluation and development of human resources. It was launched in 2017. It is based in Tehran. Mahdis holds a Bachelor's in Accounting. For her Master's degree, she went to an American university in Dubai and studied MBA there for one year. Then, she went back to Iran and studied Ph.D. in Entrepreneurship. Mahdis along with some young developers who knew programming created an institute that is known as the first job interview institute in Iran working in the field of human resources. They launched a center in which a person's competencies to perform a specific role, or promotion and development, are measured by a team of evaluators using certain tools. The results of the evaluation process in the evaluation center include hiring suitable and qualified people, finding talented people for appointing key jobs, determining and diagnosing people's needs to develop and complete skills, transfer of people in the organization, etc. Overall, the services provided by Iran Interview Company include human resource management consulting, implementation of evaluation and development centers, finding human resources, providing training courses (Iran interview a bigger dream, 2020).

Nasim Yadegar

Nasim Yadegar is the founder of The Horizon of the Third Part Company which is a social entrepreneurship project on "Fabric Bag Manufacturer." It was launched in 2014. It is based in Tehran. Nasim holds Ph.D. in Entrepreneurship. In The Horizon of the Third Part Company, they are 4 people in the headquarters department and about 40 people in the sewing and cutting department. They have one headquarters office and five workshops in the city. In fact, they have a social entrepreneurship project in which female heads of households are empowered in the field of professional sewing during a process of one or two years. Their product is an environmental product to prevent environmental pollution. That is, they have defined an

environmental and empowerment project. Their intention is to replace plastic with fabric products as a social product. They produce 20,000 fabric bags per month (Buy a green bag to help these women, 2016).

Shaghayegh Azimi

Shaghayegh Azimi is the founder of Laneh Company which is an online handicraft company. It was launched in 2018. It is based in Zahedan. Shaghayegh holds Bachelor's in International Business and Marketing, and Master's in Middle East Politics. In 2018, Shaghayegh decided to launch her own company to work with women in Zahedan province of Iran on handicrafts. These women produce handicrafts and Laneh Company helps them to sell their products. Shaghayegh launched the company herself but later on, two friends joined her. All other staffs are from outsourcing (like photographers). Their entrepreneurship is a kind of social impact which means business with social insight. Their vision goes beyond simply producing a series of products and selling them in the market. This vision includes the promotion of Iranian handicrafts in the world market and the creation of a better life for native artists active in Iranian handicrafts, especially women. The products that Laneh company produces include home brands including textiles and interior decorative items (Azimi, 2019).

Tabassom Latifi

Tabassom Latifi is the founder of MamanPaz Company which is catering. It was launched in 2014. It is based in Tehran. Tabassom holds a Master's degree in MBA. Tabassom worked as an IT specialist in two different national banks but then she decided to launch her own business in 2014. They are 30 people in MamanPaz Company. MamanPaz means moms who make food. It is an online catering. MamanPaz established a new business by empowering housewives. Today,

this startup has created employment for 500 housewives in Tehran. MamanPaz delivers about 2 to 3 thousand meals from moms' kitchens to customers' lunch tables every day. Making prices up-to-date on the website and mobile application, processing orders, management of sending orders, online payment, and even marketing for the chef in social networks through email marketing and other digital marketing methods, all can be done using information technology in their company. MamanPaz dishes are prepared by housewives with the best and freshest ingredients and sent to the buyers, following the health tips. The most important priorities of MamanPaz are creating jobs for housewives and also providing the highest quality food for users (A trip to MamanPaz, 2019).