



Gender, Space, and Women's Entrepreneurship: A Case Study in Kadıköy, Istanbul (2018–2023)

Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Mekân ve Kadın Girişimciliği: İstanbul Kadıköy'de Bir Vaka Çalışması (2018-2023)

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Abstract

This study explores the evolving dynamics of women's entrepreneurship in Kadıköy, Istanbul between 2018 and 2023, focusing on how structural inequalities, spatial context, and socio-economic crises shape women's entrepreneurial trajectories. Based on two rounds of in-depth interviews with thirteen women entrepreneurs, the research highlights the persistent challenges posed by limited institutional support, gendered expectations, and economic volatility, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent inflationary period. While entrepreneurship is often framed as a pathway to empowerment, the findings show that it simultaneously reproduces precarity through unpaid care responsibilities, gendered moral norms, and spatially contingent access to opportunities. Women's strategies of resilience such as resource-sharing and adapting business models, reflect individual ingenuity, but also reveal the lack of systemic support for gender-equitable entrepreneurship. The study emphasizes the importance of intersectional and place-based approaches to understanding how gender, class, and space interact to shape entrepreneurial agency in neoliberal and patriarchal contexts.

Keywords: Women's entrepreneurship, gender, space, women entrepreneurs in Türkiye, COVID-19.

Öz

Bu çalışma, 2018 ile 2023 yılları arasında İstanbul'un Kadıköy ilçesinde kadın girişimciliğinin değişen dinamiklerini incelemekte; yapısal eşitsizliklerin, mekânsal bağlamın ve sosyo-ekonomik krizlerin kadınların girişimcilik rotalarını nasıl şekillendirdiğine odaklanmaktadır. On üç kadın girişimciyle yapılan iki tur derinlemesine görüşmeye dayanan araştırma, özellikle COVID-19 pandemisi ve onu izleyen enflasyon dönemi sırasında sınırlı kurumsal destek, toplumsal cinsiyet temelli beklentiler ve ekonomik dalgalanmaların yarattığı kalıcı zorlukları ortaya koymaktadır. Girişimcilik sıklıkla güçlenmeye giden bir yol olarak sunulsa da, bulgular bunun aynı zamanda karşılıksız bakım sorumlulukları, toplumsal cinsiyetle kurgulanmış ahlaki normlar ve mekâna bağlı fırsatlara erişim yoluyla kırılganlıkları yeniden ürettiğini göstermektedir. Kadınların dayanıklılık stratejileri, kaynak paylaşımı ve iş modellerini uyarlama gibi, bireysel yaratıcılıklarını yansıtsa da, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğine dayalı girişimcilğe yönelik sistemsel destek eksikliğini de gözler önüne sermektedir. Çalışma, neoliberal ve ataerkil bağlamlarda toplumsal cinsiyet, sınıf ve mekânın girişimcilik öznesini nasıl biçimlendirdiğini kavrayabilmek için kesişimsel ve mekâna dayalı yaklaşımların önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın girişimciliği, toplumsal cinsiyet, mekân, Türkiye'de kadın girişimciler, COVID-19.

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Introduction

The term *entrepreneur*, derived from the French *entreprendre* (to undertake), traditionally describes individuals who organize and risk capital for profit. This study focuses on women entrepreneurs, examining how gender intersects with entrepreneurship. Globally, women remain underrepresented in entrepreneurial activity. In the European Union (EU), although women slightly outnumber men demographically, they make up just a third of the self-employed (European Commission, 2019: 12). Similarly, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) reports a gender gap in entrepreneurial participation, with a 2022 Total Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) rate of 10.2% for women versus 13.6% for men across 43 economies (Kelley *et al.*, 2023). UN Women also notes that fewer than one-third of global businesses are owned by women, with figures dipping below 15% in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa (UN Women, 2022). These disparities reflect systemic challenges, including restricted access to capital, entrenched gender norms, and policy biases (Brush *et al.*, 2019).

Women's entrepreneurship is closely linked to evolving global economic structures and women's roles within them. The economic context of each era shapes the development of female entrepreneurship. Crises and globalization have especially affected women in developing countries. While inflation and recession in developed economies caused major shifts, developing countries often faced contractions and debt crises (Kabeer, 2015: 211). In response, privatization emerged as a common solution, including in Türkiye by shifting public assets into private hands. Yet, as Prizzia (2005: 56) warns, privatization can be "politically dangerous and socially irresponsible". Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) promoted by the World Bank and IMF in the 1980s and 1990s liberalized markets but often deepened social problems. As governments reduced public services, informal economies expanded—disproportionately affecting women (Elson, 1999: 611). Women lost jobs in the shrinking public sector but found entrepreneurial openings in sectors once state-controlled, such as retail and services. Thus, women's entrepreneurship often emerged as a response to economic restructuring and liberalization. Both "push" and "pull" factors influence women's entry into entrepreneurship. Reduced formal employment due to privatization acts as a push factor, while the desire for independence and flexibility serves as a pull factor. Entrepreneurship allows women to work from home and balance family life, promoting self-growth and autonomy (Hughes, 2003: 435–436). The global rise of microfinance and small enterprise support also encouraged this trend (Mayoux, 2001:

436). Still, barriers like limited credit access and restrictive social norms persist. As Ecevit (2010: 184) notes, entrepreneurship can nonetheless empower women socially and economically.

This study examines how entrepreneurship empowers women and addresses ongoing challenges, focusing on trends from 2018 to 2023. It highlights evolving policies, economic shifts, and social attitudes influencing women entrepreneurs.

Evolution of Women's Entrepreneurship in Türkiye

Globally, women entrepreneurs are increasingly recognized for their role in innovation and economic resilience. Yet, their progress is hindered by limited access to credit, support networks, and equal policy representation (Smith & Brown, 2020: 45, 112). In Türkiye, women-focused entrepreneurship policies emerged in the 1990s with national development plans by the Directorate General on the Status of Women. These initially aimed at improving employability but evolved into mechanisms for financial support, especially for rural women impacted by liberal economic reforms (Ecevit, 2007: 1–15, 47). Despite these efforts, women remained underrepresented. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported in 2004 that women comprised a minority of small business owners in most member states (OECD, 2004: 6).

Since the early 2000s, Türkiye has aligned with global initiatives promoting women's entrepreneurship. Programs from the World Bank and UN aimed to empower women through financial resources and training (Kabeer, 2015: 215). Nationally, support structures such as TOBB's women entrepreneur boards, KOSGEB's low-interest loans, and İŞKUR's job training were introduced (TOBB, 2007: 54; KOSGEB, 2023: 32). Private banks also launched microcredit initiatives, lowering entry barriers for women (Garanti Bank, 2010: 19). EU accession reforms further promoted women's economic participation (Ecevit, 2010: 122).

Despite increased visibility, women still make up a small fraction of Türkiye's entrepreneurs, just 16% as of 2023, i.e., approx. 150,000 individuals (TÜİK, 2023: 5; KOSGEB, 2023: 12). Urban areas like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir dominate due to better infrastructure and institutional support. Most women work in services (45–50%), especially personal care, hospitality, and consulting, followed by retail and food (30%), and smaller numbers in education, health (10%), and home-based production (5–10%) (KAGİDER, 2023: 18). Although rural women's entrepreneurship is on the rise through microcredit and cooperative schemes, challenges remain, especially around care burdens and limited capital access.

These developments are also shaped by the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) gender politics. Since 2002, AKP has promoted women's entrepreneurship within a culturally conservative framework emphasizing motherhood and family roles. State-backed programs often favor home-based, child-related, or domestic-oriented businesses over non-traditional ventures (Coşar & Yeğenoğlu, 2011: 559; Kandiyoti, 2016: 18). Critics argue that such policies form part of a broader "gendered moral governance," wherein support is selectively extended to women who align with state-defined modesty norms (Diner & Toktaş, 2010: 44–45; Altınay, 2014: 208–210).

This gender ideology operates alongside neoliberalism, encouraging women to become "active citizens" while neglecting structural barriers like unequal caregiving responsibilities or inadequate labor protections (Bora, 2012: 57; Toksöz, 2012: 113). While liberal districts such as Kadıköy afford greater autonomy, they too remain entangled in broader socio-political dynamics that condition women's access to economic opportunities.

Research Method

This research employed a qualitative methodology, conducting two waves of in-depth interviews with thirteen women entrepreneurs from Kadıköy, Istanbul. The first set took place in 2018; the second in 2023. Participants were aged 34–56 years and had been operating micro or small businesses—either solo or with up to five employees—for at least two years at the time of the first interview. Interviews lasted 45 minutes and 1.5 hours, with eight audio-recorded and transcribed, and five documented via handwritten notes. NVIVO software supported the coding and analysis.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and represented a range of occupations such as law, tailoring, yoga instruction, and bar ownership, and marital statuses. While this strategy enabled access to diverse narratives, it skewed the sample toward the service sector, limiting generalizability across industries. The study's spatial focus on Kadıköy, an urban, liberal enclave, also shaped the results. Compared to more conservative districts like Üsküdar or Başakşehir, Kadıköy offers women more freedom in navigating public and commercial spaces, especially in traditionally male-dominated sectors like nightlife. However, even within this relatively open environment, participants encountered structural barriers and institutional bias. This spatial embeddedness allows the study to contribute to research on how local cultural geographies influence gendered economic agency—an underexplored area in entrepreneurship literature.

Participant Profile

Participants ranged in age from 34 to 57 years, with an average age of 46.2 years. Their demographic and professional diversity reflects broader global patterns, with many women entering entrepreneurship in their 40s due to career shifts or personal motivations (Ecevit & Kaptanoğlu, 2015). Seven were married and six divorced, suggesting varied forms of familial support or independence. Eight participants had children, navigating parenting alongside business ownership. Their businesses ranged across hospitality (cafés, bars), personal care (yoga studios, salons), and professional services (law and insurance). This sectoral distribution reflects global trends where women often cluster in service-related fields due to lower entry barriers and flexible schedules. However, service sector businesses are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns, as illustrated by closures and shifts to home-based models in 2023.

Educational backgrounds were diverse: eight participants held university degrees, typically in law or architecture, while five were high school graduates trained in trades like tailoring or culinary work. While all faced challenges related to capital, labor, and bureaucracy, education influenced the types of ventures and strategies they pursued. University-educated participants were more likely to launch consulting or specialized services, while those with vocational training tended to open hands-on businesses such as cafés or tailoring shops. This distinction supports literature suggesting that higher education expands entrepreneurial scope and problem-solving abilities (Carter *et al.*, 2015: 126).

Although some experiences echoed prior findings on empowerment through entrepreneurship, many participants emphasized that their ventures intensified physical and emotional workloads without yielding full autonomy. These nuanced accounts challenge overly celebratory narratives, calling for a more critical and intersectional understanding of women's entrepreneurship.

Empowering Pathways: Opportunities for Women in Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship policies should aim to empower women as autonomous economic agents who actively contribute to both personal advancement and national development, rather than treating them merely as a labor reserve to address unemployment (Türkten & Demiryürek, 2016: 204–205). Such policies have the potential to unlock the often-overlooked capacities of women, thereby generating broad socioeconomic benefits. Research demonstrates that when given equitable access to resources and support systems, women thrive across various

sectors, showing considerable resilience, adaptability, and innovative problem-solving capabilities (Kutanis & Alparslan, 2006: 149). It is important, however, to approach commonly cited traits like patience, determination, foresight, and negotiation skills not as innately feminine attributes, but as qualities honed through lived experience, often shaped by the disproportionate societal pressures and constraints placed upon women throughout their lives. Ecevit and Kaptanoğlu (2015: 27) highlight that entrepreneurial engagement enhances women's self-confidence and financial autonomy, enabling them to transition from private domestic spheres into public economic roles while acquiring new competencies along the way.

Empowerment in Place: Women's Autonomy and the Spatial Dynamics of Entrepreneurship:

Women entrepreneurs' sense of autonomy and confidence aligns with studies showing that entrepreneurship fosters not only financial independence but also psychological empowerment. Business ownership enables women to navigate public spaces confidently, enhancing their sense of agency within communities (Brush, 2009: 34). Eddleston and Powell (2008: 542) emphasize that as women take on multiple roles in their businesses, they gain skills and self-efficacy, bolstering resilience in facing challenges. This growth goes beyond economic gains, building deep-rooted self-confidence with wide-ranging impacts on personal and social spheres. For instance, one bar owner noted her comfort in her neighborhood, sharing,

"I feel more comfortable even on the street as I know my neighborhood... I don't rely on anybody, even my boyfriend. ...I feel strong, really strong that I am the owner of this business!" (Interview no. 3, 34 years old, conducted in 2018).

Entrepreneurship also empowers women creatively, as another participant remarked on newfound creativity and courage: *"I am telling myself; I have done it before and I can do it again... I am more active and creative now"* (Interview no. 1, 44 years old, conducted in 2018). Such transformations reflect the psychological empowerment identified in research, where business ownership encourages women to envision and pursue new projects with confidence (Carter & Shaw, 2006: 88). Another participant, who manages her business independently, noted the resilience she's developed by handling all aspects of her enterprise alone, stating, *"Doing and deciding everything on your own strengthens you"* (Interview no. 2, 53 years old, conducted in 2018). These insights align with research indicating that self-reliance fosters agency and adaptability, crucial for navigating competitive markets (Brush, 2009: 33). Wom-

en who establish businesses independently also serve as influential role models, challenging societal perceptions and reshaping gender norms.

For example, one bar owner observed initial hesitation from police officers who questioned her authority due to her profession and gender. She noted:

"They weren't even talking properly or looking at me, but later they realized I was normal, not a sex worker! (laughing). Their attitudes have definitely changed. They now talk with me as they talk with their colleagues" (Interview no. 3, 34 years old, conducted in 2018).

Over time, the officers adjusted their behavior, treating her with increasing respect. This transformation aligns with Ridgeway's (2011: 67) argument that women occupying non-traditional roles can disrupt stereotypes, enabling more equitable interactions in male-dominated settings. Similarly, a female insurance worker recounted that clients initially questioned her abilities; however, as her professional competence became evident, their attitudes shifted. One client even remarked, *"If we don't work with you, we'll definitely work with another woman"* (Interview no. 1, 44 years old, conducted in 2018). Such narratives, although supporting Eagly and Carli's (2007: 142) findings that visible competence can traditionally inspire confidence in women in male-dominated fields and increase their acceptance, nevertheless show that not all participants experienced entrepreneurship as liberating. For some, it extended existing burdens—intensifying the demands of economic survival alongside familial responsibilities. These accounts complicate optimistic portrayals of entrepreneurship as a straightforward path to empowerment. Instead, they highlight the necessity of addressing structural gender inequalities that shape entrepreneurial experience. While Ridgeway (2011) suggests that professional competence can reshape gendered expectations, the findings from Kadıköy point to the uneven and context-specific nature of this shift. This challenges the notion of a linear progression in gender norms and underscores the fragmented and negotiated legitimacy of women in public entrepreneurial roles.

Importantly, individual success stories should not be mistaken for structural change. While many women in this study demonstrated resilience and strategic navigation of barriers, their experiences reflect highly contingent outcomes influenced by varying degrees of social privilege and risk exposure. For instance, women operating bars described initial stigmatization and scrutiny, revealing how certain entrepreneurial activities remain morally contested. These dynamics reinforce the idea that empowerment is not inherent to entrepreneurship itself, but is mediated by broader socio-political conditions, including class, space, and cultural values. Therefore, the study must move beyond cataloging indi-

vidual achievements to critically interrogate the enabling and constraining forces that define which women are able to thrive, and under what conditions. Understanding the spatial dimension of women's entrepreneurship is thus essential to grasp how agency is enacted, supported, or constrained.

In entrepreneurship, the concept of space is not merely a physical location; it embodies social, economic, and cultural dimensions that influence women's experiences and opportunities in business. For women entrepreneurs, the location and characteristics of the space they operate in often shape their business dynamics, social networks, and personal comfort levels. This study delves into the narratives of women entrepreneurs in Kadıköy, Istanbul, a neighborhood where a sense of community, safety, and mutual support among women contribute significantly to their professional success and personal well-being. One participant expressed her connection to space through the following reflection:

"... we are actually like immigrants (laughs). It's like one of us left and the other one was taken away. [...] If someone asked me where I should open my first business, I would recommend this place (Kadıköy) as well. Because we have a nice environment here, there is neighborhood solidarity, women support each other here" (Interview no. 5, 47 years old, conducted in 2018).

The remarks from participants highlight how space can foster a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem. Interviewee no. 5 recounts how she felt an almost "immigrant-like" bond upon starting her business in Kadıköy. The support network she found there, rooted in neighborhood solidarity and camaraderie, provided both emotional and practical assistance in a phase when she had minimal capital and was testing her business viability (Interview no. 5, 47 years old, conducted in 2018). This supportive environment illustrates what Sherry *et al.* (2012: 89) describe as a "relational space," where social ties and communal values encourage women to enter and thrive in the business arena.

For women, safety and freedom within the business environment are critical factors influencing their relationship with space. Another participant (Interview no. 3) emphasized that Kadıköy allowed her to work in the bar industry with a sense of security and freedom. She contrasted this experience with other neighborhoods in Istanbul, such as Aksaray and Taksim, where safety concerns would have prevented her from operating with the same confidence. She explained:

"[...] I used to feel the same in Taksim, for example, but after they removed the street bars there, they finished it. Kadıköy still has that libertarian tradition" (Interview no. 3, 34 years old, conducted in 2023).

This feeling aligns with findings by Massey (1994: 82), who argues that gendered perceptions of space impact women's economic activities, as women are more likely to engage in entrepreneurial ventures in areas they perceive as safe and inclusive. The observations of these entrepreneurs underscore how space can act as a gendered domain, influencing women's decisions regarding where and how to establish businesses. Kadıköy's perceived inclusivity and libertarian values create an environment where women feel respected and supported, which in turn strengthens their entrepreneurial resilience and encourages their continued participation in the local economy. In Kadıköy, for instance, the presence of other female bar managers fosters a sense of belonging and normalizes women's roles in managing nightlife establishments, which are traditionally male-dominated spaces.

Therefore, the experiences of female entrepreneurs in Kadıköy highlight the multifaceted role that space plays in shaping women's entrepreneurship. Space acts as a foundation for community support, a facilitator of safety, and a site for challenging gender norms. For these women, Kadıköy is more than a location; it is a liberating and empowering environment that supports their aspirations and allows them to redefine entrepreneurship within a gender-inclusive framework. While Kadıköy offered many women a space of inclusion, this did not exempt them from the broader structural and cultural barriers facing women across Türkiye.

Challenges on the Journey: Navigating Obstacles in Women's Entrepreneurship

While women entrepreneurship offers numerous benefits, women still face significant barriers, mirroring those in the labor market. The European Commission's Women Innovators and Entrepreneurship Report (2008) highlights issues like horizontal and vertical segregation, limited access to finance, and exclusion from key business networks. Horizontal segregation refers to gendered divisions across occupations, while vertical segregation involves a gender-based hierarchy. For example, Ecevit's study (1991: 62) shows how women in factories dominate spinning sections, whereas men oversee dyeing sections and hold supervisory roles, keeping women at the lower rungs of organizational structures. Similarly, despite the apparent independence in entrepreneurship, statistics reveal women's low participation in small-scale enterprises and their concentration in service sectors.

Entrepreneurship, Domestic Responsibilities, and Crisis-Induced Adaptation:

In Türkiye, as of 2015, only 14% of micro-enterprises and 18% of small-to-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were managed by women. Despite the expansion of state-sponsored support mechanisms—like interest-free loans, training programs, and incentive grants provided by institutions like KOSGEB and the Women Entrepreneurs Association of Türkiye (KAGİDER)—women entrepreneurs continue to encounter persistent financial and social barriers. While these programs are designed to increase women's participation in the economy, many potential beneficiaries remain unaware of them or view the application processes as inaccessible or selectively enforced. As one participant explained:

"I knew they never give credit to a bar. They mainly give them to housewives who run businesses with handmade products" (Interview no. 3, 34 years old, conducted in 2018).

Such statements reflect more than bureaucratic frustration, they reveal how state support for women's entrepreneurship in Türkiye is structured around a gendered moral economy that privileges certain forms of acceptable femininity. Particularly under the conservative governance of the AKP, entrepreneurship is often supported when it aligns with traditional female roles, like home-based work or child-related services, while women engaging in nightlife economies, bar ownership, or creative sectors find themselves marginalized. Fieldwork in Kadıköy, a relatively liberal and socially open district in Istanbul, illustrates this dynamic clearly. Thus, state-led programs, while framed as gender-inclusive, implicitly regulate which forms of women's entrepreneurship are considered legitimate, reinforcing classed and moralized boundaries around femininity and economic participation.

The exclusion of women whose enterprises fall outside culturally sanctioned domains is only one manifestation of the broader structural inequalities embedded in Türkiye's entrepreneurial landscape. Even among women who pursue ventures aligned with traditional gender roles, systemic constraints persist, particularly around access to capital, training, and institutional knowledge. While state discourse often celebrates women's entrepreneurship as a path to empowerment, the reality is shaped by fragmented support systems, gendered expectations, and class-based disparities. These layers of inequality result in differentiated entrepreneurial trajectories, where access and opportunity are far from evenly distributed.

These structural and policy-related challenges are reflected in the lived experiences of the participants. Their narratives offer insight into how women navigate systemic limitations using personal and familial

resources, even when institutional support falls short. Others relied on severance pay or family support to finance their ventures, particularly when government grants or loans proved inaccessible. While such financial mechanisms aim to facilitate women's economic independence, participants commonly described systemic barriers, including limited education and technical skills, which restricted their ability to benefit from these supports (Sayin, 2011: 89). Indeed, gendered labor divisions limit the sectors in which women operate, with the majority of women in this study engaged in the service industry, cafes, restaurants, and small retail, rather than technology, or innovation-driven fields, which are typically dominated by men (Meta-Analysis of Gender and Science Research, 2010: 40).

This gendered constraint is compounded by societal expectations. As Gümüsoğlu (2013: 67) observes, "the mindset that excludes women from the public sphere today has rendered them invisible throughout history". For example, one woman faced opposition from her husband, who doubted her ability to succeed, asserting that she was "not smart enough to combat business life and its tricks":

"...I had a problem with my husband -I was married at that time- because he was not happy about my new job. He tried to stop me. He believed I was not intelligent enough to survive the business world and its challenges. In fact -just before getting divorced- I made the decision to set up my business and I feel very lucky that I did not listen to him" (Interview no. 1, 44 years old, conducted in 2018).

Another woman expressed frustration, explaining that her father discouraged her due to concerns about her caregiving responsibilities. She stated:

"I have never had many problems with my husband because after 15 years we became like friends. Not my ex-husband but my father was not fond of the restaurant. He is sick and I look after him and my son. So, he thought I would not go and see him anymore. As he is old, I couldn't explain it to him" (Interview no. 10, 55 years old, conducted in 2018).

However, in contrast to these negative examples, there are also women who receive support from their families. In this study, some participants stated that they turned to entrepreneurship due to the difficulties they encountered in their professional life, and that they did so with the support of their families. For instance, one participant mentioned that her family, who encouraged her to leave her workplace where she had experienced difficulties during maternity leave, was the most significant factor in her decision to pursue female entrepreneurship:

"When I told my family that I wanted to resign from my job, they encouraged me solely because my former employer refused to grant me ma-

ternity leave. In fact, with the help of my family, I even filed a lawsuit against my employer" (Interview no. 4, 42 years old, conducted in 2018).

These divergent accounts demonstrate that familial attitudes toward women's entrepreneurship in Türkiye are shaped by intersecting factors like class, education, and cultural capital. Rather than interpreting these narratives as isolated experiences, they should be situated within broader structural dynamics. For instance, the participant who pursued legal action against her employer benefited not only from her family's moral support but also from her privileged background, growing up in a family of legal professionals and having access to higher education. This socio-economic positioning enabled her to navigate legal and institutional systems with confidence, contrasting sharply with others in the study who lacked similar resources and faced more constrained options. As Ecevit and Kaptanoğlu (2015) observe, familial support often plays a critical role in women's entrepreneurial journeys, offering both emotional encouragement and material assistance. However, such support is unequally distributed and frequently tied to class privilege. Structural inequalities in education further exacerbate these disparities. Educational segmentation, where women are steered toward non-technical fields—limits their labor market outcomes and reinforces occupational hierarchies (Meta-Analysis of Gender and Science Research, 2010: 40).

These findings underscore the limitations of policies that treat women entrepreneurs as a homogeneous group. To be effective, interventions must account for the compounded effects of patriarchy, unequal access to education, and class-based barriers. Support strategies should therefore move beyond financial assistance alone, addressing the underlying social structures that shape women's economic participation and entrepreneurial agency. In addition to structural barriers in education and finance, the private sphere remains a significant site of constraint for women entrepreneurs, affecting how they balance personal and professional obligations.

Beyond access to capital or policy frameworks, women entrepreneurs also contend with the enduring weight of gendered domestic expectations, which shape how they experience autonomy and agency. The experiences of these women entrepreneurs illustrate the enduring demands of the private sphere that continue to impact women, even as they navigate their roles in the public sphere. While entrepreneurship offers these women a level of flexibility and autonomy, it also merges the boundaries between their professional and domestic responsibilities. Studies show that the burden of domestic work often persists for working women, creating what Hochschild (2012: 35) calls the "second shift," where women manage both professional duties and household

chores, often without significant support. In this study, many women, regardless of marital status, report that they bring elements of the domestic sphere into their workplaces, like cleaning and organizing. One woman stated that:

"I have a child so I have to cook for her even if she is 25 years old, for me she is still a kid. But at least I don't do that much domestic chores as I was doing before. Although I'm not very organized at home, I make sure everything is spotless at work, because clients come to the office regularly. As I do at work I employed someone to help with cleaning the house once a month". (Interview no. 12, 57 years old, conducted in 2018).

Furthermore, the dual responsibilities of childcare and business ownership can intensify this workload. One divorced participant expressed the strain of managing her business while raising her son, explaining that she works primarily during school hours to balance both roles. As the participant stated:

"I feel tired actually. As I am divorced, Ali (her son) is staying with me so I take care of him, cook for him and also work for myself. When he is at school I try to work, otherwise it is not easy. Or what we do, he tries to keep up with me. ...There are lots of things to do at home but a cleaning lady comes just once in two weeks. If not I cannot afford to do everything" (Interview no. 4, 42 years old, conducted in 2018).

This balance aligns with findings by Memiş *et al.* (2012: 101), who noted that employed women's cumulative workload is higher than that of housewives, with entrepreneurial women facing even greater demands. For women entrepreneurs, this overlap of public and private responsibilities underscores the need for supportive policies and social structures that recognize and alleviate the unique dual burden they shoulder.

Deepening Effects of Economic Crisis on Women Entrepreneurs in Türkiye: Observations from 2018 and 2023

Between 2018 and 2023, Türkiye faced significant socio-economic and political shifts. Rising inflation, currency devaluation, and political instability deeply impacted citizens, especially women entrepreneurs. Rather than transformation, findings from this period point to the intensification of pre-existing structural barriers. The COVID-19 pandemic further aggravated these challenges, halting economic activity and heavily affecting sectors like retail and services, where women are overrepresented (World Bank, 2021: 18).

Economic instability post-pandemic led to rising operational costs and decreasing revenue. For many women, this financial strain overlapped with increased domestic responsibilities, as lockdowns reinforced gendered caregiving roles (Çelik & Ertürk, 2021: 44). The com-

pounded effect of these crises reveals how gender and entrepreneurship intersect under structural inequality.

In this study, six of thirteen participants (Interview no. 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12) reported that their work conditions had drastically changed by 2023. Three women—owners of cafés and bars—were forced to close their businesses due to pandemic-related challenges (Kabeer, 2020: 15). Those who continued expressed dissatisfaction with their new working conditions. One participant highlighted the compromise of merging personal and professional space:

"I couldn't afford both rent for my home and the office... So, this is now both my workplace and my home... it's not comfortable, but I have no other choice" (Interview no. 12, 57 years old, conducted in 2023).

These adjustments, though framed as resilience, reflect how women absorb economic shocks through personal sacrifices. Blurred boundaries between home and work often diminish psychological well-being and productivity (Williams & Boushey, 2020: 78). Rather than symbols of adaptability, these coping mechanisms expose persistent gendered expectations that normalize female endurance.

One former café owner described her shift into full-time domestic labor:

"We used to eat at the café... but during the pandemic, my whole structure was disrupted. I had to cook at home almost from morning to night, feed the children, and clean the house... I became a full-time housewife" (Interview no. 8, 43 years old, conducted in 2023).

The pandemic magnified women's unpaid care work, often pulling them away from the workforce (Power, 2020: 17). Economic strain continued post-pandemic, especially in non-essential services. One Pilates instructor shared how she worked beyond regular hours to compensate:

"People don't cut back on food, but they cut back on Pilates... You start working weekends... you work in a way that compromises yourself to close that economic gap" (Interview no. 4, 42 years old, conducted in 2023).

These pressures led some women to adopt collaborative strategies. Two instructors began sharing a rental studio to lower costs. As one noted:

"We've combined our resources, sharing the space with a friend. Now, I'm at least a bit protected if another crisis hits" (Interview no. 11, 2023).

This demonstrates both the innovation and vulnerability of women navigating financial insecurity (Boserup, 2020: 210). Their collective resilience highlights the gendered burden of crisis adaptation.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study illustrates how the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in Türkiye between 2018 and 2023 did not radically change but worsened. Economic precarity, limited access to capital, and unpaid care

work persisted, intensified by external shocks like COVID-19 and inflation. Many participants emphasized that their struggles had deepened, especially in service sectors. Rather than transformation, participants described strategies of endurance. Moving businesses into domestic spaces, sharing commercial rents, or withdrawing from entrepreneurship altogether mirrored earlier coping patterns. These actions reflect a broader pattern of women absorbing systemic failures through private labor and sacrifice.

Women's entrepreneurial experiences in this study were also shaped by intersectional factors such as class, marital status, and spatial context. While some women benefited from education, social capital, or familial support, others faced resistance, financial precarity, and isolation. The diverse outcomes of these experiences stress the need for nuanced, intersectional approaches to policy and theory. To move forward, support must go beyond financial aid. It should address cultural expectations and structural barriers, particularly unpaid domestic labor and care responsibilities. Measures like childcare access, flexible work arrangements, and digital training can help reduce gender disparities in labor participation (Benería, 2021: 113; Brush, 2009: 34). Only by integrating economic support with social reform can real empowerment be achieved.

This study contributes a grounded perspective by focusing on Kadıköy, an urban district offering relatively greater freedom and support to women. Still, even in this progressive setting, women encountered unequal access and moral scrutiny. These findings show that localized, spatial factors deeply influence how gender and entrepreneurship interact.

Ultimately, individual success stories should not obscure structural realities. While entrepreneurship may be empowering for some, it cannot, by itself, overcome systemic gender inequalities. A feminist policy agenda must center structural reform and recognize the relational and spatial dynamics that shape women's economic agency.

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Table 1: List of Participants

	Interviews	Age	Occupation	Graduation	Marital status	Child	Changes in 2023
1	Interview no. 1	44	Insurer	University	Divorced	-	
2	Interview no. 2	53	Lawyer	University	Married	1	
3	Interview no. 3	34	Bar owner	High school	Single	-	Closed her bar.
4	Interview no. 4	42	Yoga instructor	University	Divorced	1	Closed her studio & rented an office with another woman.
5	Interview no. 5	47	Tailor	High school	Divorced	1	
6	Interview no. 6	47	Lawyer	University	Married	3	
7	Interview no. 7	40	Architect	University	Single	-	
8	Interview no. 8	43	Coffeeshop owner	High school	Married	2	Closed her coffeeshop.
9	Interview no. 9	48	Coffeeshop owner	University	Divorced	-	Closed her coffeeshop.
10	Interview no. 10	55	Restaurant owner	High school	Divorced	1	
11	Interview no. 11	43	Pilates instructor	University	Married	2	Closed her studio & rented an office with another woman.
12	Interview no. 12	57	Insurer	University	Married	1	Started to work in homeoffice.
13	Interview no. 13	44	Hair dresser	High school	Married	1	