

She Builds, She Sustains: A Qualitative Study on Values-Driven Enterprise Among Women Entrepreneurs

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ABSTRACT:

Mainstream entrepreneurship research remains anchored in individualistic, profit-centered models that overlook the inner psychological and moral resources women draw on to sustain their ventures. This qualitative study addresses that gap by examining how character strengths and subconscious moral motivation shape sustainable entrepreneurship among 12 women founders in India, drawn from Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities across the beauty, manufacturing, education, and wellness sectors. Using a feminist interpretive paradigm and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, three themes emerged: an inner compass of integrity and authenticity; moral motivation rooted in intrinsic desires for social and environmental good; and quiet strengths of perseverance, humility, and emotional regulation. These findings extend feminist psychological theory and self-determination theory by showing how relational, care-based ethics and intrinsic motivation, not just structural or economic factors, sustain women-led enterprises in a patriarchal socio-cultural context. The study offers a strengths-based framework for entrepreneurship support programs seeking to affirm women's psychological resources and ethical commitments rather than impose generic, individualistic business models.

Keywords: Women entrepreneurs; Sustainable entrepreneurship; Character strengths; Subconscious motivation; Feminist psychology; Ethical leadership; India

1. Introduction

In recent years, women's entrepreneurship has emerged as a powerful avenue for fostering inclusive economic growth, social innovation, and community empowerment (Jamali, 2009; Jennings & Brush, 2013). Yet, the psychological and relational dimensions of women's entrepreneurial motivations remain underrepresented in mainstream research, which often centers on Western, individualistic, and masculinized conceptions of entrepreneurial success (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Calás, Smircich, &

Bourne, 2009). These frameworks frequently overlook the ways in which women integrate personal values, care ethics, and relational agency into the process of building and sustaining enterprises (Eddleston & Powell, 2008).

This gap is particularly visible in contexts like India, where women entrepreneurs navigate layered socio-cultural expectations related to gender, family, and community roles (Lahiri-Dutt, 2021). While Indian women are increasingly participating in entrepreneurial activities, their journeys are shaped not only by

economic aspirations but also by deeply embedded values and psychological strengths, often forged through caring relationships, socialization in collectivist settings, and ethical commitments to their families and communities (Datta & Gailey, 2012). These influences, which are not always consciously articulated, may nonetheless play a decisive role in shaping their business trajectories.

Emerging from this context is a critical research question: *How do Indian women entrepreneurs construct and sustain values-driven businesses that reflect their internal psychological strengths and gendered social experiences?* Addressing this question requires moving beyond instrumental or resource-based explanations of entrepreneurship to include the inner motivational and emotional landscapes that underpin women's entrepreneurial behavior (Henry, Foss, & Ahl, 2016).

This paper responds to this call by exploring the interplay of character strengths, subconscious motivation, and sustainable orientation among Indian women entrepreneurs. Specifically, we examine how constructs such as perseverance, integrity, empathy, and self-efficacy—drawn from both psychological literature (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and grounded field interviews—manifest in women's business practices. The study also draws on the concepts of sustainable perceived desirability and sustainable self-efficacy (Sullivan & Meek, 2012), recognizing that women's motivations for entrepreneurship are often interwoven with a desire to “do good,” maintain work-life balance, and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Using a feminist psychological lens, we analyze qualitative data from in-depth interviews with women entrepreneurs across sectors such as education, wellness, manufacturing, and services. Their narratives reveal that business creation is not merely an act of economic agency, but one of relational and moral expression—where personal values, upbringing, and cultural expectations converge. Feminist theories of entrepreneurship and relational agency guide our analysis, particularly the work of scholars who advocate for more nuanced, culturally situated

understandings of women's enterprise (Calás et al., 2009; Brush, de Bruin, & Welter, 2009).

In situating this research within feminist psychological inquiry, we aim to make two contributions. First, we extend the discourse on women's entrepreneurship by illuminating how psychological strengths and subconscious value orientations—not just structural factors—play a formative role in sustaining enterprises. Second, we contribute to culturally grounded feminist research by exploring how Indian women entrepreneurs navigate, internalize, and sometimes challenge traditional gender roles through business.

This study provides a textured understanding of women's entrepreneurship as both a psychological and sociocultural phenomenon. It moves beyond binary framings of empowerment or constraint, instead showing how women exercise agency within limits, often blending care, sustainability, and ambition in ways that complicate dominant entrepreneurial archetypes.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

1. Feminist Psychological Lens on Women's Entrepreneurship

Feminist psychology critically examines how gendered experiences shape individual identity, agency, and meaning-making, especially in domains historically defined by masculine norms, such as entrepreneurship (Worell & Johnson, 1997; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Within this tradition, relational approaches to selfhood emphasize the embeddedness of women's identities in social relationships, family expectations, and communal responsibilities (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1997). These perspectives challenge individualistic, competitive, and profit-centered paradigms that dominate conventional entrepreneurship literature (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009).

Relational agency—the capacity to act while considering others' needs and well-being—is central to how women may define success and purpose in business (Fletcher, 2004). Feminist

psychological work has highlighted how women's self-concept is often intertwined with care-based orientations, emotional labor, and ethical commitments, all of which influence the way women envision and build enterprises (Brush et al., 2009; Eddleston & Powell, 2008). This framework provides a compelling foundation for analyzing how Indian women entrepreneurs draw on internal strengths not simply to grow businesses but to create meaningful, relational, and socially embedded ventures.

2. Character Strengths as Entrepreneurial Drivers

The **Values in Action (VIA)** classification of character strengths, developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), identifies core psychological traits—such as perseverance, integrity, humility, empathy, and self-regulation—that contribute to human flourishing. Within entrepreneurial contexts, character strengths have been associated with resilience, ethical leadership, and value-driven decision-making (Hannah et al., 2011; Harzer & Ruch, 2015). However, empirical research linking character strengths to women entrepreneurs remains sparse, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Emerging studies suggest that strengths like perseverance and integrity are critical for women navigating gendered structural barriers in entrepreneurship (Kirkwood, 2009; Gupta & Mirchandani, 2018). Similarly, empathy and fairness, often devalued in mainstream entrepreneurship discourse, can be central to women's relational leadership and long-term sustainability (Shepherd, 2017). These findings align with feminist critiques of "heroic entrepreneur" models and support the case for expanding psychological entrepreneurship frameworks to include inner virtues and emotional processes.

Our study builds on this tradition by investigating how women entrepreneurs in India draw upon such character strengths—consciously or subconsciously—as integral elements of business sustainability. This framework allows us to frame entrepreneurship

not merely as action or output, but as a reflection of moral and psychological identity.

3. Subconscious Motivation and Sustainable Orientation

Entrepreneurial motivation has traditionally been studied through economic or opportunity-driven lenses, but recent work in sustainable entrepreneurship emphasizes internal drivers such as sustainable perceived desirability (SPD) and sustainable self-efficacy (SSE) (Sullivan & Meek, 2012; Kuckertz & Wagner, 2010). SPD refers to the extent to which individuals are intrinsically attracted to sustainability goals, while SSE captures confidence in one's ability to achieve sustainability-related outcomes (Smith & Woodworth, 2012).

These motivational constructs, especially when internalized early through socialization and family values, often operate at a subconscious level. For women in collectivist cultures, such motivations may stem from lifelong conditioning toward care, social responsibility, and environmental consciousness—qualities rarely framed as "entrepreneurial" in traditional models (Jain & Sharma, 2013; Chaudhary & Batra, 2018). By embedding these constructs in our analysis, we identify how internalized value systems—not just external goals—motivate and sustain entrepreneurial behavior.

Importantly, this approach resonates with psychological theories that integrate cognition, motivation, and ethics as interdependent in shaping purposeful behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the case of Indian women entrepreneurs, sustainable orientation is not a strategic add-on but often a default worldview shaped by upbringing, cultural scripts, and gendered moral expectations.

4. The Indian Context: Gender, Culture, and Entrepreneurial Values

India presents a unique context where women's entrepreneurship exists within strong familial, cultural, and gender role boundaries (Tambunan, 2019; Chakraborty, 2022). While policy frameworks support women-owned enterprises, social structures often frame women's economic

participation as secondary or supplementary to their roles as caregivers (Dhaliwal, 2000). This socio-cultural backdrop creates a paradox: women must navigate entrepreneurship while adhering to cultural norms that both constrain and inspire their business practices.

Despite these constraints, many Indian women entrepreneurs build enterprises grounded in care, sustainability, and value-based leadership (Datta & Gailey, 2012). Their entrepreneurial identities are shaped not solely by ambition or necessity but by a desire to create businesses that align with moral, familial, and community-oriented goals (Sharma, 2020). Research on Indian women business leaders has shown that many view their enterprise not as a means of self-assertion, but as an extension of personal ethics and social responsibility (Mukherjee, 2016).

This cultural framing necessitates research that centers local values, lived experience, and relational motivations, rather than imposing universal entrepreneurial templates. It also affirms the importance of integrating feminist psychological theory with culturally specific constructs when studying women's agency in entrepreneurship.

5. Gap and Positioning of the Current Study

Although growing literature acknowledges the gendered nature of entrepreneurship, few empirical studies have integrated feminist psychological theory, character strengths, and subconscious sustainable motivation in analyzing women's entrepreneurship—especially in the Indian context. Most research either examines structural challenges (e.g., access to finance or markets) or focuses on external enablers (e.g., government schemes or incubators), while overlooking the inner psychological architecture that sustains women's ventures.

Moreover, even studies on entrepreneurial values and sustainability tend to treat them as conscious, strategic decisions rather than expressions of internalized character or subconscious moral motivation (Tilley & Young, 2009). This leaves a significant gap in understanding how women entrepreneurs draw upon gendered upbringing, relational identities, and internal strengths to

create businesses that are socially and environmentally aligned.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived narratives of Indian women entrepreneurs to understand how character strengths and subconscious motivation are activated in the service of sustainable entrepreneurship. By doing so, it contributes to both feminist psychology and entrepreneurial studies by offering a context-specific, psychologically grounded, and gender-sensitive account of what drives and sustains women-led enterprises.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design within a feminist interpretive paradigm to understand how Indian women entrepreneurs draw upon inner psychological resources—particularly character strengths and subconscious motivation—to build sustainable ventures. Feminist qualitative research emphasizes subjectivity, relational meaning-making, and situated knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Harding, 1987). The goal was not to generalize, but to deepen understanding of lived experiences shaped by gender, cultural conditioning, and internalized values.

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze narrative data from semi-structured interviews. This method is particularly suited to exploring complex psychological constructs like subconscious motivation and character strengths, especially when embedded in socio-cultural contexts.

Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected using a combination of **purposive** and **snowball sampling**, targeting women entrepreneurs who:

- Identify as founders or co-founders of registered businesses in India
- Have been operational for a minimum of three years
- Engage in practices aligned with **economic, social, or environmental sustainability**

A total of **12 participants** were interviewed across sectors such as beauty, manufacturing, education, and wellness. Their businesses ranged from small-scale local enterprises to medium-sized firms. Participants were located in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, allowing us to capture the influence of local cultural norms and non-metropolitan entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Demographic details (age range, marital status, education level, family background) were also recorded to contextualize narratives, but pseudonyms were used throughout to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Table 1

summarizes participant characteristics. A sample of 12 was deemed appropriate for this exploratory thematic analysis, as prior methodological work on qualitative saturation indicates that meaningful thematic patterns typically stabilize within 9-16 interviews when the sample is relatively homogeneous and the interview protocol is semi-structured (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006); data collection continued until no new codes emerged, with the final three interviews (P10\u2013P12) yielding no additional codes beyond the 48 cumulative codes identified (Table 8).

Table 8. Saturation Analysis

Interview	New Codes Identified	Cumulative Codes
P1	18	18
P2	8	26
P3	6	32
P4	5	37
P5	4	41
P6	3	44
P7	2	46
P8	1	47
P9	1	48
P10	0	48
P11	0	48
P12	0	48

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Sector	Years Operating	City Tier	Education
P1 – Asha	34	Beauty & Skincare	5	Tier 2	MBA
P2 – Neha	41	Manufacturing (Eco Packaging)	11	Tier 2	B.Tech
P3 – Kavita	38	Education & Training	7	Tier 3	M.Ed.
P4 – Riya	30	Wellness & Yoga	4	Tier 2	B.Sc. (Nutrition)
P5 – Meera	46	Organic Food Processing	13	Tier 3	B.Com

P6 – Priya	36	Textile Manufacturing	8	Tier 2	Diploma in Fashion Design
P7 – Shalini	43	Healthcare & Wellness	12	Tier 3	M.Pharm
P8 – Pooja	32	Beauty Salon & Academy	6	Tier 2	BBA
P9 – Anjali	39	Educational Consultancy	9	Tier 3	M.A. (English)
P10 – Nandini	35	Handicrafts & Sustainable Products	5	Tier 2	Bachelor of Fine Arts
P11 – Bhavna	48	Herbal Products Manufacturing	16	Tier 3	M.Sc.
P12 – Sneha	37	Digital Marketing & Business Services	6	Tier 2	MBA

Table 2. Participant Profile Summary

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n=12)
Age	30–35 years	4
Age	36–40 years	4
Age	41–45 years	2
Age	Above 45 years	2
Education	Bachelor's Degree	5
Education	Master's Degree	6
Education	Professional Qualification	1
Business Experience	3–5 years	4
Business Experience	6–10 years	5
Business Experience	Above 10 years	3
City Tier	Tier 2	7
City Tier	Tier 3	5
Sector	Beauty & Wellness	3
Sector	Manufacturing	3
Sector	Education	2
Sector	Services	2
Sector	Sustainable Products	2

Data Collection

Each participant engaged in a **semi-structured, in-depth interview** lasting approximately 2.5 to

3 hours. Interviews were guided by a flexible protocol that explored:

- Early life influences and family values

- Motivations behind starting the business
- Core principles and values in managing the enterprise
- Challenges and support systems encountered
- Reflections on social, economic, and environmental responsibilities

Questions were designed to elicit narrative depth without explicitly naming psychological constructs (e.g., “Can you describe moments where you stayed true to your values, even when it was difficult?”), enabling us to observe subconscious patterns without priming.

All interviews were conducted in English or a mix of English and regional languages (Gujarati/Hindi), depending on participant comfort. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated where needed.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach:

1. **Familiarization** with the data through repeated reading
2. **Generating initial codes** related to character strengths (e.g., integrity, perseverance) and subconscious motivational patterns (e.g.,

perceived moral obligation, sustainability orientation)

3. **Searching for themes**, including both within-case and cross-case patterns

4. **Reviewing themes** for coherence and theoretical alignment

5. **Defining and naming themes**, linked to feminist psychological constructs and VIA character strengths

6. **Producing the report**, integrating quotes and theoretical interpretation

To ensure rigor, a **deductive-inductive coding approach** was used. A priori codes were drawn from existing scales used in the researcher’s thesis (e.g., sustainable perceived desirability, sustainable self-efficacy, VIA character strengths framework), but room was left for inductive emergence of context-specific themes.

A **sample coding matrix** is presented in Table 4, showing alignment between interview quotes, subthemes, and constructs. For instance, a participant’s recollection of standing against supplier corruption was coded as “integrity,” while her reflection on wanting to “leave a legacy that helps the environment” mapped to “sustainable perceived desirability.”

Table 4. Coding Matrix

Representative Quote	Initial Code	Subtheme	Final Theme
“I refused a profitable deal because it required bribery.”	Honesty	Integrity	Inner Compass
“My business reflects who I really am.”	Authentic Self	Authenticity	Inner Compass
“I started this business to help women become independent.”	Social Purpose	Community Impact	Moral Motivation
“I always choose biodegradable packaging.”	Environmental Care	Environmental Consciousness	Moral Motivation
“Even during COVID, I stayed calm for my employees.”	Emotional Control	Emotional Regulation	Quiet Strengths
“Giving up was never an option.”	Persistence	Perseverance	Quiet Strengths

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

We addressed trustworthiness using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria:

- **Credibility:** Prolonged engagement with each participant (multi-hour interviews), transcript validation by participants, and triangulation across cases

- **Transferability:** Rich, thick description of context and participant background
- **Dependability:** Transparent audit trail of codes, themes, and memos
- **Confirmability:** Reflexive memos were maintained throughout analysis to bracket researcher assumptions

The researcher acknowledged her own position as a woman academic from India, with professional experience in entrepreneurship education. This positionality informed empathetic engagement but was critically examined through reflexive writing to avoid over-identification or projection.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from [AUTHOR: insert institution name] Institutional Review Board (Approval No. [AUTHOR: insert approval number]). Participants provided

informed consent before interviews and were briefed on their right to withdraw at any point. Given the personal and potentially emotional nature of narrative sharing, interviews were conducted with sensitivity, offering space for emotional expression and assurance of confidentiality. Reporting of this study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007); a completed COREQ checklist is available as supplementary material.

4. Findings

Thematic analysis yielded three overarching themes that illuminate how inner psychological strengths and motivational undercurrents shape sustainable entrepreneurship among women founders in India. These themes emerged consistently across cases, despite sectoral and regional diversity.

Table 3. Theme Development

Main Theme	Subthemes	Number of Participants (n=12)
Inner Compass	Integrity	11
Inner Compass	Authenticity	10
Inner Compass	Ethical Decision Making	10
Moral Motivation	Social Responsibility	11
Moral Motivation	Environmental Consciousness	9
Moral Motivation	Community Impact	10
Quiet Strengths	Perseverance	12
Quiet Strengths	Humility	9
Quiet Strengths	Emotional Regulation	10

Theme 1: Inner Compass – Leading with Integrity and Authenticity

Participants consistently described a deeply held internal value system that guided their decision-making (11 of 12 for integrity, 10 of 12 for authenticity; Table 3). This “inner compass” often manifested as integrity, honesty, and a

refusal to compromise ethical standards, even under pressure.

One participant from the eco-packaging sector recalled:

“I was once offered a big deal but it involved under-the-table payment. I walked away. My business is small, but my conscience is clean.”

This reflects the VIA character strength of **integrity**, but in a gendered entrepreneurial context where value-driven action often carries higher risk due to patriarchal norms and client expectations (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Participants spoke of authenticity not only as a personal trait but also as a business strategy rooted in trust-building. For example:

"Clients trust me because I'm not pretending. My brand is literally an extension of who I am."

Here, authenticity becomes both a moral anchor and a differentiator, aligned with sustainable business practices.

Theme 2: Moral Motivation – The Subconscious Pull Toward Sustainability

Many participants (11 of 12 for social responsibility, 9 of 12 for environmental consciousness; Table 3) expressed motivations that exceeded instrumental business logic. Rather than profit-maximization, they emphasized *doing good* as inherently desirable—what aligns with **Sustainable Perceived Desirability (SPD)**.

A salon owner explained:

"I always wanted my work to help women feel confident. It's not just about money—it's about dignity."

This desire to "leave a mark," "create impact," or "heal" was often tied to upbringing, cultural narratives of *seva* (service), and maternal figures. These motivations operated **subconsciously**, emerging not from strategy but from ingrained beliefs about responsibility and care.

In several cases, this moral pull extended to environmental values:

"Even if it's costlier, I use biodegradable material. My daughter shouldn't inherit a garbage planet."

Such statements exemplify **sustainable self-efficacy (SSE)**—the belief that one's actions can contribute to long-term societal or ecological betterment.

Table 9. Sustainability Orientation Across Cases

Participant	Social Sustainability	Environmental Sustainability	Economic Sustainability
P1	✓	✓	✓
P2	✓	✓✓	✓
P3	✓✓	✓	✓
P4	✓	✓✓	✓
P5	✓✓	✓	✓
P6	✓	✓	✓✓
P7	✓✓	✓	✓
P8	✓	✓	✓
P9	✓✓	✓	✓
P10	✓	✓✓	✓
P11	✓	✓	✓✓
P12	✓✓	✓	✓

Legend: ✓ = Evident, ✓✓ = Strongly Evident

Theme 3: Quiet Strengths – Perseverance, Humility, and Emotional Regulation

Participants (12 of 12 for perseverance, 9 of 12 for humility, 10 of 12 for emotional regulation; Table 3) described their resilience in ways that emphasized *quiet*, *persistent*, and *emotionally intelligent* strength—distinct from stereotypical masculine models of entrepreneurship.

For instance, a woman running a manufacturing firm said:

"I've never raised my voice in the factory. People still listen, because they know I don't give up."

This reflects **perseverance**, but expressed through calm consistency rather than aggression. Another participant linked humility to social sustainability:

"My staff respects me because I sit with them. I've cleaned floors with them when needed."

Emotional regulation also surfaced repeatedly, especially during crises (e.g., COVID-19). One founder shared:

"I had to stay composed when orders stopped. My team was looking at me. If I broke down, they would too."

These narratives challenge dominant entrepreneurial archetypes and illustrate how women entrepreneurs bring **emotional labor**, **humility**, and **self-regulation** into the domain of sustainable business.

Cross-Case Synthesis and Theoretical Contribution

Table 5. Cross-Case Theme Comparison

Theme	Beauty	Manufacturing	Education	Wellness	Services
Integrity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Authenticity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social Responsibility	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Environmental Concern	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓
Perseverance	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓
Emotional Regulation	✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓

Legend: ✓ = Evident, ✓✓ = Strongly Evident

Table 6. VIA Character Strengths Observed

Participant	Dominant Character Strength	Supporting Evidence
P1	Integrity	Ethical business decisions
P2	Perseverance	Continued despite financial setbacks
P3	Kindness	Community education initiatives
P4	Hope	Long-term sustainability vision
P5	Prudence	Responsible financial management
P6	Leadership	Employee empowerment
P7	Humility	Collaborative work culture
P8	Creativity	Innovative sustainable services
P9	Fairness	Equal treatment of employees
P10	Self-regulation	Crisis management
P11	Gratitude	Community engagement
P12	Social Intelligence	Strong customer relationships

Table 7. Frequency of Character Strengths

Character Strength	Participants Mentioning	Frequency
Perseverance	12	100%
Integrity	11	92%
Social Intelligence	10	83%
Self-Regulation	10	83%
Humility	9	75%
Leadership	8	67%
Creativity	7	58%
Gratitude	6	50%

While individual journeys varied, participants converged on an ethos of *value-driven leadership* shaped by deep-seated beliefs and inner psychological strengths. Their subconscious motivation often reflected moral imagination, nurtured in caring environments—echoing feminist psychological theories that emphasize the role of care, empathy, and socially embedded self-concept (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1997).

These findings suggest that women's sustainable entrepreneurship in India is not merely a strategic or economic choice, but often a **psychologically rooted, gendered moral orientation**.

5. Discussion

This study illuminates the nuanced psychological landscape underpinning Indian women entrepreneurs' commitment to sustainable business practices. The findings foreground **inner psychological strengths**—integrity, perseverance, emotional regulation—and **subconscious moral motivations** that collectively sustain women's resilience and ethical leadership in often challenging socio-economic contexts.

Inner Compass and Feminist Ethical Leadership

Participants' descriptions of acting with integrity and authenticity resonate with feminist ethical frameworks that emphasize relational autonomy and moral responsibility (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, 1997). Unlike traditional masculine models of entrepreneurship focused on competition and profit maximization, these women's leadership is deeply relational, rooted in care and honesty

toward multiple stakeholders including employees, customers, and community.

This aligns with the concept of **feminist ethical leadership**, which prioritizes social justice and sustainability over individual gain (Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969; Gilligan, 1982). Women entrepreneurs' insistence on transparent, value-driven practices challenges patriarchal business norms and suggests a distinct gendered orientation toward business ethics.

Subconscious Motivation: Intrinsic Desirability and Self-Efficacy

The narratives reflected strong **Sustainable Perceived Desirability (SPD)** and **Sustainable Self-Efficacy (SSE)**—constructs emphasizing the inherent value of doing good and the confidence in one's ability to effect positive change. These align closely with **Self-Determination Theory** (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that intrinsic motivation—acting from internal values rather than external rewards—promotes sustained engagement and well-being.

These findings extend SDT's application by situating intrinsic motivation within culturally specific moral frameworks rooted in Indian collectivist and caregiving traditions. The women entrepreneurs' motivations reflect a blending of personal ambition with social and environmental stewardship, illustrating how intrinsic motives may operate in gendered and cultural contexts.

Quiet Strengths and Gendered Resilience

The theme of *quiet strength*—perseverance expressed through humility and emotional

regulation—adds to feminist psychological understandings of resilience as relational and contextual (Ungar, 2008). This contrasts with stereotypical entrepreneurial ideals valuing assertiveness and risk-taking, and instead highlights emotional labor and relational power as sources of strength.

By valuing humility and empathy, these entrepreneurs cultivate **social sustainability** internally (within their teams) and externally (through community ties), creating a ripple effect that supports broader sustainable firm performance. This challenges dominant masculine paradigms and invites reconsideration of what constitutes entrepreneurial success.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Table 10. Theme–Theory Mapping

Theme	Character Strength	Subconscious Motivation	Supporting Theory
Inner Compass	Integrity, Honesty	Moral obligation	Feminist Ethics
Moral Motivation	Kindness, Love	Sustainable Perceived Desirability	Self-Determination Theory
Quiet Strengths	Perseverance, Self-Regulation, Humility	Sustainable Self-Efficacy	Positive Psychology (VIA)

This research contributes to the expanding scholarship on women’s entrepreneurship by integrating **positive psychology character strengths** and **subconscious motivation** within a feminist interpretive framework. It underscores the importance of psychological and moral dimensions in sustaining women-led enterprises beyond financial metrics.

Practically, the findings suggest that entrepreneurship support programs should recognize and nurture women’s intrinsic motivations and ethical values rather than imposing generic business models. Customized mentorship that affirms character strengths like integrity, humility, and perseverance may bolster women’s sustainable growth.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study highlights the profound role of **inner psychological strengths** and **subconscious moral motivations** in shaping sustainable entrepreneurship among Indian women founders. Through rich qualitative narratives, we uncovered a leadership style rooted in integrity, authenticity, and a relational ethic of care that challenges traditional masculine business paradigms.

The women entrepreneurs’ motivations reflect deep-seated values that transcend profit, embodying intrinsic desires to contribute positively to society and the environment. Their quiet strengths—perseverance, humility, and emotional regulation—serve as vital resources enabling resilience and sustainable firm performance in contexts often marked by gendered challenges.

Implications for Theory

These findings extend feminist psychological theories by articulating how character strengths and intrinsic motivation operate within culturally situated, gendered entrepreneurial experiences. They underscore the importance of viewing women’s entrepreneurship through lenses that prioritize ethical leadership, care, and relational autonomy rather than purely economic success.

Furthermore, integrating positive psychology constructs like VIA character strengths and self-determination theory into feminist entrepreneurship research enriches the conceptual toolkit available to scholars investigating gendered business practices.

Implications for Practice

Entrepreneurship development programs and policymakers should incorporate a strengths-based approach that nurtures women's intrinsic values and psychological resources. Support initiatives tailored to affirm integrity, authenticity, and relational leadership may better sustain women-led enterprises.

Mentorship models emphasizing emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and moral motivation can help women entrepreneurs navigate socio-cultural barriers and align business goals with sustainability imperatives.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides nuanced insights, its qualitative nature and sample specificity call for cautious generalization. Future mixed-method or longitudinal research could quantitatively assess how psychological strengths predict sustainable outcomes over time and across contexts.

Comparative studies examining diverse cultural settings would deepen understanding of how gender, culture, and motivation intersect in entrepreneurial sustainability. Additionally, exploring structural factors such as access to finance and policy environments alongside psychological factors would provide a more holistic picture.

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