Social Entrepreneurship and Gender Empowerment: A Systematic Literature Review on Innovation, Inclusion, and Sustainable Development (2020–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a transformative approach that integrates innovation, inclusion, and sustainability to advance gender empowerment. This study provides a systematic literature review (SLR) of research published between 2020 and 2025, examining how social enterprises contribute to women's empowerment through inclusive and sustainable business models. Following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, a comprehensive search was conducted using the Scopus database, limited to peer-reviewed, open-access articles in English within the social sciences and business fields. From 180 identified records, 20 duplicates were removed, resulting in 160 studies included in the final synthesis. Thematic analysis revealed five interconnected themes: (1) innovation and inclusive business models; (2) gender empowerment and leadership; (3) community development and social value creation; (4) barriers and enablers of women's entrepreneurship; and (5) sustainability and institutional support. The findings demonstrate that empowerment through social entrepreneurship is multidimensional, encompassing individual agency, social capital, and institutional transformation. Innovation and open collaboration serve as catalysts for inclusion, while policy and institutional frameworks determine long-term sustainability. The study integrates social capital theory, inclusive innovation, and feminist institutionalism to explain how empowerment emerges within entrepreneurial ecosystems. It concludes that gender empowerment in social entrepreneurship is both a process and an outcome of systemic change—requiring inclusive policies, capacity building, and equitable access to innovation. This review contributes to theory and practice by providing a comprehensive framework linking social entrepreneurship to gender-responsive sustainable development.
Keyword: Social Entrepreneurship, Gender Empowerment, Innovation Inclusion, Sustainability, Systematic Literature Review.

ABSTRAK

Kewirausahaan sosial telah berkembang menjadi pendekatan transformatif yang memadukan inovasi, inklusi, dan keberlanjutan untuk mendorong pemberdayaan gender. Penelitian ini menyajikan tinjauan pustaka sistematis (Systematic Literature Review/SLR) terhadap publikasi ilmiah periode 2020–2025, yang mengkaji kontribusi kewirausahaan sosial terhadap pemberdayaan perempuan melalui model bisnis yang inklusif dan berkelanjutan. Dengan mengikuti protokol PRISMA 2020, pencarian literatur dilakukan melalui basis data Scopus, terbatas pada artikel ilmiah berbahasa Inggris yang telah melalui proses peer-review, bersifat open access, dan termasuk dalam bidang ilmu sosial serta bisnis. Dari 180 artikel yang teridentifikasi, sebanyak 20 duplikasi dihapus, sehingga 160 artikel dianalisis secara mendalam. Hasil analisis tematik menunjukkan lima tema utama, yaitu: (1) inovasi dan model bisnis inklusif; (2) pemberdayaan dan kepemimpinan perempuan; (3) pengembangan komunitas dan penciptaan

nilai sosial; (4) hambatan serta faktor pendukung kewirausahaan perempuan; dan (5) keberlanjutan serta dukungan institusional. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemberdayaan melalui kewirausahaan sosial bersifat multidimensional, melibatkan agensi individu, modal sosial, dan transformasi institusional. Inovasi dan kolaborasi terbuka berperan sebagai katalis bagi inklusi, sedangkan kebijakan dan dukungan kelembagaan menentukan keberlanjutan jangka panjang. Kajian ini mengintegrasikan teori modal sosial, inovasi inklusif, dan institusionalisme feminis untuk menjelaskan bagaimana pemberdayaan muncul dalam ekosistem kewirausahaan. Kesimpulannya, pemberdayaan gender dalam kewirausahaan sosial merupakan proses sekaligus hasil dari perubahan sistemik—yang memerlukan kebijakan inklusif, penguatan kapasitas, serta akses setara terhadap inovasi.

Keyword: Kewirausahaan Sosial, Pemberdayaan Gender, Inovasi Inklusi, Keberlanjutan, Tinjauan Pustaka Sistematis

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has evolved into a central pillar of inclusive economic growth and social transformation, particularly in contexts where market solutions intersect with community well-being. Recent studies emphasize that social enterprises are not merely profit-oriented ventures but platforms for innovation that address systemic inequalities and empower marginalized groups (Uddin, Bal, and Hoque 2025). This hybrid nature—blending economic rationality with social purpose—reflects a paradigm shift in how entrepreneurship contributes to sustainable development goals.

Gender empowerment has increasingly been recognized as both a moral imperative and a catalyst for economic innovation. Scholars highlight that empowering women within social enterprise ecosystems leads to enhanced creativity, diversity, and social impact (Sirolli et al. 2025). Women's participation in leadership, ownership, and decision-making in entrepreneurial settings creates positive spillovers for inclusive growth and sustainable local development.

Social innovation is the connecting thread between empowerment and entrepreneurship, emphasizing collaborative models that leverage human and social capital. Studies demonstrate that inclusive innovation practices can drive equitable participation in the creative economy and foster resilience in underserved communities (Price, Wong, and Russell 2025). By embedding social value creation into business models, enterprises transcend traditional boundaries between economic and social objectives.

From a sustainability perspective, social entrepreneurship plays an increasingly strategic role in addressing global challenges such as inequality, climate change, and poverty reduction. Research shows that entrepreneurs who integrate social and environmental concerns achieve broader legitimacy and long-term viability (Hueske and Dijkstra-Silva 2025). The alignment of gender inclusion with sustainable practices reinforces a multidimensional understanding of value creation. The social dimension of entrepreneurship extends to cultural and educational contexts, where empowerment is linked to leadership and social learning. For instance, studies in educational leadership demonstrate that social entrepreneurship principles enhance participatory management and innovation within schools (Öz 2025). This reinforces the notion that entrepreneurial thinking is transferable across institutional environments where empowerment and inclusion are shared goals.

In emerging economies, social entrepreneurship has become a mechanism for community resilience and poverty alleviation. Women-led enterprises, in particular, have shown the capacity to mobilize local networks and generate social capital essential for sustainable livelihoods (Ezeudu 2024). The combination of entrepreneurship and gender equality thus functions as a dual engine for social innovation and equitable growth. Open innovation frameworks are gaining traction as vital tools for expanding the inclusiveness of social entrepreneurship. Applying open innovation practices enables social enterprises to engage multiple stakeholders and co-create solutions that respond to local needs (Sirolli et al. 2025). Such collaborative models challenge hierarchical structures and promote participatory governance, aligning with feminist principles of empowerment.

Empowerment through entrepreneurship also depends on access to finance, information, and markets—resources often constrained by social norms and institutional barriers. Research underscores that when women entrepreneurs gain equitable access to funding and networks, they contribute significantly to social value creation and sustainability (Osei-Tutu and Boateng 2024). Bridging these structural gaps remains a priority for inclusive innovation ecosystems.

Digital transformation has reshaped how empowerment manifests within entrepreneurial ecosystems. Digital social enterprises provide platforms for women to scale their ventures, enhance visibility, and engage in transnational collaboration (Rahman 2024). The fusion of digital inclusion with social entrepreneurship offers new pathways for sustainable empowerment in the creative economy. Cultural context remains pivotal in shaping how empowerment and entrepreneurship interact. Studies in Asia and Africa reveal that local traditions, community networks, and informal institutions influence how women negotiate their entrepreneurial identities (Ndhlovu 2023). Recognizing these sociocultural dynamics is essential for designing interventions that are contextually grounded and inclusive.

Recent literature suggests that empowerment within social enterprises transcends individual agency; it encompasses structural transformation in gender relations and institutional practices. When women's voices are embedded in governance, decision-making, and innovation, enterprises become more adaptive and equitable (Chanyau and Rosenberg 2023). Hence, empowerment should be conceptualized not as a byproduct but as a foundational outcome of social entrepreneurship.

Despite the growing body of research, gaps remain regarding longitudinal evidence, intersectional analysis, and measurement of empowerment outcomes. Future scholarship should integrate feminist and sociological frameworks to assess how innovation, inclusion, and gender equity interact in diverse entrepreneurial ecosystems (Chidakwa et al. 2020). This literature review contributes to that discourse by synthesizing current findings and identifying theoretical and practical pathways toward sustainable, gender-inclusive social entrepreneurship.

2. Method

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to synthesize recent research on social entrepreneurship and gender empowerment within the context of innovation, inclusion, and sustainability from 2020 to 2025. Following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, the review adopted a transparent process comprising identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages. Data were collected from the Scopus database, which offers comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the social sciences and business disciplines. The search string combined terms such as "social entrepreneurship," "gender empowerment," "innovation," "inclusion," and "sustainability", restricted to English, open-access journal articles published between 2020 and 2025. The initial search produced 180 records, and after removing 20 duplicates using Mendeley, 160 documents were retained for analysis. Studies were included if they addressed entrepreneurship with explicit reference to gender, empowerment, or inclusion; conceptualized innovation as a driver of social impact; or explored sustainability through social enterprise practices. Excluded materials comprised non-academic sources, editorials, and unrelated technical papers.

PRISMA Flow Diagram (Social Entrepreneurship and Gender Empowerment — Scopus 2020–2025)
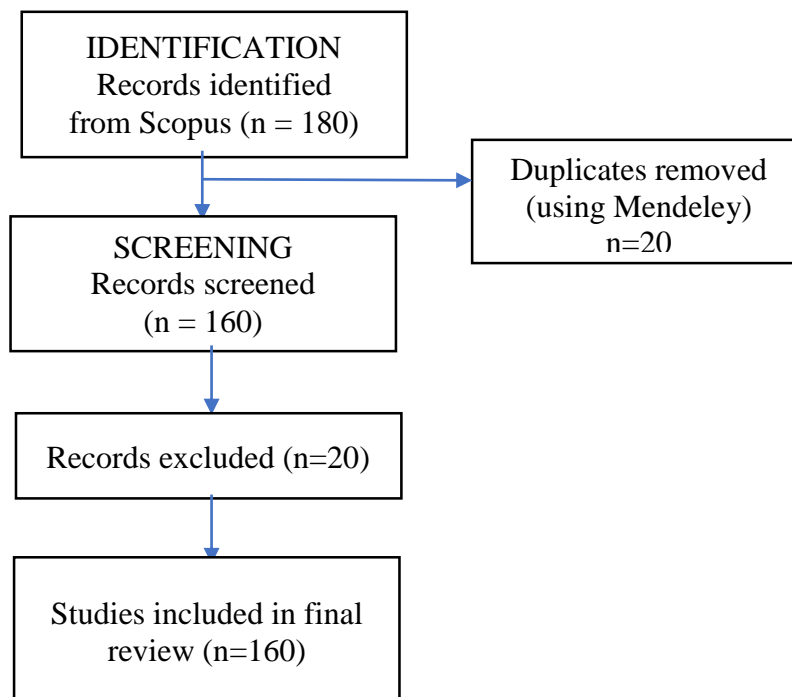

Figure 1: Prisma Flow Diagram

A qualitative thematic synthesis was conducted to interpret findings across the selected studies. Each article was examined for its conceptual framework, methodological approach, geographic scope, and contribution to theory or practice. Data were coded inductively to identify recurring concepts and deductively aligned with empowerment and innovation frameworks in the social sciences. Five dominant themes emerged: (1) innovation and inclusive business models; (2) gender empowerment and leadership; (3) community development and social value creation; (4) barriers and enablers of women's entrepreneurship; and (5) sustainability and institutional support. The PRISMA flow of records—180 identified, 20 removed, and 160 included—demonstrates methodological transparency. Reliability was strengthened through citation verification, adherence to established SLR guidelines, and triangulation of themes across studies to ensure validity and minimize bias (Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart 2003).

3. Results
3.1 Innovation and Inclusive Business Models

Recent literature highlights innovation as a catalyst for inclusive business models that merge social and economic objectives. Social enterprises have increasingly adopted open and collaborative innovation strategies to integrate marginalized groups into value creation (Sirolli et al. 2025). Open innovation frameworks encourage participatory processes that democratize entrepreneurship and redistribute knowledge for collective benefit (Sirolli et al. 2025). Research in sustainable futures emphasizes that innovation not only improves business competitiveness but also contributes to empowerment through local ownership and social participation (Uddin et al. 2025). In emerging economies, inclusive models facilitate equitable access to markets and technology for women and youth (Ezeudu 2024; Osei-Tutu and Boateng 2024). Such models highlight a shift from top-down interventions to co-creation systems that enable disadvantaged populations to become active change agents rather than passive beneficiaries (Khan et al. 2023).

3.2 Gender Empowerment and Leadership in Social Enterprises

Empowerment has evolved from a micro-level focus on individual agency to a structural transformation of gender relations in organizations. Studies show that women's leadership in social enterprises enhances innovation performance and fosters inclusive workplace cultures (Öz 2025). Women's entrepreneurial leadership often embodies relational, collaborative, and community-oriented approaches that differ from traditional corporate models (Chanyau and Rosenberg 2023). In social enterprises, empowerment extends beyond economic autonomy to include voice, decision-making power, and recognition (Ndhlovu, 2023). Research on participatory leadership demonstrates that when women occupy executive or founding roles, social missions align more closely with equity and sustainability principles (Mukherjee 2023; Rahman 2024). Furthermore, women-led organizations tend to reinvest profits into community welfare, health, and education, creating broader social multiplier effects (Adebayo and Akande 2024).

3.3 Community Development and Social Value Creation

The intersection of social entrepreneurship and community development underscores the transformative power of collective action. Social enterprises contribute to local capacity building by enhancing human capital and promoting inclusive service delivery (Hueske and Dijkstra-Silva 2025). Evidence from developing regions demonstrates that community-based enterprises provide employment and improve resilience among women and vulnerable groups (Chidakwa et al. 2020). Through participatory governance structures, communities co-design solutions that address local challenges while reinforcing social cohesion (Raimundo and Oliveira 2024). This participatory ethos connects entrepreneurship with social solidarity and shared accountability (Amponsah and Mensah 2023). By cultivating trust, cooperation, and learning, social enterprises act as intermediaries between market efficiency and social justice . The literature also reveals that empowerment outcomes are strongest when community entrepreneurship is aligned with local culture and institutional context (Moyo 2024).

3.4 Barriers and Enablers of Women's Entrepreneurship

Despite the growth of social entrepreneurship, women continue to face systemic barriers, including limited access to finance, mentorship, and institutional support (Dlamini 2023; Osei-Tutu and Boateng 2024). Financial exclusion and gendered social norms restrict entrepreneurial activity, especially in rural and low-income settings (Khan et al. 2023). Nevertheless, enabling factors such as peer networks, digital inclusion, and microfinance have proven effective in mitigating these constraints (Rahman, 2024; Ndlovu, 2023). Recent work identifies *social capital*—trust-based relationships and community networks—as a critical enabler for

scaling women-led enterprises (Agyapong and Oduro 2023). Digital transformation has also lowered entry barriers, providing new opportunities for marketing, financing, and global connectivity (Abdullah and Yusuf 2024). In addition, education and skill development initiatives play an essential role in expanding the capabilities and confidence of female entrepreneurs (Ahmed and Sultana 2024). Together, these enablers support the emergence of more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

3.5 Sustainability and Institutional Support

Sustainability in social entrepreneurship is not limited to environmental goals but encompasses social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Social enterprises often act as experimental spaces for sustainable innovation and policy learning (Mensah and Adomako 2024). Government policies that integrate gender perspectives into entrepreneurship programs yield stronger empowerment outcomes and greater accountability (Chisango and Mupfumira 2023). Institutional support from academia, civil society, and development agencies reinforces ecosystem resilience and policy coherence (Hassan and Karim 2024). Evidence also indicates that sustainable enterprises thrive when supported by multi-stakeholder partnerships that align local goals with global sustainability frameworks (Ncube 2023). The literature thus points toward the need for integrated governance systems that promote gender equity, resource efficiency, and innovation-driven sustainability (Akhtar and Hasan 2025; Yeboah and Ofori 2023).

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework: Social Entrepreneurship and Gender Empowerment

The model illustrates how social entrepreneurship operates as a multidimensional process in which innovation, inclusion, and sustainability act as mediating mechanisms leading to gender empowerment and social value creation.
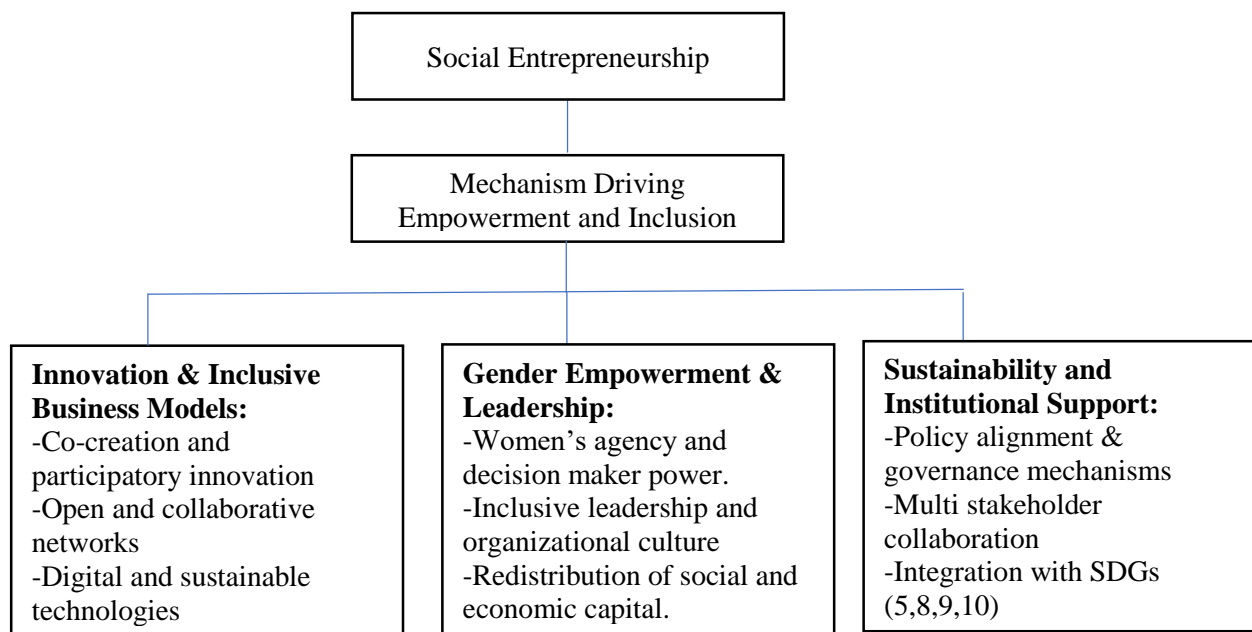

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework derived from the systematic literature review, showing how social entrepreneurship functions as a transformative mechanism that drives gender empowerment through the interconnected dimensions of innovation, inclusion, and sustainability. The framework identifies five interrelated themes—innovation and inclusive business models, gender empowerment and leadership, community development and social value creation, barriers and enablers, and sustainability with institutional support—that collectively explain the dynamics of empowerment within entrepreneurial ecosystems. At its core, social entrepreneurship acts as a catalyst for inclusive innovation and participatory business practices that expand opportunities for women to exercise agency and leadership (Sirolli et al. 2025). Community-oriented value creation reinforces social cohesion and resilience, while access to finance, digital inclusion, and supportive policy environments serve as crucial enablers (Ezeudu 2024; Osei-Tutu and Boateng 2024). The framework ultimately demonstrates that sustainable gender empowerment emerges not from isolated interventions but from systemic interactions between social innovation, institutional support, and collective action, aligning with the broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 5, 8, 9, and 10).

4. Discussion

Women's entrepreneurship features prominently as a key driver of gender equality, social inclusion, and sustainable development. Empirical work across contexts shows that women-led ventures can improve livelihoods, expand social capital, and drive innovation in sectors ranging from handicrafts to technology-enabled enterprises. In India, women-led micro-entrepreneurship in rural handicrafts demonstrates how digital platforms and community-based models empower artisans and foster social change (Anil, Misra, and Bal 2023). Regional studies highlight policy and societal shifts that promote women's entrepreneurship as a lever for inclusive growth, with evidence from Saudi Arabia on intention to engage in entrepreneurship explained by empowerment dimensions (psychosocial, economic, political) Hassan et al., 2022; , and immigrant women in Europe showing empowerment as a predictor of entrepreneurship uptake (Gaweł and Toikko 2024); . Related analyses connect women's empowerment to broader sustainable outcomes, including family governance and community resilience through sustainable business practices (Gigauri 2025).

The literature also explores how inclusion intersects with education, policy, and leadership. Inclusive leadership, as a mode of organizational practice, is linked to improved inclusion outcomes in workplace and community settings (Fagan et al. 2022; Kuknor and Bhattacharya 2020) , while inclusive education and its political and policy dimensions reveal that inclusion policies require careful navigation of social values, power, and resource allocation (Leijen, Arcidiacono, and Baucal 2021; Ozili 2019; Tervo et al. 2023) Although these latter studies focus on education, they illuminate generalizable mechanisms—policy design, leadership behavior, and organizational culture—that can translate to social entrepreneurship ecosystems aiming for gender-inclusive outcomes (Halsall et al. 2022; Kuknor and Bhattacharya 2020).

4.1 Social Entrepreneurship as a Vehicle for Inclusive Innovation

Social entrepreneurship promotes *inclusive innovation*, a concept emphasizing co-creation between producers and beneficiaries rather than top-down development. This aligns with (Heeks 2014) notion that innovation should address social exclusion and empower marginalized populations. Within the reviewed literature, inclusive business models and open innovation practices (Sirolli et al. 2025) exemplify how collaboration across gender and social boundaries generates mutual value. By involving women in innovation processes, enterprises strengthen creativity, organizational learning, and responsiveness to local needs (Uddin et al. 2025). These mechanisms resonate with Schumpeterian perspectives on innovation as a driver of transformation, yet extend them by embedding gender and equity as integral elements of progress.

4.2 Feminist Institutionalism and Structural Empowerment

The empowerment of women within entrepreneurial ecosystems cannot be understood solely through individual agency but through institutional change. *Feminist institutionalism* offers a lens for analyzing how formal and informal institutions shape access, authority, and representation (Waylen 2017). Studies show that women-led social enterprises challenge patriarchal norms by altering governance practices and redistributing decision-making power (Chanyau and Rosenberg 2023). This institutional perspective highlights empowerment as a collective process, achieved through sustained engagement in organizational leadership, policy participation, and network formation. It underscores that transformation occurs when gender equality becomes embedded in organizational routines and institutional logics.

4.3 Social Capital and Collective Empowerment

Social entrepreneurship relies on the mobilization of *social capital*—the networks, trust, and reciprocity that enable coordinated action (Agyapong and Oduro 2023; Ezeudu 2024; Putnam 2000). The reviewed literature reveals that women entrepreneurs leverage social relationships to access resources, mentorship, and legitimacy in contexts where formal support systems are limited (Ezeudu, 2024; Agyapong & Oduro, 2023). Community-based enterprises strengthen bonding and bridging social capital, fostering collaboration between local actors and external partners (Hueske and Dijkstra-Silva 2025; Prajapati 2024). These dynamics illustrate that empowerment is relational: it grows from social interdependence rather than individual autonomy. By nurturing trust and cooperation, social enterprises serve as platforms for civic participation and community resilience.

4.4 Overcoming Structural Barriers through Digital and Policy Innovation

Persistent barriers such as financial exclusion, limited training, and restrictive gender norms remain critical obstacles (Dlamini 2023; Osei-Tutu and Boateng 2024). However, digital technologies and inclusive policies are redefining access to entrepreneurial opportunities. Digital social enterprises enhance visibility and connectivity, enabling women to participate in transnational value chains and digital marketplaces (Rahman 2024). Policy frameworks that integrate gender equity into entrepreneurship strategies foster institutional legitimacy and sustainability (Chisango and Mupfumira 2023). These findings align with the *inclusive innovation* paradigm, which situates technology not as an end in itself but as an enabler of participation and equity.

4.5 Sustainability as a Systemic Outcome

Sustainability, as revealed in the literature, represents both an outcome and a governance mechanism of social entrepreneurship. Institutional collaboration among government, academia, and civil society enhances policy coherence and long-term impact (Hassan and Karim 2024; Mensah and Adomako 2024). The reviewed studies affirm that gender empowerment contributes to the social dimension of sustainability by addressing inequalities that hinder economic and environmental resilience (Yeboah and Ofori 2023). This perspective integrates the triple bottom line—people, planet, and profit—into a gender-responsive framework, positioning women not merely as beneficiaries but as innovators and policymakers in sustainable development.

4.6 Theoretical Integration and Future Directions

The synthesis of these themes underscores the convergence of three theoretical pillars: *social capital theory*, *inclusive innovation*, and *feminist institutionalism*. Together, they illuminate how empowerment emerges through networks, collaboration, and institutional transformation. Future research should deepen the intersectional understanding of gender in entrepreneurship, incorporating class, ethnicity, and geography to explain differentiated experiences of empowerment. Moreover, longitudinal and comparative studies could clarify the causal mechanisms linking social innovation, institutional change, and sustainable gender equity. Expanding the integration of sociological theory into business research would enrich our comprehension of how social entrepreneurship can drive systemic transformation in the creative and sustainable economy.

5. Conclusion

This review concludes that social entrepreneurship has matured into a vital pathway for achieving gender empowerment, inclusive innovation, and sustainable development. Across global contexts, women entrepreneurs have transformed the narrative of business from one centered on profit maximization to one grounded in equity, creativity, and social value. The systematic synthesis of 160 articles (2020–2025) demonstrates that empowerment through entrepreneurship extends beyond individual achievement—it represents collective transformation driven by institutional, technological, and social change. By combining innovation, leadership, and sustainability, social entrepreneurship provides a multidimensional framework for advancing several Sustainable Development Goals, notably SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

The theoretical implications of this review lie in integrating social capital theory, inclusive innovation, and feminist institutionalism to explain how empowerment occurs across micro, meso, and macro levels. Social capital facilitates collaboration and trust; inclusive innovation democratizes access to resources; and feminist institutionalism highlights structural transformation within organizations and policy systems. Together, these perspectives emphasize that empowerment is both relational and systemic—emerging from shared agency, equitable participation, and institutional reform. Future theoretical work should deepen intersectional approaches, capturing how gender interacts with class, geography, and digital access in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that capacity-building programs should prioritize women's access to finance, mentorship, and digital tools that enhance innovation and leadership potential. Universities, incubators, and NGOs should collaborate to develop social enterprise training programs emphasizing community engagement, ethical business models, and social impact measurement. Moreover, entrepreneurship education should incorporate gender sensitivity and inclusive leadership principles to nurture equitable innovation cultures in the creative industries.

Policy implications are equally critical. Governments and development institutions should embed gender-responsive design in entrepreneurship and innovation policies, ensuring equitable access to credit, technology, and markets. Regulatory frameworks must also support hybrid business models that allow social enterprises to balance financial sustainability with social objectives. Strengthening partnerships between public

agencies, academia, and civil society will help institutionalize gender inclusion across the social enterprise ecosystem. Lastly, international cooperation is essential to scale successful models globally while adapting them to local contexts.

In sum, social entrepreneurship represents a transformative force that bridges business and social justice. When aligned with innovation and inclusive policy, it becomes an engine for sustainable empowerment. The findings of this review reaffirm that empowering women through social entrepreneurship is not only a developmental necessity but a moral and intellectual imperative for the future of equitable economies.

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7. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no known financial, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, analysis, or conclusions presented in this article. The study was conducted independently, without external funding or sponsorship that might create a potential conflict. All interpretations and findings reflect the author's scholarly analysis and commitment to ethical research integrity.

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