

## Entrepreneurship Beyond Barriers: Women's Tourism Ventures in Dolpa, Nepal

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### Abstract

*This study examines women's tourism entrepreneurship in Dolpa, Nepal, one of the world's most remote districts, where isolation, institutional voids, and patriarchal structures create barriers to entrepreneurial action. Through analysis of interviews with 23 women tourism entrepreneurs and 5 key informants from local government, the research explores how women navigate constraints to establish tourism ventures including homestays and handicrafts. Using Theory of Planned Behavior, feminist entrepreneurship theory, and sustainable entrepreneurship models, the study reveals women's adaptive capacity through bricolage strategies and kinship networks. Despite lacking formal credit and infrastructure, participants established viable micro-ventures driven by economic necessity. Findings show multidimensional empowerment: economic gains through income generation; social empowerment via enhanced decision-making; and psychological growth through increased self-efficacy. However, achievements remain fragile due to income volatility, capital scarcity, and infrastructural deficits. The study extends entrepreneurship theory by demonstrating*

### Keywords:

*Women entrepreneurship, tourism entrepreneurship, gender empowerment, sustainable development, Dolpa*

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*agency in extreme contexts, enriches feminist scholarship by revealing resistance within patriarchal constraints, and advances sustainable entrepreneurship models. Findings inform policy recommendations including microfinance mechanisms, infrastructure investments, training programs, and gender-responsive tourism policies for transforming women's entrepreneurship from survival strategies to sustainable development pathways.*

## **Introduction**

Dolpa District is the largest administrative district in Nepal, covering an area of 7,889 km<sup>2</sup> in the Karnali Province of western Nepal. It is a remote Himalayan enclave of rugged glacial valleys, ranging in elevation from 1,525 m to 7,625 m above sea level, with extreme isolation preserving ancient Tibetan-influenced cultural traditions. Inhabited principally by agro-pastoral communities, the dominant religions are Bon and Nyingma-pa Buddhism. The district has a sparse population of about 42,774 according to the 2021 census, who depend on subsistence farming, yak herding, and the trade of medicinal fungi such as Yarsagumba. At the same time, they face threats from national park restrictions, climate variability, and poor infrastructures. Key features include Shey Phoksundo National Park, a biodiversity hotspot, and villages like Do-Tarap, where communal rituals and transhumance maintain ethnic Dolpo-pa identity in the face of encroaching modernization and state integration (Zhu, 2015).

Historically, Dolpa's economy was based on the salt and wool trade routes between Tibet and lowland Nepal (Snellgrove, 1961, pp. 120–125). While women also contributed through household production, such as wool processing, dairy, and barley farming, they rarely acted as independent traders due to gender norms that relegated them to household labor (Snellgrove, 1961, pp. 200–205). As such, in villages such as Dho Tarap, women managed herding and weaving cooperatives informally, but economic agency was communal with male-led transhumance at the forefront (Zhu, 2015, p. 15). This era represents a type of "caring economy" wherein women's unpaid labor maintains family livelihoods but is not valorized as entrepreneurship in its own right (Testa, 2018, p. 8).

Dolpa's opening to outsiders in the 1920s brought minimal cash economies through tourism and exportation of medicinal plants, providing some women with opportunities to engage in handicrafts for barter or sale in small-scale ways (Snellgrove, 1961, pp. 200–205). Basic education and health initiatives followed integration into Nepal's monarchy post-1950s, but customs remained patriarchal in nature, with women confronting various obstacles to owning property or obtaining access to credit (Acharya & Pandey, 2018, p. 25). Establishment of Shey Phoksundo National Park in the 1980s constricted

grazing land further, pushing women into informal enterprises such as homestays or herb collection, but without training for true entrepreneurial endeavors (Zhu, 2015, p. 28).

Starting in the 1990s, however, Nepal began to develop a national push for women's empowerment through programs such as the Micro-Enterprise Development Programme, or MEDEP, creating over 53,000 micro-enterprises (1999–2011), with breakdowns by region, gender (67.9% women-led) and caste which targeted rural women in districts including Dolpa (Karki, 2013, pp. 33-34). The 2006 peace process after the Maoist conflict also empowered women through quotas in local governance, enabling them to engage in community-based enterprises (K.C. et al., 2017, p. 12). These initiatives allowed women to take part in decision-making positions at different levels. However, scaling up remained constrained by gender norms, as women often reverted to subsistence amid male out-migration (Good Return, 2022, p. 4).

At present context, women here are establishing tourism ventures like homestays, teahouses, and handicraft enterprises that challenge assumptions about entrepreneurship's preconditions and women's economic agency in marginalized spaces. This study examines how they do it, and what their experiences reveal about entrepreneurship beyond barriers. Mainstream entrepreneurship theory emphasizes resource access, institutional support, and market proximity as prerequisites for venture creation (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Entrepreneurs exploit opportunities by assembling resources within supportive institutional environments that provide legal frameworks and reduce transaction costs (North, 1990). This resource-based view struggles to explain entrepreneurial emergence in contexts of resource scarcity and institutional absence (Mair & Martí, 2009; Welter, 2011). This study has led scholars to reconceptualize entrepreneurship as resource creation through bricolage, "making do with what is at hand" (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 333), recognizing entrepreneurial agency as operating through constraints (Sarasvathy, 2001). Dolpa exemplifies this paradox. Located in Nepal's Karnali Province at elevations between 2,000 and 7,000 meters, the district lacks road connectivity and basic infrastructure, experiencing food insecurity for six months annually (Gentle & Thwaites, 2016). Its population of 37,000 is scattered across 1,600 households (CBS, 2021), with formal institutions concentrated in the district headquarters (Upreti & Müller-Böker, 2010). Yet Dolpa is becoming a tourism frontier. Phoksundo Lake and Shey Phoksundo National Park attract tourists (Spoon, 2011), while the region's monasteries and depiction in Eric Valli's *Himalaya* (1999) have created visibility (Sacareau, 2009). Tourism growth has created demand for accommodation and services (Nyaupane & Budruk, 2009), increasingly met by women entrepreneurs.

Women's entrepreneurship has moved from marginal to central in scholarship, but theories often treat gender as a variable, not a core entrepreneurial dimension (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Brush et al., 2009). Early studies compared male and female entrepreneurs in motivations and choices, implicitly viewing women's entrepreneurship as lacking compared to men (Marlow & Patton, 2005). Recent work uses feminist views, recognizing entrepreneurship as gendered and influenced by patriarchal structures that disadvantage women (Welter et al., 2014). Women face universal entrepreneurial challenges and gender-specific barriers in institutions, markets, and households (Brush et al., 2009; Minniti & Naudé, 2010), such as limited property rights, credit access, mobility, unequal household labor, exclusion from networks, and social sanctions (Kabeer, 1999; Mayoux, 2001; Duflo, 2012). In South Asia, these barriers are severe. Patriarchal systems, son preference, early marriage, dowry, and purdah limit women's autonomy, education, and economic roles (Acharya & Bennett, 1981). In Nepal, despite gender equality laws, women's entrepreneurship is mostly in informal, low-capital sectors like agriculture, handicrafts, petty trade where growth is limited (Tamang et al., 2014). Women struggle to access credit (only 12% get formal loans), receive business training (fewer than 5% in programs), and face time poverty due to domestic duties. 3-5 hours daily on unpaid care work versus 30 minutes for men (ILO, 2019).

These challenges intensify in rural areas, where isolation compounds gender inequality. In Nepal's mountain districts, women's literacy rates lag 20-30 percentage points behind men's; maternal mortality remains high due to limited healthcare; and Chhaupadi, menstrual seclusion in huts—persists despite legal prohibition (Ranabhat et al., 2015). Women's mobility is restricted by terrain and cultural norms; their access to markets, information, and services is limited (Lama & Budhathoki, 2013). Here, women's entrepreneurship represents an act of resistance against intersecting marginalization.

Tourism is promoted as a development strategy for peripheral regions, promising income, jobs, and cultural preservation without heavy industrial infrastructure (Scheyvens, 2000; Ashley et al., 2001). For women, tourism entrepreneurship is seen as suitable: it can be home-based, utilizes 'feminine' skills (hospitality, cooking, handicrafts), requires low capital, and offers cultural exchange and empowerment opportunities (Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012; Ferguson, 2011).

Critical tourism scholars have challenged this optimistic narrative, documenting how tourism development often reinforces inequalities (Britton, 1982; Mowforth & Munt, 2016). Women's tourism work is characterized by low pay, instability, harassment, and

confinement to service roles, while men dominate management, guiding, and transportation positions (Sinclair, 1997; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). Tourism revenues leak to external operators, leaving minimal benefits in destinations (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010). Tourism's impacts, commodification of traditions and environmental degradation, disproportionately affect women, who manage cultural reproduction and natural resources (Nepal, 2000).

In Nepal's mountain regions, tourism development has shown mixed impacts. The Everest and Annapurna regions have seen tourism growth, generating income but creating wealth disparities and environmental stress (Nyaupane & Budruk, 2009; Stevens, 1993). Women's participation has increased through lodge ownership and handicraft sales, but faces constraints from limited education and male control over income (Gurung & Seeland, 2008; Lama, 2000). In remote areas like Dolpa, where tourism is nascent, the dynamics remain underexplored. Despite literature on women's entrepreneurship in developing countries (Brush et al., 2009; Minniti & Naudé, 2010), rural entrepreneurship (Korsgaard et al., 2015), and tourism entrepreneurship (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000), their intersection lacks systematic understanding of how women navigate barriers, gender inequality, and resource scarcity to sustain tourism ventures in extreme contexts.

Existing research has examined women's entrepreneurship in rural Nepal (Lama & Budhathoki, 2013; Tamang et al., 2014) but rarely focuses on tourism or extreme remoteness. Studies of tourism entrepreneurship in Nepal (Nyaupane & Budruk, 2009; Spoon, 2011) have documented community impacts but not specifically analyzed women's experiences or gender dynamics. Research on entrepreneurship in extreme contexts (Welter, 2011) has theorized constraint navigation but lacks empirical grounding in highly marginalized settings. And feminist entrepreneurship scholarship (Ahl & Marlow, 2012) has critiqued mainstream theory but rarely engages with geographic extremity as a dimension of marginalization.

This study addresses these gaps by examining women's tourism entrepreneurship in Dolpa, that, how do women entrepreneurs navigate institutional voids, resource scarcity, and patriarchal structures to establish and sustain tourism ventures in extreme contexts, and what are the implications for entrepreneurial theory and development practice?

Through qualitative analysis of interviews with 25 women tourism entrepreneurs in Dolpa district, this research makes three contributions. Theoretically, it extends entrepreneurship theory by showing how entrepreneurial agency operates in extreme contexts through bricolage, network mobilization, and adaptation rather than resource acquisition and opportunity exploitation. It advances feminist entrepreneurship by revealing

how gender intersects with geography, ethnicity, and class to shape entrepreneurial possibilities and constraints. It also contributes to tourism studies by documenting how women's tourism entrepreneurship in peripheral regions challenges both empowerment narratives and exploitation critiques. Empirically, the study provides insights into women's tourism entrepreneurship in remote environments, revealing barriers, creative strategies, and outcomes for empowerment and community development. Practically, the findings inform policy by identifying interventions, infrastructure development, financial inclusion, skills training, and legal reform to support women's tourism entrepreneurship in marginalized regions, while highlighting the limitations of top-down approaches that ignore local realities and women's agency.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Theoretical Foundations**

The combination of three theoretical approaches, namely the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Institutional Theory, and Feminist Theory, complements and allows for multilevel analysis of individual agency, institutional constraints, and systemic gender inequality in the context of women's tourism entrepreneurship.

**Theory of Planned Behavior and Entrepreneurial Intention:** Ajzen's (1991) TPB suggests that intentions arise because of attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control; in entrepreneurship, these considerations link favorable attitudes, social approval, and self-efficacy with intentions (Krueger et al. 2000). In women, structural barriers increase uncertainty; intentions are prioritized toward autonomy over achievement, which increases the gap between intention and action in resource-scarce settings (Kanwal et al., 2021; Leroy et al., 2009).

**Institutional Theory and Entrepreneurship:** Institutions-formal (laws, rights) and informal (norms)-embed and shape entrepreneurship (North, 1990; Scott, 1995). Supportive environments lower transaction costs but voids necessitate bricolage via networks (Bruton et al., 2010; Mair & Martí, 2009). For women, patriarchal norms and segregated networks impede access, which calls for "institutional work" to create legitimacy and trust (Welter et al., 2014; Korsgaard et al., 2015).

**Feminist Theory:** Feminist theory challenges mainstream entrepreneurship scholarship's gender-blind assumptions, revealing how entrepreneurship is fundamentally gendered, shaped by patriarchal structures and masculine norms that position women as "other" relative to an implicitly male entrepreneurial ideal (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Brush

et al., 2009). Contemporary feminist entrepreneurship scholarship analyzes how gender inequality is produced and transformed through entrepreneurial activity (Henry et al., 2016; Villaseca et al., 2024).

TPB, institutional theory, and feminist theory provide complementary insights into women's tourism entrepreneurship in extreme contexts. TPB explains individual intention formation through attitudes, norms, and perceived control. Institutional theory examines how formal and informal institutions create barriers and opportunities shaping entrepreneurial possibilities. Feminist theory highlights how patriarchal structures disadvantage women while recognizing their agency in transforming these structures. Integrating these perspectives creates a multi-level framework. This framework guides the subsequent empirical analysis.

### **Conceptual Foundations**

Mainstream entrepreneurship scholarship defines entrepreneurship as "the process by which individuals, either independently or within organizations, pursue opportunities without regard to the resources they currently control" (Brush et al., 2009, p. 9). This definition emphasizes opportunity recognition and exploitation, with entrepreneurs identifying market gaps to create value (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). However, these definitions assume resource availability that may not exist in extreme contexts. Alternative views frame entrepreneurship as bricolage, "making do by applying combinations of resources at hand to new problems and opportunities" (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 333). This perspective, emphasizing creative resource recombination, particularly applies to developing countries where institutional voids necessitate improvisation (Mair & Martí, 2009). For this study, entrepreneurship is conceptualized as the process through which individuals identify opportunities, mobilize resources (through acquisition or bricolage), and create ventures that generate economic and social value, while navigating uncertainty and institutional constraints. This definition accommodates both opportunity-driven and necessity-driven entrepreneurship, recognizing that motivations and strategies vary across contexts.

Rural entrepreneurship differs from urban entrepreneurship through its geographic context of sparse populations, limited infrastructure, and reliance on natural resources (Korsgaard et al., 2015). Kalantaridis and Bika (2006, p. 1562) define it as "the creation, operation, and growth of business ventures in rural locations that generate value for the community and contribute to economic development." This definition reflects rural entrepreneurs' embeddedness in local networks and their role in addressing community needs (Stathopoulou et al., 2004). In developing countries, rural entrepreneurship aids

poverty reduction through SMEs, which provide 80% of rural employment but face barriers including poor connectivity and limited credit access (Yadav et al., 2022; Naudé, 2010). In Nepal's Karnali Province, poor road connectivity affects market access and entrepreneurial entry, particularly during monsoons (Rokaya & Pandey, 2024), perpetuating poverty cycles (Gentle & Maraseni, 2012). This study conceptualizes rural entrepreneurship in Dolpa as necessity-driven venture creation using local resources while navigating isolation and institutional voids through community strategies.

Women's entrepreneurship encompasses "the process through which women identify, develop, and bring to life a business concept, product, or service, navigating gender-specific constraints, including socio-economic and cultural barriers, to create economic value" (Brush et al., 2009, pp. 9-10). This definition highlights gender-specific barriers: restricted property rights, limited credit access, mobility constraints, unequal household labor, exclusion from male networks, and cultural norms that delegitimize women's economic participation (Minniti & Naudé, 2010; Kabeer, 1999). Women's entrepreneurship serves as a vehicle for empowerment, enabling women to gain financial independence, enhance societal position, and contribute to development through innovative ventures (Sangolagi & Alagawadi, 2016). In Nepal, women's entrepreneurship has evolved from informal activities to formalized ventures, though progress remains uneven (Tuladhar, 1996; Tamang et al., 2014). Women operate mainly in informal sectors with lower entry barriers but limited profitability, constituting only 22% of registered entrepreneurs (Khanal and Shrestha, 2019; Shrestha, 2023). Rural women face additional challenges: limited market access, restricted mobility, and inadequate infrastructure (Lama, 2013). For this study, women's entrepreneurship in Dolpa is conceptualized as establishing tourism-related micro-ventures that generate income and enhance autonomy, while navigating barriers of gender inequality, geographic isolation, and institutional voids through strategies that leverage resources and shift cultural norms.

Tourism entrepreneurship involves creating ventures providing goods and services to tourists, from accommodation and food services to guiding, transportation, and cultural products (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000). In peripheral regions, tourism entrepreneurship is promoted as a development strategy leveraging natural and cultural assets, promising income generation and employment creation (Scheyvens, 2000; Ashley et al., 2001). For women, tourism entrepreneurship is considered suitable: it can be home-based, builds on "feminine" skills, requires low capital investment, and enables cultural exchange (Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012; Ferguson, 2011). However, critical scholars document how

tourism development reproduces inequalities (Britton, 1982; Mowforth & Munt, 2016). Women's tourism work often involves low pay, seasonal instability, and confinement to low-status roles, while men dominate higher-paid positions (Sinclair, 1997; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). Women's participation through lodge ownership remains constrained by limited education and male control over income (Gurung & Seeland, 2008; Lama, 2000). This study conceptualizes tourism entrepreneurship in Dolpa as women's micro-ventures capitalizing on tourism demand from natural attractions and cultural heritage, operating within constraints of seasonal demand and patriarchal norms.

### **Empirical Review: Barriers, Strategies, and Outcomes**

Patriarchal structures constitute the primary barrier to women's entrepreneurship in rural developing contexts, manifesting through cultural norms that confine women to domestic roles and restrict their authority over resources (Dean & Ford, 2017). In rural settings, societal expectations position women's household responsibilities as primary, making entrepreneurial pursuits secondary (Nayak & Nayak, 2025, p. 11). This creates time poverty: women spend 3–5 hours daily on unpaid care work versus 30 minutes for men, leaving minimal time for business (ILO, 2019). Dean and Ford (2017, p. 17) argue that patriarchal entrepreneurial discourses frame leadership as masculine, questioning women's business competence and reinforcing stereotypes that women lack the rationality and decisiveness required for entrepreneurship, thereby limiting their legitimacy (pp. 184–185). In rural Nepal, women require male permission for travel, property ownership, and financial transactions, while their economic contributions remain undervalued (Acharya & Bennett, 1981). Terjesen and Elam (2009, p. 1102) show that in patriarchal rural societies, women face restricted social capital, hindering access to mentorship and funding, while exclusion from male-dominated business networks creates further structural disadvantages (Brush et al., 2019).

These patriarchal norms also generate social stigma that questions women's competence and entrepreneurial legitimacy. UNESCAP (2022, p. 35) notes that Nepali women struggle to gain trust from financial institutions, suppliers, and customers, a stigma arising from perceptions of women as homemakers that leads to doubts about their entrepreneurial commitment and capability (p. 12). Phillip (2024) highlights how gender stereotypes portraying entrepreneurship as masculine cause women, especially in male-dominated fields, to face impostor syndrome. One participant recounts: "Being in a male-dominated industry, I'm the only woman. In million-dollar negotiations, a guy asked me for coffee, assuming I was the secretary" (p. 107). Such experiences foster self-doubt

and undermine confidence, further restricting women's access to credit, suppliers, and customers (p. 54).

Patriarchal exclusion extends to social capital and professional networks, compounding the barriers women face. Limited access to networks hinders women entrepreneurs by restricting growth opportunities and knowledge acquisition (Terjesen & Elam, 2009; Brush et al., 2019). In rural Nepal, geographic isolation and patriarchal norms worsen these deficits, with UNESCAP (2022, p. 12) noting that "restricted mobility and household burdens prevent women from accessing mentorship and networks, critical for success." Exclusion from male-dominated networks, where information, opportunities, and resources are negotiated, creates competitive disadvantages (Terjesen & Elam, 2009, p. 1102). Brush et al. (2019, p. 7) highlight that "women's limited participation in ecosystems restricts access to mentors and networks that drive growth," a particularly significant constraint in resource-scarce areas where informal networks substitute for weak formal institutions (Korsgaard et al., 2015).

Structural exclusion is most acutely felt in the domain of finance, where women-led businesses globally face a \$1.7 trillion financing gap (MicroSave, 2025). In Bangladesh, women hold only 6.5% of loan assets due to high collateral demands and discriminatory lending practices (MicroSave, 2025, p. 1), challenges compounded by limited financial literacy and cultural norms restricting women's economic independence (Women's World Banking, 2014). In rural Nepal, women's access to finance is further constrained by limited mobility during pregnancy and lactation, which restricts participation in microfinance training programs, while household responsibilities and physical tasks limit program engagement more broadly (Sharma & Thapa, 2008, p. 4). Sima et al. (2021) highlight similar barriers for rural Gambian women, including collateral shortages stemming from patriarchal inheritance laws and institutional gender biases (pp. 31–32). Bhandari (2023) notes that Nepali women's restricted access to economic resources limits business opportunities, with cultural constraints rooted in patriarchal norms (p. 37). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that financial exclusion stems from gendered property rights and discriminatory institutions that systematically deny women economic autonomy.

Financial barriers are compounded by geographic isolation, which restricts market access, increases transportation costs, and limits supply chain integration. In rural Nepal, poor transportation infrastructure and gender norms restrict women's mobility, forcing them to operate home-based enterprises far from markets and energy sources, thereby limiting access to supply chains and customers (Asian Development Bank, 2020, p. 39). Poor roads

lead to dispersed production and increased post-harvest losses, particularly affecting women in agriculture (International Finance Corporation, 2018, p. 27), while in Nepal's mountain regions, weak road connectivity results in high transportation costs and limited private sector involvement, confining women traders to local markets (World Food Programme & FAO, 2011, p. 40). These infrastructural deficits create spatial traps in which women entrepreneurs cannot access higher-priced urban markets, while urban traders cannot reach remote producers, perpetuating low-value entrepreneurship (Rokaya & Pandey, 2024).

Underpinning many of these barriers is a deficit in education and entrepreneurial skills that limits women's ability to start and scale SMEs. In rural India, lack of access to quality education restricts women's financial literacy, while insufficient training programs exacerbate challenges in managing businesses, particularly under socio-cultural constraints that prioritize household duties (Ankita et al., 2025, p. 719). In rural Nepal, limited access to education and training restricts women entrepreneurs' ability to scale SMEs, with poor infrastructure and cultural norms further limiting mobility (Asian Development Bank, 2020, p. 37).

Bosma et al. (2020, p. 69) note that women entrepreneurs in developing economies face barriers due to lower educational attainment, which limits their market competitiveness and capacity to navigate complex business environments (Ankita et al., 2025; Nikhila et al., 2025).

Yet despite these intersecting structural, financial, and educational constraints, women entrepreneurs in rural contexts demonstrate considerable agency, drawing on social networks, resourcefulness, and strategic negotiation to navigate and, in many cases, transcend these barriers. A primary adaptive strategy involves leveraging kinship networks, women's groups, and community embeddedness to compensate for institutional voids (Bakas, 2014; Welter et al., 2014). Bakas (2014) shows through ethnographic research that women entrepreneurs in rural Greece integrate family support into their businesses, transforming gender roles while contributing to local economies (pp. 91–107), with entrepreneurial motivations focused on community benefits rather than individual economic gain. Research on Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in India similarly demonstrates how collective organization enables women to pool resources and build business skills (Pandhare et al., 2024; Borah et al., 2025). Pandhare et al. (2024) demonstrate that SHGs empower rural Indian women through access to savings and loans, leading to increased income and decision-making power (pp. 9–10). However, while social networks provide critical support in resource-scarce contexts, dependence on bonding social capital may

limit access to the diverse resources available through bridging social capital (Korsgaard et al., 2015).

Alongside collective strategies, women entrepreneurs in constrained environments practice bricolage, recombining available resources to overcome scarcity (Baker & Nelson, 2005). This involves using household assets for business purposes, transforming cultural knowledge into marketable products, and improvising solutions to infrastructural deficits (Müller, 2016). For tourism entrepreneurs, bricolage includes converting homes into homestays, using family members as labor, and adapting traditional practices for tourist consumption (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000). In rural Greece, women handicraft makers integrate production into household routines (Bakas, 2014), while in Nepal, women lodge owners combine hospitality with agriculture, using farm products for guests while accommodating domestic duties (Gurung & Seeland, 2008). However, bricolage carries limitations: while it enables venture creation under constraints, it may also perpetuate small-scale operations and restrict growth trajectories (Baker & Nelson, 2005).

Women also navigate constraints through incremental norm negotiation, expanding their autonomy by demonstrating economic contribution and strategically framing entrepreneurship as compatible with prevailing cultural values (Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012; Bakas, 2014). This involves presenting businesses as extensions of domestic roles, emphasizing family benefits, and securing male family support by demonstrating income contributions (Lama, 2000). In rural Uganda, women tourism entrepreneurs frame their ventures as serving family needs and community development, gaining legitimacy by aligning with culturally valued roles (Tucker & Boonabaana, 2012). In Nepal, women entrepreneurs emphasize their businesses' contributions to children's education and household welfare, securing husbands' support through economic necessity (Tamang et al., 2014). Where successful, such entrepreneurship can shift gender norms by demonstrating women's capabilities and creating social precedents for future generations (Kabeer, 1999).

The cumulative effect of these strategies is reflected in the outcomes women entrepreneurs achieve, which are multidimensional, spanning economic, social, and psychological dimensions, though they are not without ambivalence. At the economic level, women's entrepreneurship generates income that improves household welfare and reduces poverty (Kanwar & Arrawatia, 2022). Pandhare et al. (2024) found that microfinance and SHGs improved household consumption, income, and savings in rural Indian households (p. 5). Krishnaveni (2025) illustrates this through notable examples: Kudumbashree SHGs in Kerala transformed 50,000 women into micro-entrepreneurs in organic farming and

catering, generating ₹500 crore annually (p. 238), while Amul's dairy cooperatives increased earnings for 3.6 million rural women from ₹1,200 to ₹12,000 monthly (p. 241). Kanwar and Arrawatia (2022) show how micro-entrepreneurship enables women to contribute to farm management while managing homes, increasing family income and independence (pp. 54–56), with micro-enterprises helping rural women improve children's education and household economic status (p. 57). Nevertheless, income generation does not automatically guarantee women's economic empowerment if men retain control over earnings or if income is channelled exclusively toward household needs rather than women's own agency (Kabeer, 1999).

Beyond economic gains, entrepreneurship enhances women's social and psychological empowerment, though these outcomes are equally complex. Socially, Adhikari and Ghimire (2022) find that micro-enterprises in Nepal's Parbat District increase women's involvement in social groups and household decision-making (p. 103), enabling them to challenge gender norms and assume community leadership roles (p. 104). Kim et al. (2022) find that women in social entrepreneurship address gender discrimination and promote community development in emerging markets (p. 955), while Ogbari et al. (2024) show that social empowerment aids poverty alleviation among Nigerian women entrepreneurs by reducing gender disparities through better resource access (p. 9). At the psychological level, entrepreneurship fosters enhanced self-confidence, self-efficacy, and personal accomplishment (Kanwal et al., 2021; Jalil et al., 2023). Kanwal et al. (2021) demonstrate that personality traits such as extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness enhance entrepreneurial intention through self-leadership, promoting adaptability and converting individual traits into motivational strategies for entrepreneurial development. Jalil et al. (2023) further show that psychological capital, encompassing self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience, directly influences Malaysian women's entrepreneurial intentions, with attitudes serving as a partial mediator. However, the accumulation of business responsibilities on top of existing domestic duties risks creating time poverty that can offset these gains, underscoring the ambivalent nature of entrepreneurial outcomes for women in rural contexts (ILO, 2019).

### **Synthesis and Conceptual Framework**

This literature review has synthesized scholarship across entrepreneurship theory, feminist perspectives, tourism studies, and development literature to establish a conceptual foundation for analyzing women's tourism entrepreneurship in extreme contexts. Three key insights emerge. Building on these insights, this study employs an integrated conceptual framework

that positions women's tourism entrepreneurship in Dolpa as shaped by three intersecting dimensions: institutional context (formal and informal institutions that create barriers and opportunities), entrepreneurial agency (women's strategies for navigating constraints through bricolage, network mobilization, and norm negotiation), and empowerment outcomes (economic, social, and psychological changes resulting from entrepreneurship). This framework guides the empirical analysis, enabling systematic examination of how context shapes agency and how agency produces outcomes under conditions of extreme constraint.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs qualitative research grounded in interpretive phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of women tourism entrepreneurs in Dolpa, Nepal. Qualitative methodology is appropriate for investigating complex phenomena where understanding subjective meanings and contextual nuances is essential (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretive phenomenological approach explores how women entrepreneurs navigate barriers and construct identities within extreme contexts of geographic isolation and patriarchal norms (Smith et al., 2009).

The study is situated in Dolpa, a remote district in Nepal's Karnali Province. Dolpa was selected as the research site for exemplifying extreme constraints on women's entrepreneurship: geographic isolation with minimal roads, mountainous terrain at 1,525-7,625 meters elevation, sparse population, institutional voids with limited government and financial services, nascent tourism around Phoksundo Lake and Bon heritage, and patriarchal norms in Dolpo-pa communities (Gentle & Maraseni, 2012; Spoon, 2011).

The study population comprised women entrepreneurs operating tourism-related SMEs in Dolpa, including homestays, teahouses, and handicrafts. Purposive sampling identified participants meeting criteria: female ownership, minimum one-year operation, and interview willingness (Patton, 2015). Participants were identified through community referrals along trekking routes. The sample included 23 women entrepreneurs representing diverse tourism ventures, varying in business types, ethnicities, and experience. This aligned with qualitative research saturation principles (Guest et al., 2006). Five key informants from local government and tourism officials provided insights into institutional contexts shaping women's entrepreneurship in Dolpa.

## **Data Collection Procedure and Instruments**

Data collection occurred during three-month tourism season. Semi-structured interviews explored phenomena while maintaining focus (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interview guides covered entrepreneurial motivations, venture establishment, resources, barriers, and operations. Interviews with women entrepreneurs were conducted in Nepali for 60-90 minutes, while key informant interviews of 45-60 minutes addressed institutional contexts. The researcher observed ventures and maintained field notes and a reflexive journal (Ortlipp, 2008; Spradley, 2016). The study followed ethical principles including informed consent and confidentiality (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Participation was voluntary with withdrawal rights. Pseudonyms are used in reporting, with identifying details omitted.

Data analysis used thematic analysis to identify and report patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method aligned with the study's interpretive phenomenological approach and could generate detailed accounts of complex phenomena (Nowell et al., 2017). Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: Phase 1: Audio recordings were transcribed in Nepali, translated to English, and reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and note initial patterns. Phase 2: Using NVivo 12, transcripts underwent line-by-line coding, generating over 150 codes through inductive and deductive approaches. Phase 3: Codes were organized into potential themes using visual mapping to explore relationships. Phase 4: Themes were reviewed against data to ensure internal coherence and external distinctions, with some themes being merged or discarded. Phase 5: Final themes were defined by articulating their essence and named concisely. Phase 6: Findings were written up with supporting participant quotes illustrating patterns, accompanied by analytical narrative interpreting themes.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the findings from in-depth interviews with 23 women tourism entrepreneurs in Dolpa District, one of Nepal's most geographically remote and economically marginalized areas. The analysis is structured around three complementary theoretical lenses: (i) the Theory of Planned Behavior, (ii) feminist entrepreneurship theory, and (iii) sustainable entrepreneurship theory. Each lens highlights a distinct aspect of the participants' entrepreneurial experiences. Together, these frameworks illustrate how women in extremely resource-constrained environments develop entrepreneurial intentions, overcome patriarchal and institutional barriers, and achieve empowerment and sustainability through their ventures. The participants' voices are prominently featured,

with direct quotations used to preserve the authenticity of their lived experiences and ground theoretical interpretations in empirical reality.

### **Entrepreneurial Intentions and Behaviors: Theory of Planned Behavior Lens**

Participants showed positive attitudes toward tourism entrepreneurship as a path to economic stability and family welfare, driven by both necessity and opportunity. Participant 2 (Suprabha Guest House, Tripurakot) started her venture with Rs. 5,000 from maternal savings: *"I stepped away from politics to create something more stable for my family. Tourism was growing, and I saw an opportunity."* Participant 3 (Himal Hotel, Ringmo), widowed at 24, started her hotel with Rs. 1.5 lakh: *"After my husband died, I had to stand on my own feet. Now I employ a local girl and support my family."* Attitudes were also shaped by perceived social benefits, with Participant 7 (Dolma Tea House, Chhepka) stating: *"We provide affordable meals to trekkers and porters. It feels good to contribute to our village's reputation."* This reflects how attitudes in collectivist cultures combine individual and communal welfare considerations.

Closely related to these attitudes, subjective norms, perceived social pressures, emerged as critical enablers of entrepreneurial intentions. All participants cited family support as pivotal, particularly from mothers, husbands, or siblings, reflecting Nepal's kinship-oriented structure where family approval legitimizes women's economic activities. Participant 7 described: *"I do all the cooking, and my husband handles supplies from Dunai. We work as a team,"* a model that embodies normative approval for family-based ventures as household strategy. Similarly, Participant 19 relied on her sister in their tea shop operation. Community norms showed mixed influences, while locals appreciated economic contributions, skepticism persisted. Participant 19 noted: *"Women's leadership faces admiration but also scrutiny, especially when borrowing money."* These ambivalent norms reflect transitional gender ideologies where women's entrepreneurship gains acceptance but remains contested.

Beyond normative pressures, perceived behavioral control, beliefs about one's capacity to perform entrepreneurial behaviors, was constrained by systemic barriers, yet participants demonstrated adaptive strategies that sustained operations. Financial constraints dominated narratives, with all 23 participants reporting no access to formal credit and relying entirely on personal or family savings. Participant 3 noted: *"No banks operate in remote Ringmo. Expansion depends on personal savings."* Infrastructural deficits further eroded control, with Participant 2 describing: *"Poor roads, no internet, limited electricity make everything harder."* Yet adaptive behaviors emerged alongside these constraints:

Participant 7 streamlined operations, "*I prepare simple meals that trekkers appreciate*", while Participant 2 reinvested profits incrementally: "*I started with Rs. 5,000 and expanded by reinvesting earnings.*" These strategies of simplification and incremental growth show how women maintain agency despite low perceived control, suggesting that TPB's control construct may underestimate resilience in conditions of scarcity.

Taken together, these findings reveal a notable persistence gap in the TPB framework. While strong intentions driven by positive attitudes and family norms did translate into venture creation, low perceived control perpetuated micro-scale operations rather than growth. Participant 3 expressed this tension directly: "*I want to expand, add more rooms, but without loans, it's impossible. My intentions are there, but means are not.*" This sustained operation without scalability extends TPB by demonstrating that entrepreneurial behaviors can persist at subsistence levels even when control remains minimal.

### **Gender Dynamics and Empowerment: Feminist Entrepreneurship Lens**

Feminist perspectives illuminate how participants negotiated agency within patriarchal structures, subverting gender roles through their ventures while simultaneously operating within cultural constraints. Participant 3's narrative exemplifies this agency: "*Society expected me to depend on relatives. Instead, I built a hotel and employ another woman.*" Participant 19 co-founded her shop with similar resolve: "*People doubted two women could run a business. We proved them wrong.*" Yet patriarchal norms continued to constrain operational autonomy, Participant 7's cooking role aligned with traditional women's work, while Participant 2 acknowledged: "*I manage the guest house, but major decisions require my husband's approval.*" Social stigma questioning women's entrepreneurial competence compounded these structural constraints. Participant 19 noted: "*Lenders questioned our ability to repay, saying women are unreliable,*" limiting access to informal credit, while Participant 2 faced community scrutiny: "*Some admire my success, but others say I neglect my children.*" This gendered scrutiny, largely absent for male entrepreneurs, reflects the masculine entrepreneurial discourses identified in feminist scholarship (Dean & Ford, 2017), to which Participant 3 responded with quiet defiance: "*I prove my competence daily by running a profitable hotel.*"

Geographic and social isolation further restricted women's access to professional networks and mentorship, reinforcing their dependence on kinship ties. Participant 17 noted: "*We rarely interact with other entrepreneurs. No training, no business groups. We learn by trial and error,*" while Participant 7 stated: "*No institutional support exists. I learned cooking from my mother, not formal training.*" Only Participant 3 had attended an

NGO workshop, describing such opportunities as rare. Networks were consequently limited to family: Participant 2 stated, "*My mother taught me management. My husband connects me to suppliers. Beyond family, I have no business contacts.*" This reliance on kinship networks, while providing essential support, restricts exposure to diverse knowledge and markets, reflecting the institutional neglect of remote women entrepreneurs documented in the literature (Brush et al., 2019).

Despite these intersecting barriers, entrepreneurship generated multidimensional empowerment outcomes. Economically, ventures provided income and financial autonomy: Participant 3 stated, "*I earn enough to educate my child and save modestly,*" while Participant 2's guest house supported her family and employed local women. Socially, entrepreneurship enhanced status and community influence, with Participant 3 observing: "*Community members now seek my advice on tourism. My voice matters more in village meetings,*" and Participant 19 adding: "*Running this shop with my sister shows that women can lead.*" Psychologically, entrepreneurship boosted self-efficacy and confidence: Participant 2 reflected, "*Building this from Rs. 5,000 to a respected guest house fills me with pride.*" These narratives illustrate how entrepreneurship cultivates psychological capital, confidence, resilience, and hope, consistent with empowerment literature (Jalil et al., 2023). However, empowerment remained fragile, with Participant 3 cautioning: "*One bad season, one health crisis, and everything could collapse,*" underscoring feminist critiques that empowerment without structural support is inherently vulnerable.

### **Sustainability Practices and Impacts: Sustainable Entrepreneurship Lens**

Tourism SMEs generated modest but meaningful economic impacts through local multiplier effects. Participant 2 stated: "*Trekker spending increased revenue and supported local food vendors. Money circulates in the village,*" while Participant 3 noted: "*Phoksundo tourists book my hotel, and I employ a local girl, creating two incomes.*" Economic sustainability was, however, constrained by seasonality: Participant 7 explained, "*We earn during trekking season (April–October) but struggle in winter. Savings barely last,*" and Participant 17 added: "*Our tent shop operates only in summer. Off-season, we rely on yarsagumba collection.*" The absence of finance further prevented scaling, with Participant 3 stating: "*With a loan, I could add rooms and offer heating. But no banks exist here,*" perpetuating micro-scale operations and limiting growth potential.

Beyond economic impacts, ventures fostered social sustainability by strengthening community ties and preserving cultural identity. Participant 3 noted: "*Tourism boosts pride in our Bon culture. Trekkers learn about our traditions,*" while employment of local

women enhanced social equity, Participant 3's hiring of a village girl provided income and demonstrated to other women that opportunities exist. However, social tensions also emerged: Participant 2 observed, "*Some neighbors envy my success, creating friction,*" and Participant 19 noted that competition for tourists can strain relationships, suggesting entrepreneurship can simultaneously enhance cohesion and introduce inequalities requiring careful management. Cultural dilution risks were minimal, with Participant 3 stating: "*We share our culture authentically, without compromising traditions for profit,*" aligning with sustainable tourism principles.

Participants also demonstrated environmental consciousness, though infrastructural gaps posed ongoing challenges. Participant 2 described composting and use of biodegradable materials, Participant 3 noted regular cleanup near Phoksundo Lake and use of reusable containers, and Participant 7 limited waste through simple meal preparation. Yet Participant 2 acknowledged: "*Without infrastructure, pollution risks grow as tourism increases,*" and Participant 3 observed water scarcity during peak season. Participant 17 mentioned wildlife disturbance from increased foot traffic, while rising firewood demand pressured local forests. Institutional support was conspicuously absent: Participant 19 stated, "*Policies exist on paper, but implementation is zero,*" and Participant 3 added: "*We pay taxes but get no services,*" leaving women entrepreneurs without the systemic backing needed to sustain environmental practices.

Looking ahead, participants articulated modest growth aspirations tempered by realism. Participant 2 envisioned modest expansion, adding rooms and improving facilities, while emphasizing that infrastructure improvements such as roads and internet access would help immensely. Participant 3 hoped for increased tourism alongside better waste management and water systems, and identified digital marketing training as a priority. Strategies emphasized collective action: Participant 7 suggested forming a women entrepreneurs' cooperative to pool resources and negotiate better supply prices, while Participant 19 proposed mobile training programs and microloans tailored to remote areas. These visions collectively underscore the need for systemic interventions to realize the entrepreneurial potential of women in Dolpa's remote tourism economy.

Collectively, these findings offer a ground picturisation of womens' tourism entrepreneurship in Dolpa, highlighting both the constraints and generative aspects. Participants navigated overlapping barriers, such as patriarchal norms, financial exclusion, geographic isolation, and institutional neglect, yet exhibited remarkable agency through adaptive strategies, community integration, and gradual negotiation of norms. Their ventures yielded multidimensional outcomes, including economic income, social empowerment, and

environmental stewardship, although these achievements remained fragile and dependent on personal resilience rather than on structural support. These findings expand existing theoretical frameworks by illustrating how the TPB's control construct underestimates women's persistence in scarcity, how feminist entrepreneurship manifests through quiet subversion rather than overt resistance, and how sustainability is practiced as an everyday necessity rather than a strategic choice in remote rural contexts.

## **Discussion**

This study examined socio-cultural and economic barriers confronting women entrepreneurs in Dolpa's tourism sector, strategies for navigating these constraints, and multidimensional empowerment impacts. Findings reveal a complex landscape where resilience coexists with systemic marginalization, generating modest but meaningful empowerment that remains fragile without structural support. This section integrates findings with theoretical frameworks and existing literature, highlighting contributions and implications.

This study extends TPB by demonstrating how extreme resource scarcity and geographic isolation moderate the intention-behavior relationship. While TPB predicts that positive attitudes, supportive norms, and high perceived control lead to strong intentions and subsequent behaviors (Ajzen, 1991), findings reveal that in hyper-remote contexts, strong intentions (driven by necessity and family support) translate into venture creation despite low control, but result in persistent micro-scale operations rather than growth.

This 'persistence gap', sustained operation without scalability, suggests that TPB's control construct may underestimate resilience mechanisms in extreme scarcity. Women in Dolpa employ adaptive strategies, incremental reinvestment, simplification, resourcefulness, that maintain agency even when structural control is minimal. This finding challenges TPB's assumption that low control inhibits behavior, revealing instead that behaviors can persist at subsistence levels, driven by necessity and normative obligations.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of collectivist norms in shaping entrepreneurial intentions. Unlike Western contexts where TPB emphasizes individual attitudes, Dolpa women's intentions are deeply embedded in family and community norms, with entrepreneurship framed as household strategy rather than individual pursuit. This suggests that TPB requires cultural adaptation to account for collectivist motivations in non-Western settings (Kanwal et al., 2021; Leroy et al., 2009). Findings enrich feminist entrepreneurship theory by revealing how women in patriarchal mountain societies negotiate agency within and against cultural constraints. Consistent with feminist perspectives (Brush et al., 2009; Henry et al., 2016), women in Dolpa face systemic barriers, limited capital

access, social stigma, restricted networks, that reflect patriarchal structures marginalizing women economically.

However, the study also reveals spaces for resistance and transformation. Women subvert traditional gender roles by leading ventures, challenge stigma through performance of competence, and extend empowerment relationally by employing other women. This aligns with social feminism's emphasis on relational approaches (Ngwenya & Aigbavboa, 2018) and feminist entrepreneurship's focus on collective empowerment (Villaseca et al., 2024). Critically, findings underscore that empowerment remains incomplete and fragile without structural change. Women gain economic autonomy and social status, yet remain constrained by property laws, credit exclusion, and infrastructural deficits. This supports feminist critiques that individual empowerment without systemic reform perpetuates vulnerability (Dean & Ford, 2017), calling for policies that dismantle patriarchal structures rather than merely enabling women to navigate them.

The study also contributes by documenting entrepreneurship in an under-researched context, indigenous Dolpo-pa communities, where intersections of gender, ethnicity, and remoteness create compounded marginalization. This extends intersectional feminist analysis (Adhikari et al., 2024) by showing how geographic isolation amplifies gender-based barriers, necessitating place-based interventions. It was found that, how women-led tourism SMEs in Dolpa embody sustainable entrepreneurship's triple bottom line, economic viability, social equity, and environmental stewardship, albeit reactively and at micro-scales (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Economically, ventures generate income and local multipliers; socially, they foster employment, cultural pride, and gender norm challenges; environmentally, they adopt conservation practices and promote eco-awareness. This aligns with research on women's relational and ethical entrepreneurial approaches (Harrington et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2024), suggesting that women entrepreneurs in patriarchal societies integrate sustainability not through formal frameworks but through values of community welfare and environmental care embedded in cultural practices.

However, findings reveal that sustainability remains fragile due to systemic constraints. Seasonal volatility, capital scarcity, and infrastructural deficits threaten economic sustainability. Social tensions from inequality and competition challenge social sustainability. Absent waste management and water systems endanger environmental sustainability as tourism scales. This underscores that sustainable entrepreneurship requires enabling ecosystems, finance, infrastructure, policy, not just entrepreneurial intent (Ahmad et al., 2024).

Findings resonate with broader literature on rural women's entrepreneurship in South Asia, confirming barriers such as limited finance (MicroSave, 2025), restricted mobility

(Asian Development Bank, 2020), social stigma (UNESCAP, 2022), and network deficits (Brush et al., 2019). However, Dolpa's extreme isolation amplifies these barriers, with complete absence of roads, banks, and digital connectivity creating unique challenges absent in less remote rural areas. The study also confirms empowerment impacts documented in literature, economic gains (Pandhare et al., 2024; Krishnaveni, 2025), social agency (Adhikari & Ghimire, 2022; Kim et al., 2022), and psychological growth (Jalil et al., 2023; Kanwal et al., 2021), while revealing that in hyper-remote contexts, these gains are more modest and precarious, requiring sustained support to prevent reversal.

Contextually, findings highlight Dolpa-specific factors shaping entrepreneurship: tourism dependence on Phoksundo Lake and trekking routes; Bon Buddhist cultural heritage as tourism asset; seasonal volatility due to harsh winters; reliance on Yarsagumba (caterpillar fungus) collection for capital; and absence of institutional presence. These factors create a unique entrepreneurial ecosystem distinct from other rural Nepali contexts, underscoring the need for place-based policies.

Findings generate several policy recommendations for fostering gender-inclusive rural tourism development in mountain regions, like; establishing mobile banking units or community-based microfinance cooperatives in remote areas, offering collateral-free loans with flexible repayment aligned to seasonal tourism income. Gender-sensitive lending criteria should recognize women's economic contributions and provide financial literacy training. Prioritizing road connectivity, reliable electricity, internet access, and waste management systems in tourism corridors. These investments would reduce operational costs, expand market reach, and enhance environmental sustainability, benefiting all entrepreneurs while disproportionately empowering women by reducing mobility constraints.

Deploying mobile training programs covering business management, digital marketing, hospitality standards, and sustainable tourism practices. Scheduling should accommodate women's household responsibilities, and content should be culturally appropriate and delivered in local languages. Similarly, facilitating formation of women-led cooperatives to pool resources, negotiate bulk supply purchases, share knowledge, and advocate collectively for policy support. Cooperatives can also provide peer mentorship and reduce isolation. Integrating gender considerations into tourism planning, ensuring women's participation in decision-making, equitable benefit distribution, and protection from exploitation. Policies should incentivize women-led ventures through tax breaks or preferential licensing. Establishing waste collection and recycling infrastructure, water conservation programs, and renewable energy sources (solar) to support sustainable tourism growth. Engage women entrepreneurs in co-designing these systems to ensure

practicality. Further, strengthen local government capacity to deliver services in remote areas, including business development support, health services, and education. Establish tourism information centers that can also serve as hubs for entrepreneur networking.

## **Conclusion**

The study explores how women in Dolpa, a remote district of Nepal, engage in tourism-related entrepreneurship despite facing multiple challenges. It finds that these women show strong resilience, they use family support and local tourism opportunities to start small businesses that not only improve their livelihoods but also challenge traditional gender roles and boost their confidence and psychological well-being.

However, their entrepreneurial efforts are limited by serious obstacles such as lack of access to credit, poor infrastructure, limited education, social stigma, and restrictions on mobility. As a result, their businesses tend to remain small and vulnerable. The research builds on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) by showing how scarcity and constraints influence the link between women's intentions and actual business behavior. It also contributes to feminist entrepreneurship theory by showing how women exercise agency (the ability to act and make choices) even within restrictive social and economic conditions. To strengthen women's entrepreneurship in such regions, the study recommends integrated solutions, such as better access to finance, improved infrastructure, training opportunities, support through women's cooperatives, and legal reforms to reduce gender inequality.

Overall, the study highlights that women entrepreneurs in isolated areas like Dolpa can play a vital role in poverty reduction and gender equality, if they are supported through systemic investments and inclusive development policies. It urges scholars and policymakers to rethink development models to make them more equitable and sustainable, while recognizing the lived experiences of women from remote regions.

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## **Author Introduction**

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