

## **Entrepreneurial training and the legitimacy of women entrepreneurs: towards an integrated conceptual model in the Moroccan context.**

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**Abstract**

This study aims to model the mechanisms through which entrepreneurial training contributes to the legitimization of women entrepreneurs in a sociocultural context marked by restrictive gender norms, using Morocco as the analytical framework.

On a methodological level, the research adopts a theoretical approach based on a systematic literature review. Through this process, an integrated conceptual model is proposed, identifying the direct, mediating (such as self-confidence and access to professional networks), and moderating (notably social norms) effects of training on perceived legitimacy. Although the study is exploratory and conceptual in nature, it lays the groundwork for future empirical validations. The main conclusion highlights that entrepreneurial training serves as a strategic lever not only for developing entrepreneurial skills but also for strengthening the social and institutional recognition of women entrepreneurs, acting as a vector for personal empowerment and the transformation of dominant social norms.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurial training, Legitimacy, Entrepreneurial skills, Gender, Morocco, Social norms.

## **Introduction**

Women's entrepreneurship has garnered significant interest in academic research, both for its role in inclusive economic development and its potential for social transformation. However, in many sociocultural contexts—particularly in societies with rigid gender norms like Morocco—women entrepreneurs continue to face structural and symbolic barriers that hinder their recognition and legitimation in the economic sphere (Benchekroun, 2019; El Hadad, 2020).

Entrepreneurial legitimacy, understood as the social and institutional recognition of the right to act as an economic agent (Suchman, 1995), is a central challenge for women entrepreneurs operating in environments shaped by gendered expectations. These norms tend to assign domestic and familial roles to women, making their presence in the entrepreneurial arena atypical and even socially contested (Marlow & Swail, 2014; McDowell et al., 2019).

In this context, entrepreneurial training emerges as a strategic pillar, not only for enhancing technical skills but also as a process of empowerment that enables women to construct a credible and visible entrepreneurial identity (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008; Brush et al., 2009). Beyond the transfer of knowledge, training serves as a space for identity transformation, network-building, and the challenge of social stereotypes.

Yet, despite the proliferation of entrepreneurship training programs, few studies have sought to model in an integrated way the mechanisms through which such training contributes to the legitimation of women entrepreneurs, taking into account mediating factors (such as self-confidence or access to networks) and contextual moderators (such as social or religious norms).

This raises a central question: To what extent and through which mechanisms do entrepreneurial training contribute to the legitimation of women entrepreneurs in a sociocultural context marked by restrictive gender norms?

Through a cross-cutting and critical literature review, this study proposes an original conceptual model articulating the direct, mediating, and moderating effects of entrepreneurial training on perceived legitimacy. It aims to offer a contextualized theoretical contribution to the field of women's entrepreneurship, particularly in Global South countries, while laying the groundwork for future empirical validations.

## **1. Literature Review**

### **1.1. Entrepreneurial Training**

Entrepreneurial education refers to the set of pedagogical mechanisms aimed at equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to integrate successfully into the entrepreneurial world. It goes far beyond the mere acquisition of technical know-how, aiming to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and posture capable of identifying opportunities, taking initiative, managing risk and uncertainty, and ultimately creating value (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008).

Moreover, Fayolle and Gailly identify three complementary objectives of entrepreneurship education:

- Educating entrepreneurship consists in preparing individuals for entrepreneurial action.
- Educating through entrepreneurship, which relies on concrete, real, and immersive experiences.
- Educating about entrepreneurship, which is based on a thorough and analytical understanding of the entrepreneurial phenomenon.

This integrated approach is rooted in an active learning process that favors experiential teaching methods. Indeed, in a study conducted by Fayolle and Gailly (2015), the transformational nature of entrepreneurship education was shown to significantly impact entrepreneurial intentions and attitudes, especially when supported by interactive and contextualized pedagogical approaches. Entrepreneurship pedagogy is notably characterized by the use of active methods such as case studies, business creation simulations, and role-playing. It also draws on reflective approaches that promote the internalization of lived experiences and the development of entrepreneurial judgment (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's experiential learning model is based on a four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This cycle fosters personal involvement and engagement, which in turn promotes the development of entrepreneurial skills. Along similar lines, Pittaway and Cope (2007) emphasize that entrepreneurial learning unfolds through a continuous interaction between the individual and their environment, with experience playing a central role.

Furthermore, entrepreneurship education is seen as a lever for developing technical, social, and cognitive skills essential to entrepreneurship, such as creativity, problem-solving, risk-taking and risk management, communication abilities, and leadership (Man et al., 2002). In the case of women entrepreneurs, training takes on a strategic role in their empowerment and recognition process. It helps strengthen self-confidence, build a credible entrepreneurial posture, and

challenge deeply rooted gender stereotypes prevalent in many sociocultural contexts. Additionally, Brush et al. (2009) highlight that training provides access to recognized competencies, valuable certifications, and structured professional networks, all of which contribute to establishing the legitimacy of women entrepreneurs.

## **1.2 Entrepreneurial Competencies**

Entrepreneurial Competencies (ECs) have gained remarkable traction in literature in recent years, following the foundational work of Boyatzis (1982), who defines competencies as a combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities mobilized in complex, enduring, and performance-oriented environments. When transposed to the field of entrepreneurship, the concept refers to a multidimensional set encompassing personal traits, knowledge and know-how, as well as observable behaviors that enable entrepreneurs to identify, develop, and exploit business opportunities (Bird, 1995; Man et al., 2002; Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010).

ECs include personal, relational, social, strategic, and organizational components, which explain the diversity of typologies proposed in the literature. Mitchelmore and Rowley (2013) distinguish five categories: personal, relational, entrepreneurial, managerial, and human competencies. Meanwhile, Ataei et al. (2020) propose a classification based on five axes: psychological, strategic, organizational, communicative, and opportunistic competencies. These competencies are characterized by their flexible and contextual nature. They are acquired through training, field experience, and action-based learning approaches, and are also highly influenced by sociocultural factors (Man & Lau, 2005; Ahmad et al., 2010; Fazal et al., 2019). Furthermore, the Resource-Based View (RBV) considers entrepreneurial competencies as rare, valuable, and hard-to-imitate intangible resources. These competencies provide entrepreneurs with strong performance capabilities and social recognition, which can translate into a sustainable competitive advantage (Man et al., 2002; Al Mamun et al., 2019; Kuswanto & Wulandari, 2022; Pulaj Brakaj & Šafránková, 2024).

Recent studies emphasize the importance of analyzing ECs through a gender lens. Indeed, the entrepreneurial trajectories of women and men often differ across sectors: women tend to gravitate toward service industries—particularly those requiring strong relational skills—while men are more present in scientific and technical fields (Kelley & Thomas, 2011; McCracken et al., 2016). This gender-based segmentation influences both entrepreneurial styles and the types of competencies mobilized. In other words, women tend to develop competencies in interpersonal communication, multitasking, and emotional empathy—skills often undervalued

yet essential for managing human-centered, client-oriented businesses (Kirkland et al., 2013; Newburry et al., 2008; Ruderman et al., 2017).

Other studies focusing on female entrepreneurship highlight the crucial role of non-cognitive competencies in the entrepreneurial journey of women (Huber et al., 2014), as well as their attitudes toward various risks (Gaglio & Katz, 2001; Shook et al., 2003), not to mention creativity and resilience (Gundry et al., 2014; Römer-Paakkanen & Pekkala, 2008). Loué and Baronet (2012) also identify intuition, opportunity recognition, financial management, human resources, marketing, leadership, and communication as critical competencies.

### **1.3 Entrepreneurial Legitimacy**

Entrepreneurial legitimacy is a central concept in the study of female entrepreneurship, particularly in social contexts where gender norms prevail. In his seminal definition, Suchman (1995) describes legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” This definition highlights the social, dynamic, and relational nature of legitimacy, which depends on stakeholders’ expectations and the institutional framework in which entrepreneurs operate.

Building on Suchman’s definition, Liu et al. (2019) adapt the concept of legitimacy to the specific context of female entrepreneurship. They define it as the collective perception of whether women are considered legitimate actors in founding and running a business, in light of prevailing social norms and values. This recognition manifests through acceptance, approval, and support granted by various social actors. However, earlier literature often approached entrepreneurial legitimacy by focusing on dimensions such as restricted access to funding (Marlow & Swail, 2014), the dominance of masculine entrepreneurial discourse (Hamilton, 2013), and the pervasive influence of gendered social norms (Klyver et al., 2013), along with institutional biases that shape the construction of female entrepreneurial legitimacy (Fisher et al., 2017).

Following this line of inquiry, McDowell et al. (2019) argue that women entrepreneurs construct legitimacy across two main spheres: the market sphere and the private sphere. In the first, legitimacy is established through recognition by suppliers, partners, clients, and financial institutions, who perceive the woman entrepreneur primarily as an economic actor (Liu et al., 2019). In the second, legitimacy is governed by a familial logic, shaped by perceptions from family, relatives, and the community—actors that often confine women to traditional roles related to caregiving, motherhood, or domestic tasks (Miller et al., 2011). This dual logic

compels women entrepreneurs to negotiate both economic and social legitimacy, requiring them to reconcile divergent and sometimes conflicting expectations.

Moreover, Yang & Wu (2016) and Hashim et al. (2021) emphasize that legitimacy is built through dynamic interactions between the woman entrepreneur and her stakeholders. In other words, legitimacy results from the entrepreneur's ability to align her actions with the values and expectations of various social actors. This capacity depends not only on managerial and technical competencies, but also on the ability to build mutually beneficial relationships and implement practices that resonate with prevailing social norms.

In Morocco, the sociocultural context is marked by a strong institutionalization of gender norms, which traditionally assign women to domestic and familial roles, thereby limiting their access to economic and public spaces (Benchebkroun, 2019; Ennaji, 2014). These norms are further reinforced by religious values, social customs, and patriarchal family structures that strongly influence the recognition of Moroccan women entrepreneurs (El Hadad, 2020). As a result, women entrepreneurs in Morocco are now engaging in a form of resistance, seeking to negotiate their legitimacy in a context where entrepreneurial success is still constrained by socially assigned roles. Nevertheless, change is underway, driven by public policies, women's networks, and training initiatives that aim to reshape these norms and support women's economic empowerment and advancement (Catusse et al., 2016).

## **2. Methodology**

This study adopts a constructivist epistemological stance, recognizing that entrepreneurial legitimacy—particularly for women—is not an objective given, but rather a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, institutional dynamics, and symbolic interactions. Accordingly, we chose a theoretical approach based on a systematic literature review, aiming to critically synthesize existing knowledge and develop an integrated conceptual model. The reasoning adopted is deductive and interpretative: we derive theoretical assumptions from prior studies and recontextualize them within the Moroccan socio-cultural environment. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how entrepreneurial training operates as both an individual catalyst and a driver of social transformation, thereby laying the groundwork for future empirical testing.

The methodology adopted in this research follows a theoretical approach aimed at developing a conceptual model that explains the mechanisms through which entrepreneurial legitimacy among women entrepreneurs is constructed via entrepreneurial training, within a specific sociocultural context such as Morocco. We began with a literature review that enabled us to

synthesize prior studies on entrepreneurial training, the development of entrepreneurial competencies, and the construction of legitimacy for women entrepreneurs, with particular emphasis on gender-sensitive perspectives.

The sources reviewed include peer-reviewed academic articles published in indexed and specialized journals, with a particular focus on recent research and methodologically relevant contributions.

Based on this review, we identified the key variables influencing the legitimation process for women entrepreneurs, establishing links between the entrepreneurial training received, the competencies acquired, and the forms of recognition obtained. On this basis, we constructed a conceptual model that highlights these variables through hypothetical causal relationships. This model seeks to shed light on the mechanisms through which entrepreneurial training influences perceived legitimacy, by incorporating both mediating and moderating factors.

### **3. Results**

The theoretical analysis conducted in this study highlights three types of relationships identified in the literature concerning the role of entrepreneurial training in the construction of women entrepreneurs' legitimacy: direct, mediated, and moderated relationships.

#### **3.1 Direct Effects**

##### **- Relationship between entrepreneurial training and entrepreneurial competencies**

Entrepreneurial training is widely recognized as a primary catalyst for the development of entrepreneurial competencies among women, by providing them with tailored knowledge and practical experiences (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008). Indeed, experiential learning methods and active pedagogical approaches foster the acquisition of technical, social, cognitive, relational, and behavioral competencies, which are crucial for identifying and seizing business opportunities (Man et al., 2002; Kolb, 1984). Furthermore, training helps women entrepreneurs adopt a dynamic, creative, and proactive entrepreneurial posture, thereby contributing to their empowerment.

*H1: Entrepreneurial training significantly enhances the development of entrepreneurial competencies among women.*

##### **- Relationship between entrepreneurial competencies and legitimacy**

Entrepreneurial competencies play a critical role in the legitimation process of women entrepreneurs, particularly in environments where prevailing social norms may hinder their recognition. When a woman entrepreneur demonstrates competencies such as proactivity, effective communication, and strategic thinking, she increases her credibility among both

economic stakeholders (customers, suppliers, partners, funders) and social actors (family, community, social networks) (Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010; McDowell et al., 2019). These competencies enable women to overcome gender stereotypes and establish a strong basis of legitimacy within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

*H2: Entrepreneurial competencies enhance the perceived legitimacy of women entrepreneurs.*

### **- Relationship between entrepreneurial training and legitimacy**

The literature review reveals that women who have received solid entrepreneurial training are better equipped to construct their legitimacy. This can be attributed to the dual impact of training: on one hand, it supports the acquisition of targeted entrepreneurial competencies; on the other, it facilitates access to intangible resources such as self-confidence, certifications, and professional networks (Brush et al., 2009). Thus, entrepreneurial training goes beyond the scope of learning and serves as a powerful vector for social and economic recognition.

*H3: Entrepreneurial training directly contributes to the construction of women entrepreneurs' legitimacy.*

## **3.2 Mediation Effects**

Two key variables emerge in literature as mediators in this relationship:

- **Self-confidence** appears to be a central factor in the legitimation process. Trained women entrepreneurs develop better self-esteem, a necessary condition to assert their entrepreneurial stance in an environment often dominated by masculine norms (Brush et al., 2009).
- **Access to professional networks** also constitutes a strategic mediator, as it enables women to increase their visibility, build social credibility, and mobilize support within the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Catusse et al., 2016).

Based on this, we formulate the following hypotheses:

*-H4: Self-confidence mediates the effect of entrepreneurial training on legitimacy.*

*-H5: Access to professional networks mediates the effect of training on entrepreneurial legitimacy.*

## **3.3 Moderation Effects**

Social, cultural, and traditional norms exert a decisive moderating influence on the legitimation process of women entrepreneurs. In contexts heavily imbued with gender stereotypes, training and skills may prove insufficient if women do not operate in an environment favorable to their social recognition (Bencheckroun, 2019; El Hadad, 2020). Conversely, in more open and

inclusive institutional frameworks, these same inputs have a strong impact on perceived legitimacy.

Furthermore, entrepreneurial training goes beyond skill transfer to act as a lever for social transformation by contributing to the evolution of collective perceptions of women's roles in the economy. By doing so, it helps redefine social norms, establishing more favorable conditions for recognizing women as legitimate economic actors.

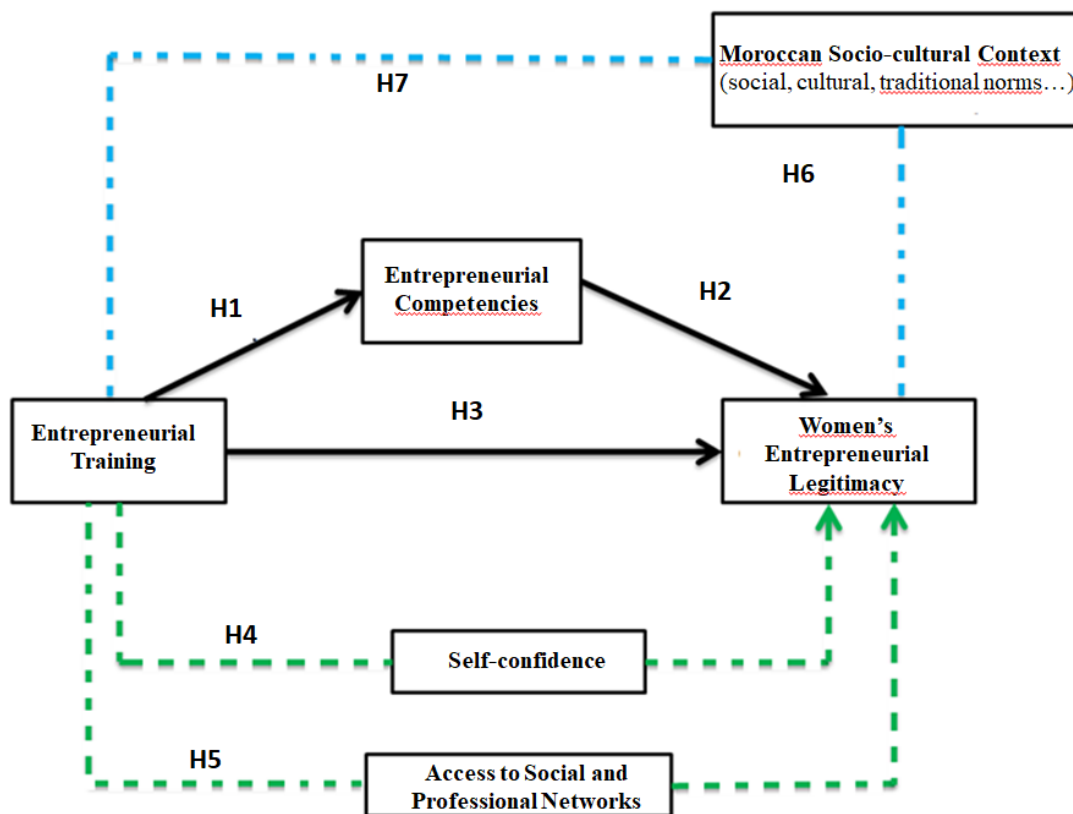
Based on this, we propose:

-H6: Social norms moderate the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and legitimacy.

-H7: Entrepreneurial training contributes to the transformation of social, cultural, and traditional norms, thereby indirectly fostering the legitimacy of women entrepreneurs.

Considering the above hypotheses derived from the literature review, the following conceptual model illustrates all the studied relationships between the different variables of our research.

**Figure 1 : Conceptual Model of the Study**



**Source:** Elaborated by the authors

**Table N°1 : Theoretical framework – contributions – contribution to the conceptual model**

Concept	Key authors	Theoretical contributions	Contribution to the conceptual model
<b>Entrepreneurial Education</b>	Fayolle & Gailly (2008, 2015)	- Education = active, transformational, experience-based process	Basis for relationships H1 (education → competencies) and H3 (education → legitimacy)
	Kolb (1984)	- Three levels: <i>in, through,</i> and <i>about</i> entrepreneurship	
	Pittaway & Cope (2007)		
	Brush et al. (2009)	- Education = source of social recognition, self-confidence, and access to professional networks	Mediating variables: confidence (H4) and networks (H5)
<b>Entrepreneurial Competencies (ECs)</b>	Boyatzis (1982)	- ECs = combination of knowledge, skills, and observable behaviors	Basis for relationship H2 (competencies → legitimacy)
	Man et al. (2002)	- Multidimensional and contextual competencies	
	Mitchelmore & Rowley (2010, 2013)		
	Loué & Baronet (2012)	- ECs include both cognitive and non-cognitive competencies (emotional intelligence, leadership, resilience)	Deepening the levers of legitimization
	Huber et al. (2014)		
<b>Strategic Intangible Resource (RBV)</b>	Man et al. (2002)	- ECs = rare, valuable, and inimitable resources → sustainable competitive advantage	Justifies the strategic role of competencies in legitimacy
	Al Mamun et al. (2019)		

<b>Entrepreneurial Legitimacy</b>	Suchman (1995)	- Legitimacy = perception of acceptability by the social environment	Central dependent variable of the model
	Liu et al. (2019)	- Dual sphere: economic (market) and private (family/society)	
	McDowell et al. (2019)		
	Yang & Wu (2016)	- Legitimation = social interaction process, influenced by stakeholders' expectations	Justifies inclusion of moderating effects of social norms (H6, H7)
	Hashim et al. (2021)		
<b>Moroccan Sociocultural Context</b>	Benchebkroun (2019)	- Restrictive patriarchal and religious norms	Justifies the importance of context as a moderator in the model (H6, H7)
	El Hadad (2020)	- Emerging public policies supporting female entrepreneurship	
	Catusse et al. (2016)		

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors

The table provides a structured synthesis of the key theoretical foundations underpinning the proposed conceptual model. Three major axes organize the framework: entrepreneurial training, entrepreneurial competencies, and entrepreneurial legitimacy. Each axis is supported by authoritative and widely cited scholars, thereby reinforcing the academic robustness of the model.

Entrepreneurial training is addressed not only from a pedagogical standpoint (Fayolle & Gailly; Kolb), but also from a symbolic and social empowerment perspective (Brush et al.). This dual perspective allows the model to move beyond a purely instrumental understanding of training, positioning it as both a direct driver of entrepreneurial competencies and an indirect enabler of legitimacy through mediators such as self-confidence and access to professional networks.

Entrepreneurial competencies are conceptualized as complex, multidimensional, and context-sensitive resources. They encompass technical skills as well as relational, emotional, and strategic dimensions. This comprehensive approach enhances our understanding of legitimacy-

building by demonstrating that social recognition is not solely based on financial performance, but also on interpersonal abilities that are often overlooked in the case of women (Mitchelmore & Rowley; Loué & Baronet).

The concept of entrepreneurial legitimacy is drawn from its relational and dynamic perspective (Suchman, 1995) and is further extended in the context of women entrepreneurs (Liu et al.; McDowell et al.). Legitimacy is treated not as a static condition, but as a negotiated and evolving process, highly shaped by institutional and sociocultural expectations. This justifies the inclusion of social norms as a moderating variable, especially in patriarchal environments like Morocco.

Together, these contributions enable the construction of a rich, integrated, and contextually grounded theoretical model, offering a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which entrepreneurial training supports the legitimacy-building process of women entrepreneurs.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of this study, we developed a conceptual model based on the articulation between entrepreneurial training, skills development, and the construction of women entrepreneurs' legitimacy within a context strongly marked by masculine social, cultural, and traditional norms. The formulated hypotheses (H1 to H7) allowed us to apprehend the legitimacy of women entrepreneurs not as a fixed condition but rather as an evolving and continuously negotiated process, influenced by personal, cultural, social, and institutional factors.

The logic followed in developing the model stems from the literature review, which led us to identify direct, mediating, and moderating effects. The direct effects (H1, H2, H3) show the undeniable and structuring role of entrepreneurial training on skills development and the perception of legitimacy. The mediating effects (H4, H5) enrich this dynamic by introducing psychological and relational dimensions such as self-confidence and access to social networks, which act as levers in the construction of legitimacy. Finally, the hypotheses (H6 and H7) highlight that the sociocultural context — encompassing social, cultural, and traditional norms — is not a fixed constraint but a factor that can be modulated and reconfigured through entrepreneurial action and training mechanisms.

### **4. Theoretical contributions of the model**

Our conceptual model offers a contextualized and integrated understanding of women entrepreneurs' legitimacy. It goes far beyond classical and traditional linear approaches by adopting an interactionist approach where entrepreneurial training plays a catalytic role in personal development and institutional transformation. This work makes an original contribution to literature by framing legitimacy within dual logic: individual (skills, entrepreneurial stance, confidence) and collective (social perception, institutional recognition). This dual perspective proves particularly relevant in a context like Morocco, where gender norms are deeply rooted in social and institutional structures.

### **5. Practical and managerial implications**

This work opens the way for numerous practical implications. Training stakeholders should be called upon to design pedagogical programs that integrate reflective, experiential, and relational dimensions, while promoting the visibility and social recognition of women entrepreneurs and encouraging their integration into social networks. Public decision-makers are also urged to implement targeted policies oriented towards the valorization of women's skills. Moreover, the model invites a rethinking of entrepreneurship training, not merely as a learning tool but as a vector of social recognition and economic emancipation for women.

## **6. Limitations and research perspectives**

Although this paper relies on a solid and rigorous literature review, it remains essentially theoretical. It is necessary to test the model's robustness in the field through empirical validations such as qualitative surveys, case studies, or even comparative analyses, to concretely verify the identified dynamics. Likewise, some dimensions could be analyzed in greater depth, such as the long-term evolution of social, cultural, and traditional norms or contextual variations across regions. Finally, it is also important to introduce other variables such as age, education level, sector of activity, etc., to better understand the diversity of legitimization trajectories in women's entrepreneurship.

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