Research Article

Threats and Overcoming Behaviors Experienced by Women Entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT

Objective: this article aims to identify threats experienced by women entrepreneurs and describe the behaviors they use to overcome them so they can continue developing their businesses. **Methods:** the research is qualitative, exploratory in nature, and semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Sixty-five entrepreneurs in the Network of Women Entrepreneurs in Brazil participated in the study. Using the Atlas.ti software, a lexicographic analysis identified three types of threats (role conflicts, affective, and patriarchy) and three overcoming behaviors (dialogue and negotiation, use of male vigor network, and resilience). **Results:** the findings describe the adverse, hostile, and embarrassing conditions women entrepreneurs face in running their businesses and suggest a typology of threats and behaviors to overcome such conditions. **Conclusions:** this study contributes to the body of research on female entrepreneurship by identifying categories of threats unique to women entrepreneurs. A more comprehensive understanding of this reality contributes not only to better individual actions but also to inspiring the creation of public policies to help women in the continuity and survival of their businesses.

BAR, Braz. Adm. Rev., 22(1), e240157, 2025.

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INTRODUCTION

Women entrepreneurship has been gaining prominence in practice and research. Even 40 years after the first publication on the topic (DeCarlo & Lyons, 1979), it remains a promising subject due to its persistent research needs. The significant increase in the number of female entrepreneurs reinforces the need to investigate the threats (De Bruin et al., 2007; Roomi et al., 2018) and barriers (Max & Ballereau, 2013) women face and the behaviors that are useful to overcome them.

The types of threats and overcoming behaviors of women in entrepreneurship are not a common subject in research. After investigating 220 articles about problems faced by women entrepreneurs, we identified 32 discussing some type of overcoming behavior. Nevertheless, none of them describe the main threats faced by female entrepreneurs in conjunction with the overcoming behaviors they adopt while struggling under such situations. Lima et al. (2024), for example, investigated the challenges and drivers of success for female entrepreneurs in Brazil but did not analyze the relationship between specific challenges and their possible overcoming factors, nor the overcoming behaviors of the entrepreneurs themselves. On the contrary, they emphasized contributors to success located at the meso or macro levels. Our study is an initial contribution to the development of a typology to classify the threat-overcoming behavior relationships from a primary source encompassing several business segments and broad alternative overcoming behaviors. Thus, this research contributes to entrepreneurship as a field of study by answering the following research question: What are the main threats women entrepreneurs face and the behaviors they use to overcome them so they can continue developing their businesses?

This question was answered by organizing, in the form of a typology that combines the constructs of affective and cognitive dimensions, the cause-consequence relationship between common gender-related threats and the behaviors women entrepreneurs use to overcome those threats. The study was developed in Brazil, a step forward for research on entrepreneurship by women in emerging countries, given that, until now, most research in this context has taken place in Asian countries (Corrêa et al., 2024). The article brings the following contributions: (a) an integrative empirical study, new in the international literature, involving the analysis of multiple aspects, including affective and cognitive components of threats and overcoming behaviors, contributing to advancing scientific knowledge about female entrepreneurship; (b) for policymakers, this study helps identify relevant threats faced by women entrepreneurs, neglected especially in management and

behavioral theories, and proposes a typology of threats combining affectivity and cognition; (c) for practitioners, this paper clarifies the fact that women entrepreneurs rely particularly on cognitive and affective aspects to face adversity, highlighting the relevance of individual traits and emotional states as models of perception and overcoming behaviors.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Female entrepreneurship

Women generally face more difficulties (e.g., gender discrimination, stereotypes, also having the house to manage) and are less likely than men to play an entrepreneurial role, such as creating or leading a business (Brush et al., 2009; Dileo & García Pereiro, 2018). These aspects characterize the gender gap in entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, female entrepreneurship has become a global trend, contributing progressively more to socio-economic development (Kelley et al., 2017). However, understanding the causes of these difficulties and, mainly, ways of overcoming them is still lacking. In one of the pioneering studies on women entrepreneurs, DeCarlo and Lyons (1979) compared different samples of women based on the personal characteristics, values, and needs they expressed. They identify significant differences in relation to the profile, productive capacity, and motivational aspects of women entrepreneurs.

The research spurred other studies by emphasizing the importance of women entrepreneurs in economic development, job creation, and the diversity of entrepreneurship (Verheul & Thurik, 2001), also helping to characterize an increase in the number of women entrepreneurs (Langowitz & Minniti, 2007). Some of these investigations are centered on themes involving the psychology of female entrepreneurs, personal backgrounds and business characteristics, attitudes toward entrepreneurship, intentions to start a business, the entrepreneurial process, management practices, strategies, networking, family issues, access to capital, and performance (Ahl, 2006; Leitch & Stead, 2016). Brush (1992) and Ahl (2006) highlight themes such as motivations and barriers to entrepreneurship, the entrepreneurial process, and the management models of women entrepreneurs.

Female entrepreneurship has also been the subject of study in different cultures (Carter et al., 2001), such as in Oman (McClelland, 1987), Turkey (Ufuk & Özgen, 2001), Ghana (Wrigley-Asante, 2018), Brazil (Machado et al., 2016), and Indonesia (Anggadwita, Ramadani et al., 2017). Studies show that socio-cultural aspects can be predictors of entrepreneurial activity among women (Hunt & Levie, 2003). Women entrepreneurs have faced particularly difficult obstacles related to socio-cultural aspects. In general, in many societies, shared values and

expected behaviors do not support their entrepreneurial activities (Anggadwita, Luturlean et al., 2017; Godwin et al., 2006). Indeed, greater effort is required from women compared to men in entrepreneurship (Bertolami et al., 2018). This is due to the extra barriers faced by women, requiring, above all, the adoption of better management for survival and continuity in their businesses.

However, the literature does not include specific knowledge about the types of threats or barriers affecting women entrepreneurs in connection with ways to overcome them. The lack of understanding of these aspects can result in the underutilization of female human capital and their potential to drive socio-economic development, thus perpetuating lower living standards for women and their families (De Bruin et al., 2007).

Threats and overcoming behaviors

We define a threat as an expression of the intention to inflict harm, injury, or damage (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Therefore, 'threat' is a suitable word to describe the collection of barriers, challenges, difficulties, and obstacles faced during the execution of an action, such as starting and running a business. A threat does not necessarily materialize as a barrier or challenge, but this study emphasizes the need to raise awareness of these circumstances while they are still potential risks. Despite coming from a distant origin, threat studies have spread since the 1990s in the field of applied social sciences, particularly in business administration. Several factors contributed to this increase, such as globalization, higher competition, and the need for organizations to adapt to competitive and constantly changing environments.

The threats considered are well varied, such as those arising from fundraising or financing problems (Nadolnyak & Hartarska, 2021; Orser et al., 2000) along with high rates of inflation and interest (Coleman, 2000; Robson & Obeng, 2008). Considering different empirical studies, some authors have concluded that women perceive discrimination from banks against them in accessing funds (Akehurst et al., 2012; Brush, 1992).

Women typically start and run businesses with fewer financial resources, a condition that tends to diminish their performance (Gundry & Welsch, 2001). This variety of barriers may explain why some studies indicate that women prefer using their personal savings and family loans instead of financing from banks (Petersen & Rajan, 1994). This already reveals two common overcoming strategies they use in entrepreneurship: autonomy and reliance on their network, particularly their family. Autonomy is key when facing restrictions such as discrimination (De Clercq & Brieger, 2021). When experiencing difficulties in securing funding from the traditional banking system, as already suggested in the study of female farmers (Nadolnyak & Hartarska, 2021), women may tend to access non-traditional lenders and their network. Acevedo-Duque et al. (2021) found a positive relationship between business sustainability and the resilience of female entrepreneurs. Similar results were found by Ayatakshi-Endow and Steele (2021) with Brazilian female entrepreneurs and by Gundlach and Sammartino (2020) with Australian women entrepreneurs.

The tradition of expecting less from women is culturally rooted and connected to the stereotype that they can do less. Gender stereotypes are socially constructed in entrepreneurship, and their influence falls on the entrepreneurial intentions of men and women (Gupta et al., 2009). Experiencing gender stereotypes is negatively associated with women's entrepreneurial aspirations and "affects the type of ventures women prefer to start, compelling women away from more agentic-type growth-oriented ventures and toward more communal-type ventures" (BarNir, 2021, p. 1). Moudrý and Thaichon (2020) demonstrated that women entrepreneurs were willing to adopt specific masculine traits to increase their chances of success in the retail business.

Counting on others and networking are also important to overcoming prejudice and discrimination (Jaim, 2021). Dal Mas and Paoloni (2020) found that relational capital is a crucial asset in fostering the success of a venture, while Venugopal and Viswanathan (2021) advocate the use of negotiated agency under consumption constraints by low-income entrepreneurs to overcome institutional norms.

Such agency conflicts also happen when they try to balance work and family duties (Tundui & Tundui, 2021). Women entrepreneurs perceive less role conflict between their role as entrepreneurs and their role as people responsible for their families when they receive emotional support from their families (Muhammad et al., 2022; Welsh et al., 2021; Young et al., 2019). Husband support is important, and a favorable relationship with him regarding the woman's entrepreneurial activities may be a determinant for her success and harmony in the family (Wolf & Frese, 2018). Wang (2019) emphasizes the role of strategic negotiation in gaining independence and purpose as entrepreneurs. Similar findings were obtained by Hundera et al. (2019) when studying Ethiopian women entrepreneurs' role conflicts.

Conflicts experienced by women play a critical role in the development of female entrepreneurship, directing the search for opportunities (Lewis et al., 2016). In stressful situations, affective aspects (feelings, emotions, mood, temperament, and passions) influence their understanding of the scenario and define cognitive behaviors (strategies, decisions, and thinking) for coping and overcoming as well (Thagard & Nerb, 2002).

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Goleman (1995) explains that emotions are manifested in different ways and the responses come from strong energy that motivates the individual, which can have a positive or negative effect.

Despite the recognition of the diversity of pressures, obstacles, and difficulties that entrepreneurs face, studies that organize and classify the threats related to these themes are still rare and barely connected to corresponding overcoming behaviors regarding such threats. Table 1 summarizes the threats, coping mechanisms, and their classifications, along with corresponding authors. Conducting such studies, particularly those related to women entrepreneurs, is urgent. Thus, we move forward in this direction.

Table 1. Threats and coping strategies categorization summary.

Category	Threats	Author	Coping mech	Author
Affective	Mood, feelings	Lewis et al. (2016)	Cognitive behavior	Thagard and Nerb (2002); Goleman (1995)
Personal	Role conflict	Welsh et al. (2021); Muhammad et al. (2022); Young et al. (2019)	Family support	Tundui and Tundui (2021); Wolf and Frese (2018)
Patriarchy	Financing	Orser et al. (2000); Nadolnyak and Hartarska (2021)		
	Stereotype	Wahdiniwaty and Rustam (2019); Gupta et al. (2009); BarNir (2021)	Networking	Jaim (2021); Dal Mas and Paoloni (2020); Venugopal and Viswanathan (2021)
			Male vigor	Moudrý and Thaichon (2020)
			Negotiation	Wang (2019); Hundera et al. (2019)

Note. Organized by the authors.

METHOD

The choice to use a qualitative approach is due to the exploratory nature, objective, and specificities of this study (Pettigrew, 1992). Data were collected through interviews conducted at the entrepreneurs' workplaces and based on a semi-structured script. The script was organized a priori based on theoretical constructs covering content related to ideas of starting a business, initiatives taken in the identification of opportunities, ways to address issues inherent to personal and family obligations, experiences related to threats, and overcoming behaviors adopted to face such threats.

Participants

For data collection, the following criteria were initially developed: the participants should be owners of micro and small companies since women entrepreneurs are the ones who feel most threatened by changes in the business environment. These women have few resources to combat threats and are the most vulnerable when a threat materializes, which is the object of this study. The service and commerce sectors were also chosen because they are sectors in the final stage of the value chain flow, that is, direct sales to the consumer.

After identifying the criteria, the research proposal was presented to the *Rede Mulher Empreendedora* (RME) (Women Entrepreneur Network), a Brazilian non-profit organization with the mission to empower female entrepreneurs, guaranteeing their financial and decision-making independence within their businesses and their lives. This organization has 100,000 affiliates across Brazil. The organization was asked to recommend possible participants covering at least 10 Brazilian states so that the survey would have greater breadth in terms of diversity. The RME ambassadors from the 10 states recommended 70 women entrepreneurs in accordance with the criteria established by the sampling criterion of regional representativeness and the saturation indicated by Biernacki and Waldorf (1981).

After sending the emails, 65 women entrepreneurs agreed to participate. Regarding the origin of the interviewees, 7 women are from Belém/PR, 6 from Curitiba/PR, 5 from Porto Alegre/RS, 6 from Rio de Janeiro/RJ, 6 from Belo Horizonte/MG, 6 live in Brasília/DF, 7 live in Natal/RN, 6 from Salvador/BA, 6 from Anápolis/GO, and 10 interviewees from São Paulo/SP, totaling 65 interviewees.

The research protocol was submitted to the National Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Nove de Julho, CAAE: 67162722.2.0000.5511. The participants signed the Free Consent Form and participated in the research spontaneously.

Most interviewees hold at least a college degree (94%). In many cases, their college degree was unrelated to the nature of their businesses. Many of these entrepreneurs took graduate-level courses in business management. The predominant age group ranged from 23 to 40 years old. While 36% of the businesses started between 2015 and 2018, the average founding year was 2007. As for marital status, 37% (24) are single, 55.3% (36) are married, and 7.7% (5) are divorced.

Data collection instrument

A semi-structured script was organized based on the literature to support the theory of the constructs involved in the research (Table 2).

Table 2. Profile of women entrepreneurs.

Place of birth	Age group	Education	Marital status	Partners
Locality	Experience in the field	Business time	Number of employees	Field of activity
About business				
• History • Before you undertook your business, what were your previous experiences? • When undertaking, how did your family and friends react? • Did anyone influence the creation of your business? • How did you come up with the idea? When did you get the idea for this venture?		• How did people react to your idea? • Did you take long to decide to create the venture? • How long did it take from the idea to the opening of the business? • Did you reach out to people to exchange ideas or make decisions (family, friends, leaders)?		
Research questions	**Analytical category**	**Analysis elements**	**Support authors**	
What types of threats did they experience, what triggered them, and how did they deal with them?	Types of threats and reliance more on affective and/or cognitive aspects.	• Threats from the environment/degree of hostility • Political and governmental contradictions, expropriations • Corruption • Legal restrictions and resources • Preconception, field of activity, gender	Welsh et al. (2021); Anggadwita et al. (2017); Ahl (2006); Ahl and Marlow (2012); Baron (2008); De Bruin et al. (2007); Langowitz and Minniti (2007); Thagard and Nerb (2002); Coleman (2000); Cliff (1998); Goleman (1995)	
What are the behavioral actions and reactions experienced in the course of adversities and difficulties encountered?	Behaviors considering affective and cognitive aspects.	• Human capital • Share capital • Psychological capital	Welsh et al. (2021); Anggadwita et al. (2017); Ahl (2006); Ahl and Marlow (2012); Baron (2008); De Bruin et al. (2007); Langowitz and Minniti (2007); Thagard and Nerb (2002); Coleman (2000); Cliff (1998); Goleman (1995)	
What are the types of threats experienced by entrepreneurs who were influenced by being women, location, field of activity, prejudices, among other reasons?	Personal threats, threats in business, and other types of threats.	• Consider the: • Cultural aspects • Social aspects • Environmental aspects • Economic aspects	Hechavarría and Ingram (2019); Bertolami et al. (2018); Colette et al. (2017); Fetterolf (2017); Gupta et al. (2009); Robson and Obeng (2008); Baron (2008); Langowitz and Minniti (2007); Ahl (2006); Hunt and Levie (2003); Carter et al. (2001); Brush (1992)	

Note. Organized by the authors.

Design and data analysis

After finishing the interviews and transcribing their contents, we classified and categorized the data through the content analysis method (Bardin, 2011). We sought to meet the research requirements of identifying patterns among the components of the studied phenomenon and the theoretical assumptions raised. Qualitative research software, as Atlas.ti (Friese, 2014), supported the data analysis. In the first stage, codes and categories were created a priori, based on theoretical concepts, in a deductive way to represent the meanings related to aspects linked to threats and overcoming behaviors.

Based on this demarcation, analyses of the interviews followed the guidelines of Bardin (2011): (1) Pre-analysis: transcription of all 65 interviews, which allowed for the reading and organization of the material, in addition to defining of the analysis corpus. All 65 documents (one for each interview) were inserted into the software for data analysis. (2) Exploratory stage: in this stage, lexicographic analysis was conducted, along with the identification of the semantic classes of the data. Additionally, factor analysis and descending hierarchical classification were performed, followed by the integration of these analyses.

This integration generated three data clusters that contributed to the analysis of the threats experienced by the entrepreneurs: (a) the first cluster, named 'affective,' groups issues related to the history of the entrepreneurs, whose reports brought their experiences, difficulties, obstacles, and actions when facing business and family; (b) the second cluster, named 'people,' groups reports based on values, emotions, different family conflicts, partners, personal and professional life, reactions, and the very threats experienced; (c) the third cluster, named 'patriarchy,' groups aspects related to the work context.

Use of instruments and data

Through Atlas.ti, the data were categorized into groups of convergence and semantic similarity, transforming raw data into elements of a typology (Woolf & Silver, 2017). The categories used in the software were previously identified in the literature review and in the results of the lexicographic analysis, namely: (1) role conflicts threats, (2) affective threats and (3) patriarchy threats. Table 3 shows the categories and their associated codes leading to the threat typology.

Table 3. Identified categories and linked codes to build the typology.

| Category	Linked codes
Affective threats	Acting under pressure (from time and hostile scenarios)
	Insecurity about competence
People — role conflicts threats	Marriage issues (children, spouses)
	Work overload (home/business)
	Age-related issues
Patriarchy threats — context of work	Chauvinism, prejudice, harassment

Note. Research results.

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A comparison was made between the findings from the data and the categories found in the literature. The interviewees' statements were compared with the categories and their codes to deepen the exploration of the details of the categories. This process occurred through lexical-semantic analysis of similarity, complementarity, diversity, and divergence of meanings to meet the criteria of homogeneity, inclusiveness, objectivity, consistency, and reliability — key aspects of the research question, objectives, and elements used in content analysis.

The definition of the threat categories considered how they semantically interrelate. Figure 1, created with Atlas.ti, shows the relationships between them.
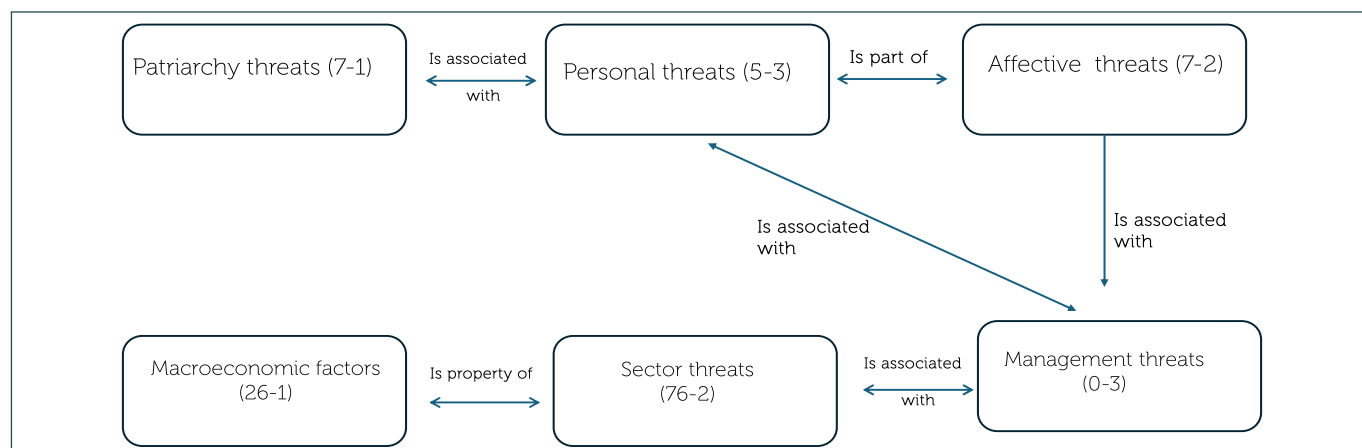
Source: Research results.

Figure 1. Semantic interrelationship of the threat categories.

The pre-analysis procedure and the exploratory and interpretation stages were followed by the identification of the overcoming behaviors adopted by the subjects. We defined that the codes should illustrate the behaviors associated with each category of threat. In this way, codes and categories emerged from the data analysis, inductively.

We noticed that overcoming behavior is related to the strategies and tactics used by the entrepreneurs that result in the psychological comfort and in practices to face threats. The following categories of overcoming behavior emerged (Table 4): (1) use of the male network, (2) dialogue and negotiation, and (3) resilience, the support and comfort for understanding the causes of adverse situations arising from different fronts of threats (Irigaray et al., 2017). This resilience is flexible and demonstrates the emotional control of the interviewees.

Table 4. Threat and overcoming categories and linked codes.

Threat categories	Overcoming categories	Linked codes
Patriarchy threats Sector threats	Use of the male vigor net	Combating chauvinism, prejudice, and harassment, strength in negotiation with banks and customers.
Personal threats Affective threats	Dialogue and negotiation	Negotiation regarding household chores, seeking support from family members, seeking personal and professional life balance.
Patriarchate threats Personal threats Affective threats Management threats	Resilience	Emotional control, flexibility to adapt to the context, understanding the factors that can be changed, and do not acting under pressure.

Note. Research results.

In the next section, we will discuss these categories using extracts from the interviewees' statements that support the overall findings and discussion.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of four main categories of threats and the corresponding behaviors adopted by the entrepreneurs to overcome these threats. All data acquired through the interviews are used in this article. The following sections describe in detail the findings from this analysis.

Threats

We identified four categories of threats: role conflicts, affective, patriarchy, and business.

Role conflicts

One of the main threats experienced by women in their businesses relates to the conflict of roles, with overwork, household chores, and jealousy or lack of support from their husbands. Extracts from their interviews illustrate such conflicting situations:

"The double and even triple daily work shifts we face are complicated, as we need to work and still be a mother, housewife, and wife. One thing that bothers me a lot is ... not being able to go to my son's parent-teacher meetings. So, I understand it as a threat" (36 years old, married, with children, legal services business).

"... you have to be beautiful, to take care of your health, to take care of the house, the husband, the company, so it's a giant threat. I'm working here 23 hours a day" (30 years old, married, with children, sports fieldhouse rental business).

"The women's story is very difficult. We embraced many things and did not stray from others. So, the emotional impacts that I have, it is because we end up assuming: two young daughters and work. Time management for me is the most difficult thing ... I feel that at some point it can paralyze some production activity" (37 years old, married, with children, internet tech business).

"The drama of the entrepreneurial woman is to reconcile professional and personal life. Finding the balance in this equation is a big challenge" (36 years old, married, with children, accounting services business).

The balance between house chores and work activities, so desired by women, is often not effective when they become entrepreneurs. The roles of wife, mother, and head of household overburden them by adding to their obligations as entrepreneurs. Thus, they have continuous fatigue, discouragement, and stress. Not surprisingly, their condition in the family context is usually considered less active than that of men (Wilson et al., 2007). Ahl (2006) reinforces this observation by showing the tendency to return to the idea that women are in the background and that, as Achtenhagen and Welter (2003) propose, family and household responsibilities are the responsibility of women.

"... the difficulty of any entrepreneurial woman is her own time because no matter how modern the couples may be, it seems that it is always the woman's mission to go to bed while thinking about cooking lunch the next day, taking the food out of the freezer ahead of time, because she is the one supposed to provide food and comfort to the people of the house" (53 years old, married, with children, fashion business).

"... a threat is how to balance all our roles because we women ... are the link in the family, the link in the house. Because a man is unlikely to arrive at his workplace and say, 'Today I need to stay home because my son is sick'" (37 years old, married, with children, education services business).

Affective threats

Following the integrative approach of Baron (2008), in which affect is understood as an important factor in entrepreneurial behavior, the recurring situations of time pressure, commitments related to social roles, and hostile scenarios can impose affective threats. For some of the entrepreneurs, the time and emotional energy demanded by their company created feelings of guilt in relation to their role as a mother, which added another emotional burden (Lewis, 2017). These reactions can play a critical role in the behavior of these women, considering that commitments related to social roles contribute to emotional responses that can portray a false image of professional insecurity and incompetence (Baron, 2008). Some statements exemplify these ideas:

"In 2015, I had burnout at level five. I did not speak for 45 days and spent seven months at home, away from my business. It was stress when the crisis broke out" (42 years old, married, with children, education services business).

"The professional threat comes with emotional pressure. At first, I would have tears in my eyes and wanted to cry. Therefore, I would hide it, but now I know that there are certain moments when tears come to me because I am emotional. I cry a little, then I control myself and I accept that. I was very ashamed, and then I thought, 'Is a man going to cry? You won't cry'" (53 years old, divorced, with children, gambling business).

"I cry. I cry a lot. ... I cannot share this problem because I cannot make everyone feel shaken. And that is very bad for me. In the last two years, I gained 22 kg ... due to stress. I lost a little faith, despite having conviction and believing and knowing what I believe. It makes you give up" (36 years old, married, with children, furniture store business).

McClelland (1987) states that competence insecurity refers to skills and dispositions that go beyond an individual's cognitive skills, including self-control, self-recognition, and social skills. In other words, competencies

can be influenced by affective aspects and, depending on the situation, refer to positive or negative outcomes. The narrated contexts clearly demonstrate the participants' insecurity regarding their skills.

"A psychological threat of becoming incapable of feeling that you can't be in charge of the business, of needing a shoulder, of not being able to handle it, of needing someone to help. My husband used to say, 'You need a stronger person who can say what is necessary'" (29 years old, married, with a child, education service business).

"I think the issue of insecurity is the worst of all. Sometimes there is a woman with great potential who knows much more than a man, but even so, she feels fragile and cannot show who she really is" (38 years old, single, technology services business).

"Sometimes I feel like running away because people don't value us. In reality, I think I don't feel capable … It seems that I don't know things" (52 years old, married, with children, architecture services business).

Patriarchy threats

Situations involving male chauvinism and gender bias were reported by all 65 entrepreneurs, in all 10 regions of the country. Regardless of location, this behavior of the male audience falls under the category we named 'patriarchy threats.' For Nogueira (2018) and Roomi et al. (2018), patriarchy is a form of social organization in which relationships are governed by two principles: women are hierarchically subordinate to men, and young people are hierarchically subordinate to older men. The patriarchs of the community thus determine women's career choices.

This tradition of male supremacy and of the elders, which devalues women and keeps them in the care of the home, as a mother and breeder, dates back to Ancient History and the Middle Ages. Such a perspective has two components: (1) cognitive, which endorses categorical generalization, and (2) dispositional, which involves hostility, and which influences discriminatory behaviors (Jones, 1973). These aspects were reported in the interviews, as shown below:

"There are environments that are masculine. When I opened the company, they came to me saying, 'Who are the male directors?' So, I said 'I am the founder and the only owner.' You are not enough; it is supposed to have someone else if you are not a man" (25 years old, single, consulting services business).

"Male chauvinism is still very present. Women go through so many things, so many hostile situations. Then, when they have a business, they are discredited, they have no reputation. I face this difficulty every day" (29 years old, single, car repair services business).

"I can say that I already suffered a lot of prejudice from construction workers. I arrive at a construction site, and in the beginning, almost nobody respected me. Nowadays, I know how to deal with them very well. But they have that prejudice at the beginning that I'm a woman" (52 years old, married, with children, architecture services business).

Harassment, on the other hand, is understood as an "abusive conduct that manifests itself notably through behaviors, words, acts, and gestures, which can cause damage to a person's personality, dignity, or physical or psychological integrity, putting life or employment at risk or resulting in degradation in the work climate" (Hirigoyen, 1998, p. 55). The author also states that harassment exposes women entrepreneurs to unwanted situations in the exercise of their activities and can produce negative emotional behaviors, in addition to influencing decisions and/or behavior in business. Some statements are illustrative:

"The first threat I received, I think, was the question of my physique, that was something that bothered me because I have a body … I have a thick thigh …, so I think the first threat is that you know how to show that you don't, it's just your body … because the first thing that comes is that look … so for me, that was always the first threat" (41 years old, single, accounting services business).

"Pickup lines. For example, you are going to sell a product or present the company and you end up suffering a little, like: 'But, don't you want to go out for dinner?'" (30 years old, single, media services business).

"It is still very difficult for women to face male chauvinism and get their space in the job market. In addition to being competent, women must always be well-dressed, looking good, good make-up, and looking happy. Women always need to be aware of the limits between simple praise/courtesy and harassment. The line that separates each other is very thin" (36 years old, married, with children, legal services business).

This category, threats from patriarchy, reinforces some types of threats experienced in business, such

as corruption, informality, and aspects of financial support. The following statements illustrate the category:

"In the car repair and maintenance service industry, there is a lot of corruption. They work on parts, deceiving the customer. The system itself created an obstacle to earning money, and that is why, in Brazil, we can buy a car, but we cannot maintain it" (29 years old, single, car repair services business).

"My business suffers a lot from the informal ones. People are not concerned with a company, with invoices, with a regularized business. They are after price, under a limited quality. At the time, the customer says, 'I got it for 40% less than your value. Why is yours more expensive?'" (36 years old, married, with children, furniture factory business).

"Another difficulty was dealing with the banks, no support, and a lot of bureaucracy. Opening a business where 98% of the customers are men and not playing poker ... that didn't give me credibility. I heard many phrases like: 'She won't last three months in the market!'" (53 years old, divorced, with children, gambling business)

"Financing is always a threat, because you want to do so much, but you have to wait for the return. You have to wait for the company's profit so that you can reinvest in it" (34 years old, divorced, tech services business).

From the above, these reported threats are constant in Brazil, although results of international surveys also highlight some of these difficulties, especially in emerging economies. Miles et al. (1978), Yasuda (2005), Robson and Obeng (2008), and Moreno et al. (2019) identified these elements as problems faced at various stages of organizations, including the need for public policies that recognize women as an integral part of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Colette et al., 2017). In the study by Ali and Shabir (2017), corruption and obstacles also harm women, but Godwin et al. (2006) argue that although entrepreneurs face obstacles in guaranteeing access to resources for their ventures, one of the strategies to overcome such threats is to collaborate with a man.

Overcoming behaviors

The literature defines overcoming behaviors as coping strategies by entrepreneurs to minimize the risks arising from the identified threats. We identified three categories of overcoming behaviors adopted by the interviewed entrepreneurs: the use of the masculine network, dialogue and negotiation, and resilience.

Use of the masculine network

The use of the masculine network refers to leveraging masculine energy — the representativeness of the man in society as a protector, a representative in situations, and a family provider. It is related to the change in strategy of the entrepreneurs and/or their perspicacity in realizing that the male presence as part of the company can mean their survival in the market. The following statements illustrate the category:

"At various times, I realized that some negotiations were only consolidated after my husband was involved, especially if the interlocutor was also a man. Eventually, we stayed on speakerphone, and the treatment was different" (33 years old, married with children, clothing store business).

"Although my husband is fantastic and helps me at certain times, this is a crutch for me, a crutch for my business, and I feel very threatened by it. Something that I lived, for example, in my banking days: many times, I would close contracts with investment insurance clients, and they would say: 'But, are you the one who came? Where's the male manager?'" (32 years old, married, with children, training school business).

For the use of the masculine network, Cromie and Burley (1992) noted that female entrepreneurs tend to trust male colleagues as their primary contact and same-sex colleagues for everything else, while male entrepreneurs tend to trust both male and female colleagues. Partnering with men provides legitimacy in predominantly male contexts and helps increase access to resources (Godwin et al., 2006). One of the reasons for this ambiguous relationship was identified by Klerk and Verreynne (2017). According to the authors, female entrepreneurs tend to rely more on the male contact network because there is a conflict between cooperation and competition with other female entrepreneurs.

"What helped me to overcome everyday challenges was trying to understand the male universe. My business is a very masculine environment, but I was too naïve to realize why I was missing so many deals. The frustration came and my brother alerted me about male chauvinism. He helped me in a big contract sale, and I've learned the right approach to adopt" (32 years old, single, consulting services business).

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"I am the owner of the business, but it came from my husband's craftsmanship as a woodworker. He only builds the furniture. I am the one who created the business model, sales, marketing, and everything in the company, even the brand and visual identity have to do with me. He only works with the orders I give him. However, if he is not with me to close the deal, nothing happens. It is not enough just coming to take the measurements; he needs to introduce himself as my business partner" (36 years old, married, customized furniture business).

"Men in my location are too chauvinistic. Women, they have to be submissive, always. When I started working in the coffee business and I had to go to the farms to buy the coffee beans, the farmer always asked where the male owner of the business was. When I said it was me, they didn't like that answer. Therefore, I decided to take an employee with me to make things easier, and he helped me in the male representation to close the deal. These are embarrassing situations ... there is no need to experience all this wear and tear" (35 years old, married, coffee shop business).

Dialogue and negotiation
The use of the network of contacts as a powerful weapon for entrepreneurs to overcome the barriers encountered represents the best example of dialogue and negotiation as typical behavior adopted by women entrepreneurs to overcome some gender-related threats. Entrepreneurs seek the support of other entrepreneurs (contact networks, entrepreneur networks) for psychological support or for practical solutions (Alison et al., 2010).

In addition to networks, female entrepreneurs often resort to mentors, who contribute to the development of transformational leadership skills and personal and professional development, thus leading to business expansion (Robin & Timothy, 2015). In the particular case of technology entrepreneurs, incubators and accelerators that play this role seek to minimize the gender effect on access to resources (Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018). Such contact networks can also be informal. The atmosphere of camaraderie and mutual trust built in these networks reinforces the resilience and determination of entrepreneurs to overcome obstacles (Wrigley-Asante, 2018). Some extracts from the interviews serve as evidence:

"Within the nutrition segment, despite having many women who choose to just sell, most leaders are men. Then, I said, this has to change, and I started

to engage with female entrepreneurship. I met the Rede Mulher Empreendedora (Women Entrepreneur Network) organization. I found the proposal very cool" (35 years old, single, nutrition services business).

"I am always looking for practical solutions to the challenges we face. I look for support in multifunctional teams, negotiating with everybody, sharing our difficulties, but also the benefits and how our actions can influence the hardest decisions" (30 years old, single, digital services business).

"My basic learning came from my mother. She had always been a strong woman and she taught me that I can do whatever I want and that every woman has the right to be the owner of her own life. I've learned that we can conquer the world with a good conversation... Look into people's eyes and say: 'You are a man, and I am a woman, but we are all humans.' And things start to work out" (34 years old, divorced, two children, tech services business).

Dialogue and negotiation also refer to the family universe. In this context, women entrepreneurs seek dialogue and negotiation with husbands and children to balance the accumulation of tasks between home and business and to gain support from their husbands.

"At home, there is this prejudice. He took a long time to get used to my way, because I have a friend who is supportive. She even said to me: Wait, let him come to help too ... Many men are not prepared for that" (36 years old, married, with children, nutrition pharmaceutical business).

Resilience
Coping with prejudice and harassment involves the resilience of women entrepreneurs. Resilience is related to their ability to deal with threats and adversities, overcoming obstacles, or resisting pressure without experiencing a psychological, emotional, or physical breakdown. Because they are resilient, they seek to find strategic solutions to face and overcome adversity. The level of reciprocity and trust between these women is an important factor that explains and keeps these networks active (Wrigley-Asante, 2018).

"I try to understand the culture of society a little, a moment of transition. We have to educate people. It will take a little while to remove these prejudices, but then I make a point of correcting people" (29 years old, single, tech services business).

"I learn and help other women entrepreneurs because many of them feel the same as I do. Meditation helped me a lot, as well as spirituality and resilience. In order to achieve what I wanted, I had to be flexible. It doesn't come the way we want and when we want. Thus, I started focusing on more productive things and not caring too much about the fact that I was a woman ahead of a consulting company" (35 years old, single, nutrition and network marketing business).

Although Irigaray et al. (2017) state that negative experiences are inevitable for anyone, there are events that can be perceived as a danger by some people, while for others, they represent only a challenge or opportunity.

"I have already felt threatened, a fool who talks about mechanics. So, since he sees me like this, I pretend to be. I learned to have this emotional control of understanding at that moment that he is seeing me like this, and I am unable to change this image. So, I will pretend, I will leave, but I will not return, I will not send the proposal" (29 years old, single, car repair services business).

"I have this feeling that it will be alright. My coach said I am very resilient and that if I were a war soldier, I would be very strong because of the issues I faced with my business. A lot of stress, a lot of prejudice, and a lot of competitiveness, women included. Nevertheless, I keep moving trying to understand the situation and trying to put myself in their position to see both sides" (40 years old, married, management training, and education business).

Much of an entrepreneur's determination happens as she gains social status, becomes more respected, and redefines her business identity (García & Welter, 2013), reinforcing her ability to overcome gender barriers.

"I never thought I could achieve all I have today. I come from a black family, very poor. Since we were little kids, we learned to fight hard in a world full of prejudice. However, I grew, my business is successful, and I am respected and happy. I work on the board of a multinational company, composed of 80% men and no black people" (42 years old, married, marketing consulting business).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
Contribution

In order to deepen the understanding of women's entrepreneurship, this research aimed to identify the threats faced by women in leading their businesses and to identify and understand the behaviors they use to overcome such threats.

Figure 2 shows the main types of threats and overcoming behaviors found in this research. The threats were classified into a typology divided into two groups. The first group, formed by the category's threats from patriarchy and business, is related to the context. The second group, formed by the categories conflict of roles and affective, refers to individual aspects of entrepreneurs.
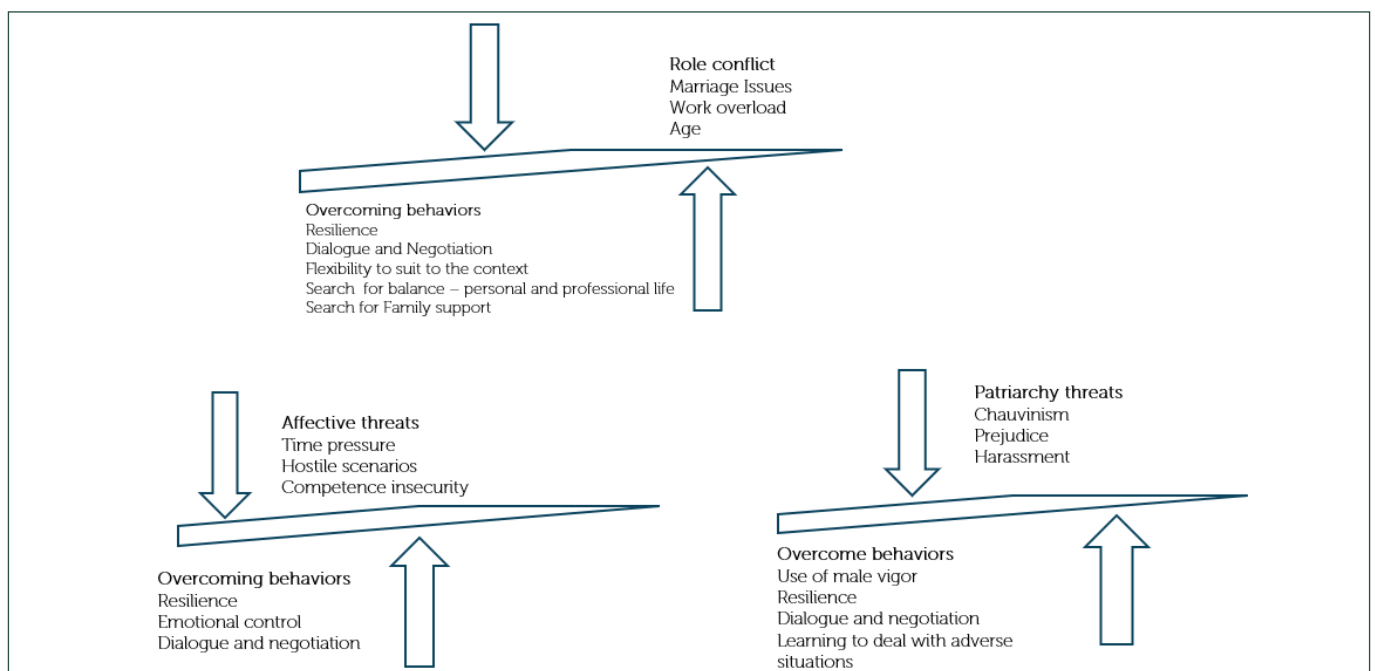
Source: Research results.

Figure 2. Typology of threats and overcoming in entrepreneurship from women.

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Regarding the group of threats originating from the context (threats from patriarchy and business), we identified that many aspects of the environments in which entrepreneurship occurs happen in contexts built by the behavior of the entrepreneur. It is not by chance that contextualization has been identified as important and necessary for research in entrepreneurship (Watson, 2013; Welter, 2011; Welter & Gartner, 2016).

As for the group of threats related to the affective and behavioral aspects of female entrepreneurs (threats of conflict of roles and affective), this research brings, among its contributions, an integrative approach that combines micro, macro, individual, and environmental aspects, with emotional states that shape perceptions and behaviors involved in overcoming threats.

Among the overcoming behaviors, three types were found: dialogue and negotiation, the use of the masculine vigor network, and resilience. These behaviors help women face the above-mentioned threats, whether by attenuating the power and impact of the threat, creating defense mechanisms to avoid its recurrence, or overcoming the threat completely.

Implications

This research sheds light on one of the persistent black boxes of entrepreneurship. We present how rejection and overcoming limitations occur, such as those represented by threats. The two processes are captured by the concept of refusal to enact limitations, already characterized in the literature on entrepreneurial bricolage (Baker & Nelson, 2005) but not yet demystified. The literature explicitly recognizes the importance and need to explain how the phenomenon occurs. The fact is that, in a wide variety of situations and types of entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs face limitations that are sometimes even considered impediments, and yet, they manage to overcome them successfully. The reality of the 65 entrepreneurs studied reflects much of this.

This study contributes significantly to the growing body of research on female entrepreneurship by identifying categories of threats unique to women entrepreneurs. The findings enrich existing theories by providing a contextual perspective on how sexism, gender prejudice, and societal norms influence entrepreneurial activities. These insights highlight the need for further theoretical developments, particularly frameworks that integrate gender-specific challenges with broader entrepreneurial concepts. The identification of contextual factors underscores the dynamic and non-uniform nature of entrepreneurial threats, advancing the understanding of how personal and external conditions shape entrepreneurial experiences.

Also, another contribution of this study lies in the identification of distinct categories of threats derived from the qualitative findings. These categories provide a valuable framework that can guide future research aimed at exploring each category in greater detail. By examining the specific conditions under which these threats manifest, researchers can uncover the underlying factors that influence their occurrence and intensity. Additionally, understanding the conditioning factors, such as personal characteristics, sectoral contexts, or societal expectations, can further illuminate the dynamics of these threats.

The findings also carry important political implications, particularly for policymakers and institutions advocating gender equality in entrepreneurship. By revealing the structural barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, this study highlights the need for policy interventions, such as funding initiatives targeted at female-led businesses and educational campaigns to combat gender bias. Policymakers could also establish legal protections against discriminatory practices in entrepreneurial environments, fostering a more inclusive and equitable business ecosystem. Advocacy groups and public institutions have a vital role in addressing the systemic issues that exacerbate these threats.

As a practical implication of this study, we have identified three types of threats to women entrepreneurs against which public policy could act more firmly to minimize or eliminate. The action of public policies seems more evident in the group of contextual threats (threats from patriarchy and business), but even in those allocated to the group of threats more linked to the individual (threats of conflict of roles and affective), governments can take action. For example, public policies can recognize the dual workload of women, who typically have more responsibilities within the family, and create mechanisms that alleviate the threat of role conflict.

Like other minority groups, prejudice and discrimination are highly influenced by societal norms and cultural aspects that are not easily changed. A shift to a more inclusive environment requires government intervention through proper support for social programs, incentives for independent organizations, and a clear regulatory agenda that balances the context and conditions for the inclusion of minority groups, including women (Hechavarría & Ingram, 2019). We expect this study to inspire public policies that facilitate access to public resources and minimize the effects of gender bias embedded in society.

Also, in terms of practical implications, the overcoming behaviors found can serve as inspiration for women entrepreneurs, who can adopt them in situations of threat. The highlighted overcoming behaviors can also

be incorporated into training or consulting programs for entrepreneurs.

As a social implication of this study, as stated by several interviewees, one of the major benefits of joining the Women Entrepreneur Network is knowing that they are not alone in their feelings. As they share their experiences, they realize their problems and constraints are more common than imagined. Although the sense of belonging and the empathy created by these stories do not solve the issues they face on a daily basis, they find their inner strength to feed their determination to move forward and fight against gender bias in the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Wrigley-Asante, 2018). We believe this and other similar studies, when properly publicized, help spread the word among women facing the same circumstances, empowering them to stand by their beliefs, play a relevant role in the economic environment, and serve as a sign of support and encouragement not to give up but to persist in their entrepreneurial endeavors.

Limitations

Although the academic field has only recently awakened to the topic of female entrepreneurial threats, most common studies are configured as a contextual aspect necessary to understand everyday initiatives and the broader trajectory of entrepreneurial activities related to an organization. Threats are thus established as a theme to be explored in depth in future studies on entrepreneurship from a contextual perspective. A finding highlighted in this article is that contextual aspects do not manifest uniformly for any entrepreneur. In addition to the obvious variation in their manifestation due to differences in specific contextual aspects — such as different sectors of activity, types of business, and location — the very condition of the entrepreneur shapes such manifestations. Being a female entrepreneur is associated with a list of specific threats.

This is the case, for example, with sexism and gender prejudice faced by all 65 women entrepreneurs studied. This contribution to entrepreneurship research originally applies to the universe of the 65 women portrayed here, but future studies could explore other possible demographic characteristics of entrepreneurs in general. In addition to gender differences, other possibilities for comparison could include young versus older entrepreneurs, novice versus experienced entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs with and without personal and professional influence, or different levels of networking. The way these 65 entrepreneurs overcome threats — such as the rejection of social norms that impose behavioral expectations on women entrepreneurs or the rejection of limitations on entrepreneurial initiatives led by women — are promising themes for future studies. Such aspects reflect the

challenges faced by these female entrepreneurs, who are often underestimated in their ability to navigate complexities and overcome each challenge.

Future research

This research marks the beginning of a deeper exploration of this topic and opens perspectives for new studies, such as developing a scale of threats in entrepreneurship to measure the intensity of these threats and the strategies used to overcome them. We also suggest measuring the influence of these interactions on the work satisfaction and life satisfaction of women entrepreneurs.

Building on this study, future research should explore each identified category of threats in greater depth to uncover the conditions under which they arise and their varying impacts. Developing a scale to measure the intensity of these threats and the strategies employed to overcome them would represent a significant methodological advancement. Furthermore, comparative studies examining demographic variables — such as age, experience, or access to networks — would enrich the understanding of entrepreneurial challenges. Future investigations could also assess the influence of these threats on work satisfaction, life satisfaction, and entrepreneurial performance, providing a comprehensive view of their long-term implications.

Future research could also delve deeper into each of the identified categories of threats, exploring them from various perspectives and contexts. Researchers could investigate how these threats manifest across different sectors, regions, or entrepreneurial stages, providing a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs. Furthermore, studies could focus on identifying the conditioning factors that influence the intensity and impact of these threats. These factors could include personal characteristics, such as resilience or experience, as well as external factors, like industry norms or geographical location. Such investigations would enrich the theoretical framework and provide actionable insights for developing targeted interventions to support female entrepreneurs.

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BAR, Braz. Adm. Rev., 22(1), e240157, 2025.

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