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Building networks in the manufacturing sector: A qualitative study of women entrepreneurs in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the article is to explore how Turkish women entrepreneurs who own medium and large-scale manufacturing firms construct and mobilise social networks and how these networks evolve over time.

Research Design & Methods: A qualitative research design was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 women entrepreneurs in the manufacturing sector in Antalya, Türkiye. Due to the absence of a formal database, snowball sampling was used. The data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to capture participants' lived experiences in relation to the research questions.

Findings: The findings show that women entrepreneurs actively engage in networking throughout the entrepreneurial process. While networks were relatively limited during the start-up phase, they expanded and diversified as ventures grew. Four main network types were identified: personal networks, influential mentors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and public institutions. These networks provided key benefits, including financial support, customer and personnel access, information sharing, and motivational support.

Implications & Recommendations: The results emphasise the importance of cultivating networks beyond family ties, particularly with mentors, NGOs, and formal institutions, to support venture development and sustainability.

Contribution & Value Added: By focusing on women entrepreneurs in the manufacturing sector in a developing country context, this study extends existing research on gender and social networks beyond service-sector and Western settings.

Article type: research article
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INTRODUCTION

Women entrepreneurship has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, yet important gaps remain in understanding how gender shapes entrepreneurial processes across diverse institutional and cultural environments. In particular, scholars argue that women's access to social networks, crucial for acquiring resources, legitimacy, and information, remains structurally constrained by gender norms, institutional weaknesses, and male-dominated business systems (Ahl, 2006; Brush *et al*., 2019; Moletta *et al*., 2023). While there is extensive evidence that social networks play a central role in supporting venture creation and growth, most studies focus on small-scale service firms in Western economies (Carranza *et al*., 2018), leaving significant blind spots in industries and regions where women face more pronounced barriers.

Manufacturing represents one such blind spot. Globally, women remain markedly underrepresented as owners and managers of manufacturing firms due to the sector's high entry costs, technological requirements, and entrenched gender stereotypes (Hampton *et al*., 2011; Brush *et al*., 2019;

Neumeyer *et al*., 2019). Manufacturing typically demands access to technical knowledge, skilled labour, supply chains, and institutional support; resources that are often embedded within male-dominated networks. As a result, women entrepreneurs must navigate structures that may be less accessible or inclusive than those found in service industries. Despite these challenges, empirical evidence on how women in manufacturing build and leverage networks remains limited (Hampton *et al*., 2011).

Türkiye presents a particularly compelling context in which to examine these dynamics. As a collectivist society with persistent patriarchal norms, Türkiye exhibits gendered patterns of labour participation, entrepreneurship, and access to institutional resources (Maden, 2015; Toksöz, 2016). Although women represent nearly half of the population, their labour force participation remains among the lowest in the OECD, and women-owned manufacturing firms constitute only a small share of national enterprises (TURKSTAT, 2022; Karadeniz *et al*., 2023). Research consistently shows that Turkish women entrepreneurs depend heavily on strong family ties and informal networks to compensate for limited institutional access (Ufuk & Özgen, 2001; Panda, 2018; Atsan, 2022). However, we know little about how women entrepreneurs in medium- and large-scale manufacturing firms develop, diversify, and mobilise networks over time.

Against this backdrop, social networks offer a valuable lens to understand women's entrepreneurial behaviour in culturally and institutionally complex contexts (Arregle *et al*., 2015; Poggesi *et al*., 2016; Yadav & Unni, 2016). Theories of social capital emphasise the importance of both strong ties, such as family and close friends, and weak ties, such as professional contacts, for resource mobilisation, opportunity identification, and venture growth (Granovetter, 1973; Greve & Salaff, 2003). However, much of this theorising is based on Western settings and traditional rational perspectives (Ahl, 2006; Foss, 2010). There is limited understanding of how social networks function within collectivist cultures, gendered expectations, and manufacturing-specific constraints and conditions, which likely shape network composition and evolution in distinctive ways.

Although existing studies recognise the importance of networking for women entrepreneurs, three significant gaps persist. Firstly, limited research examines women entrepreneurs in manufacturing, an industry that requires resource-intensive, male-dominated networks. Second, theories of social networks insufficiently address how they operate in collectivist, patriarchal, and institutionally constrained environments such as Türkiye. Third, little is known about how women's networks transition from strong, informal ties to more diverse and institutionalised networks as firms grow. This study addresses these gaps by providing empirical and theoretical insight into how medium- and large-scale women-owned manufacturing firms in Türkiye build, interpret, and utilise social networks across different stages of their entrepreneurial journeys. This article explores how women entrepreneurs construct and mobilise social networks while managing manufacturing firms in Türkiye, and how these networks evolve as their ventures grow. By focusing on a context where women confront both industrial and cultural barriers, the study deepens theoretical understanding of gendered networking behaviour under conditions of institutional constraint. Moreover, examining women entrepreneurs operating in a male-dominated industrial sector within a collectivist society provides rare evidence on women-owned manufacturing firms in Türkiye, illuminating a context largely absent from existing research. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What types of social networks do women entrepreneurs in manufacturing rely on?

RQ2: In what ways do these social networks influence women entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial activities and decisions?

RQ3: How does the development and use of social networks vary across different stages of the venture life cycle?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research Context: Women's Economic Participation and Cultural Position in Turkish Society

In ancient Turkish societies, there was no distinction between men and women in social life, and women actively participated in political, administrative, and economic activities (Aksoy, 2016). With

the acceptance of Islam, there has been a decline in women's rights in Turkish societies over time due to the misinterpretation of Islamic principles and the influence of anti-women foreign cultures (Sarıkoyuncu, 1999; Maden, 2015). For example, in the Ottoman Empire, women were not involved in education or professional life outside their families; education for women meant nothing more than acquiring knowledge of religious matters. Within the framework of the reform movements of the Tanzimat period, there was a slight improvement in women's participation in economic life. While the majority of women worked in agriculture, only a small number of them in large cities benefited from educational opportunities (Aksoy, 2016).

Following the establishment of the Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, aiming to become a modern, Western society, women began to regain their social and political rights. To educate all members of society, including women, the Tevhid-i Tedrisat Law was adopted in 1924. The Civil Law, enacted in 1926, prohibited men from marrying multiple wives, established equality between men and women in marriage and inheritance law, and mandated civil marriage in place of religious ceremonies. In 1930, women were able to participate in municipal elections; in 1933, they were able to be elected as mukhtars under the Village Law; and in 1934, women gained the right to vote and be elected in parliamentary elections (Sarıkoyuncu, 1999; İçli, 2003). During this period, Türkiye initially adopted a market-based economic development model, followed by an import-substitution industrialisation model in which the state played a central role (Toksöz, 2016). Agricultural production and employment continued to dominate the Turkish economy. Women usually worked as unpaid family workers in small-scale agricultural enterprises. Both the share of industrial employment and the share of women employed in the industrial sector were quite low. Almost all female industrial workers were in the tobacco, textile, and food-processing industries (Makal, 2001). Although Türkiye adopted an export-based industrialisation strategy starting in the 1980s, female workforce participation continued to decline due to inadequate investment in manufacturing. Only after becoming an EU candidate in 1999 was a low level of women's participation in the workforce recognised as a significant problem. Over the past 20 years, the current government's religious and conservative stance has emphasised the role of women within the family. Policies implemented have again led women to remain largely in the agricultural and service sectors or at home as unpaid family workers, contributing to the growth of informal employment (Toksöz, 2016).

The integration of women into Türkiye's labour market remains limited, with low labour force and employment participation rates. This issue extends to women entrepreneurs. According to the 2022 TURKSTAT Household Labor Force Survey, Türkiye's total population is 85.3 million, with women constituting 49.9%. However, the labour force participation rate in 2022 was 62.8% for men compared to only 28% for women. This contrasts sharply with the rates for women in OECD (52.9%) and EU (51.9%) countries (Ayta & Şen, 2023).

Furthermore, the proportion of female employers in Türkiye is 12%, showing improvement from 6.2% in 2007 but still significantly lower than the EU average of 27% (TURKSTAT, 2007, 2022; TURKONFED, 2017). Regarding entrepreneurial activity, women's total early-stage entrepreneurial activity (TEA) in Türkiye is 10.28%, compared to 21.05% for men. The gender gap in TEA (male-to-female ratio) is among the highest in OECD countries, indicating significant disparities in entrepreneurial participation (Karadeniz *et al*., 2023). These figures underscore the need for targeted policies to promote gender equality in employment and entrepreneurship.

Studies on the profile of Turkish women entrepreneurs consistently show that traditional gender roles are the primary barriers to women's participation in the workforce and their pursuit of entrepreneurship (Ufuk & Özgen, 2001; Karatas-Ozkan *et al.,* 2010; Maden, 2015; Kalemci Tuzun & Araz Takay, 2017; Seçkin Halaç & Seçkin Çelik, 2019). In Türkiye, care work for the children, the elderly, the sick and the disabled is generally provided within the family and almost exclusively by women (Toksöz, 2016). Family obligations are considered female responsibility. The patriarchal social structure prevents women from participating in employment and gaining a profession and career outside home. Additionally, challenges such as limited access to capital, lack of experience, low education levels, insufficient business networks, and difficulties in accessing market, financial, and technological information decrease both the inclination of women to pursue entrepreneurship and their success in it (Hisrich & Öztürk, 1999; Panda, 2018; Atsan, 2022).

Social Networks and Women Entrepreneurs

Social networks are widely recognised as important components of the entrepreneurial process, particularly in enabling access to resources, information, and early opportunities. Greve and Salaff (2003) describe networks as the relational structures that link entrepreneurs to various stakeholders, emphasising their foundational role in establishing and sustaining new ventures. Similarly, Witt *et al*. (2008) define entrepreneurial networks as the social connections that entrepreneurs draw upon for informational exchange and resource-related support. Much of the existing scholarship highlights how such networks can contribute to idea generation, opportunity recognition, and the acquisition of critical knowledge during venture formation (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Jenssen & Koenig, 2002; Peltier & Naidu, 2012). Social ties may also facilitate the flow of explicit and tacit knowledge, enabling entrepreneurs to navigate uncertainties and overcome early-stage challenges (Anderson & Jack, 2002).

Within this broader literature, several studies suggest that strong-tie networks, particularly family ties, can be especially valuable for entrepreneurs by providing moral encouragement, emotional support, and even unpaid labour (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Mozumdar *et al*., 2019). More generally, network engagement has been linked to enhanced venture performance, improved access to market intelligence, and increased likelihood of securing both financial and human capital (Dubini & Aldrich, 1991; Hansen, 1995; Shabsough *et al*., 2021). Some studies focusing on women entrepreneurs have indicated similar patterns: for example, business networks have been associated with positive performance outcomes among women-led ventures (Zhu *et al*., 2019; Xie & Lv, 2016), and collaborative exchanges within networks may provide essential information and resources (Tata & Prasad, 2008).

At the same time, network usage appears to be shaped by contextual factors, including institutional development and cultural norms. Research conducted in developed economies has suggested that entrepreneurs often rely more heavily on professional or institutionalised sources of support, such as venture capitalists or business associations, where such structures are well-established (Au & Kwan, 2009). By contrast, in developing or less developed countries, where formal market-supporting institutions may be less accessible or reliable, family and informal networks often play a more central role (Egbert, 2009). Studies examining women in these contexts further indicate a tendency to rely more on extended family and close personal ties (Renzulli *et al*., 2000; Greve & Salaff, 2003). Poggesi *et al*. (2016), for instance, note that women entrepreneurs in such environments frequently view networks as tools for compensating resource scarcity and navigating institutional constraints.

Existing research also points to gendered dynamics in access to networks. Some scholars observe that women may experience exclusion from male-dominated business networks, limiting access to information, credit, partnerships, or industry-specific knowledge (Winn, 2005). Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean (2017) similarly report that women technology entrepreneurs may be marginalised from influential transactional networks that often facilitate access to valuable resources such as business incubation.

In terms of network characteristics, several studies *suggest* that women entrepreneurs tend to have smaller, more homogeneous networks than men (Renzulli *et al*., 2000; Tata & Prasad, 2008; Kim & Sherraden, 2014). These networks often consist predominantly of strong ties, family members, relatives, and close friends, while weak ties such as professional acquaintances, advisors, experts, and association memberships appear less common (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Hampton *et al*., 2011; Verheul & Thurik, 2001). Scholars have attributed this pattern, in part, to gendered expectations and caregiving responsibilities, which may limit women's time and ability to engage in broader professional networks (Munch *et al*., 1997; Renzulli *et al*., 2000).

Although these insights offer valuable guidance, it is important to note that most are derived from studies carried out in Western contexts or within service-oriented and small-scale business sectors. Much less is known about whether similar dynamics apply to women entrepreneurs in manufacturing industries within developing-country settings such as Türkiye, where institutional, cultural, and sector-specific conditions differ substantially from those typically examined in prior research. Because manufacturing ventures often require access to technical knowledge, skilled labour, and formal institutional support, women's network use in this sector may diverge from previously documented patterns.

Given these contextual gaps, the present study adopts an exploratory approach to examine how women entrepreneurs in medium- and large-scale manufacturing firms in Türkiye construct and utilise their social networks. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study uses open-ended research questions to explore network patterns, purposes, and developmental trajectories within this under-researched context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore how women entrepreneurs make sense of their social networking experiences as they manage manufacturing firms in Türkiye. IPA is well-suited for examining lived experiences and the meanings individuals attribute to them, particularly when research aims to capture complex, context-embedded interpretations rather than generalizable patterns (Smith, 2004; Goulding, 2005). Given the limited scholarly attention to women entrepreneurs in the Turkish manufacturing sector, a qualitative, phenomenological approach provided the depth and sensitivity required for understanding their nuanced networking practices.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit women entrepreneurs who could provide rich, relevant insights into the phenomenon under study. Inclusion criteria were being the owner or co-owner of a medium- or large-scale manufacturing enterprise; having a minimum of five years of entrepreneurial experience, and being actively involved in strategic and managerial decision-making. Because there was no official database of women-owned manufacturing firms in Türkiye, sampling was complemented by snowball referrals, allowing participants to nominate other eligible women who met the criteria. The process was supported by collaboration with the TOBB Antalya Women Entrepreneurs Board, which facilitated initial contact with potential participants. A total of 17 women entrepreneurs participated. This sample size is consistent with IPA guidelines, which recommend relatively small samples (typically 6-20 participants) to enable in-depth, idiographic analysis (Smith, 2004).

Procedure

Data were gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, which enabled participants to articulate their experiences freely. The interview guide was developed based on the literature on social networks and women's entrepreneurship and reviewed by two academic experts, one specialising in qualitative methods and the other in gender and entrepreneurship. The interview guide comprised 10 open-ended questions. Each interview began with broad, narrative-based prompts designed to build rapport and help participants feel comfortable sharing their entrepreneurial journeys (*e.g.*, 'Could you describe your entrepreneurship story from its founding to the present?'). As the conversation progressed, more analytical and explanatory questions were introduced (*e.g.*, 'Who supported your business during the establishment and growth phases, and in what ways?' and 'Is there anyone you frequently consult about your business or seek advice from? Who are they, and how have they influenced your decisions?'). Two pilot interviews were conducted to refine clarity and flow; pilot data were excluded from the final analysis.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were conducted in the participants' workplaces, and were audio-recorded with consent. Field notes were taken to capture contextual details, non-verbal cues, and reflective observations relevant to the interpretative process.

Saturation was assessed continuously during data collection. After the 14th interview, no new themes appeared, and subsequent interviews confirmed existing patterns. The final three interviews were conducted to ensure saturation had indeed been reached and to strengthen the credibility of the thematic structure. This approach aligns with qualitative standards that emphasise conceptual sufficiency over numerical thresholds (Yin, 2009).

Data Analysis

All interviews were manually transcribed verbatim before analysis. The data were examined using the systematic, multi-stage procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) outlined by Smith *et al.* (2009). First, each transcript was read several times to allow the researchers to immerse themselves in the data and develop a holistic understanding of each participant's narrative. Second, transcripts were analysed line by line, and detailed exploratory notes were produced to capture descriptive observations, linguistic features, and conceptual reflections relevant to the research questions. Third, emergent themes were identified for each participant, clustered into meaningful categories, and examined for conceptual connections. These emergent themes were then synthesised into higher-level themes that represented the core elements of that participant's experience. Fourth, the same analytic procedures were applied to all remaining transcripts, resulting in a set of main and subordinate themes for each participant. Fifth, a cross-case analysis was conducted to explore similarities and differences across participants, enabling the development of a coherent, integrative thematic framework. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to existing literature on women's entrepreneurship, social capital, and gendered networks.

Participants were informed about the study's purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary nature. To ensure data accuracy and reliability, interview transcripts were shared with participants for member checking, allowing them to confirm that the transcripts accurately captured their statements. A few participants made minor adjustments, enhancing the validity of the interview data. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presentation of Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics of the respondents (Table 1) show that the ages of women entrepreneurs range from 27 to 50 years. Seven of them are aged between 40 and 50, seven are aged between 30 and 40, and three are aged between 20 and 30. More than half of the respondents are married and have children. Most of the respondents are highly educated, with 11 holding bachelor's degrees and 4 holding master's degrees. Only two of them are high school graduates. The sample consists of women running diverse businesses, all in the manufacturing sector.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants

Participants	Age	Marital status	Children	Education	Sector
P1 – Demet	35	Married	Yes	Undergraduate	Elevator manufacturing and installation
P2 – Hilal	30	Single	Yes	Graduate	Alcoholic beverage production
P3 – Zehra	42	Married	Yes	Graduate	Furniture production
P4 – Gonul	42	Married	Yes	Undergraduate	Fence production and installation
P5 – Burcu	44	Married	Yes	Undergraduate	Seed and vegetable production
P6 – Serpil	50	Married	Yes	Undergraduate	Plant/flower production
P7 – Hacer	35	Married	Yes	High school	Industrial plant product. and processing
P8 – Elif	45	Married	Yes	High School	Printing
P9 – Renan	49	Single	No	Graduate	Furniture production
P10 – Hale	46	Married	Yes	Undergraduate	Medical product manufacturing
P11 – Selin	31	Single	No	Undergraduate	Plastic products manufacturing
P12 – Nihal	25	Single	No	Undergraduate	Industrial plaster material production
P13–Zeynep	34	Single	No	Undergraduate	Steel scaffolding production
P14 – Ezgi	27	Single	No	Undergraduate	Fish farming and processing
P15 – Aylin	27	Single	No	Undergraduate	Electronic card production
P16 – İdil	35	Married	Yes	Graduate	Milk products manufacturing
P17 – Pelin	30	Married	Yes	Undergraduate	Plastic products manufacturing

Source: own study.

A Typology of Social Networks and Their Usage Purposes: Types of Social Networks Used

Various approaches have been employed to categorise the network connections between entrepreneurs and individuals. These networks can vary depending on participants' characteristics and the nature of their relationships or interactions (John, 2024). Faroque *et al*. (2017) and Hernández-Carrión *et al*. (2019) classified networks into two types: personal/social and professional/business. The study results show that women entrepreneurs use both network forms.

a) Personal or familial contacts: Among all network types, familial contacts were one of the most significant and common themes that women entrepreneurs used through their entrepreneurship process. In the excerpts below, participants explain how important the family is to them:

Hilal:

> *'My family has made serious contributions to me. My mother provides all kinds of moral support. My family also supports me financially...'*

Hacer:

> *'….My husband was very supportive; if this is called success, his support was huge. Because, leave aside his financial support, which I will somehow manage with loans, but his moral support was very important. It was very important to encourage me, guide me and trust me in a subject he knew nothing about. My husband's family also supported us a lot…'*

Serpil:

> *'…My mother's support was great. When my children were little, I would leave the house with her and go to work. My mother would even take care of the meals we would eat at home. Without her help, I couldn't have come this far…'*

These women entrepreneurs appear to receive family support in building and running their businesses. Brüderl and Preisendorf (1998) also emphasised in their study that the family network is an important mechanism for success.

b) Influential mentors: This second theme refers to experienced and respected business people in the sector who guide and protect the women entrepreneur. Women entrepreneurs called them 'abi (elder brother in Turkish)' or 'abla (elder sister in Turkish)', which means business people who are older and more experienced than themselves and with whom they have established close relationships.

Gonul explains that she benefited from an experienced and knowledgeable individual whom he describes as her 'abi' in the sector:

> *'…I have a financial advisor and an 'abi' who is very experienced in this sector. I trust his ideas and seek his advice before new investments …'*

Hilal mentioned that there are two people in the industry whose experiences she has benefited from:

> *'… I have two people in my life that I turn to for moral support, motivation, and guidance on how the business works. One is a family friend who's been in business for years, and the other is a university professor I trust deeply.'*

Zehra states the support she received from the chairman of the board of a large corporate furniture company, who always supported her with knowledge and other resources at every stage of her business life in the sector, with the following words:

> *'…The one who helped me the most was an 'abi' from a large furniture company. He (the chairman of the company) and I worked closely together for a long time. He likes to support young entrepreneurs like me.'*

c) Non-Governmental organisations (NGOs): NGOs play a distinct role as collaborative platforms for women entrepreneurs, serving as spaces for non-hierarchical networking and fostering business

collaborations among individuals (Lindberg *et al*., 2010). Participants stated that they joined different NGOs and benefited from them.

Zeynep talked about the benefits of NGOs in expanding social networks:

> *'… When I needed something done, I was able to get it done from morning to night with the support of the association members. I can say that our work has accelerated a lot thanks to this network…'*

Aylin explained with examples that she benefited greatly from the associations she was a member of:

> *'…We exchange information with other members of the association. For example, I called a friend from the association about one of our projects. I knew that they had done a similar project before. We met and got information from him…'*

İdil talked about the useful training, information exchange and trips she received thanks to the association she joined:

> *'…GOSD (an NGO) was very helpful to me. I am glad I became a member. …The training is very helpful. There are technical trips. For example, the last trip we went to was to a livestock company, a competitor of ours. I saw our shortcomings, I asked what was on my mind…'*

d) Formal institutions: The final theme refers to public authorities and governmental agents. The entrepreneurship literature widely acknowledges formalised institutional support as a critical factor influencing women's entrepreneurial endeavours (Mũnoz & Kibler, 2016). It is seen that women entrepreneurs try to develop good relations with local authorities.

Hilal explains how she created benefits for her company by using her contacts in public institutions that she met through NGOs:

> *'...For example, we use an e-invoice portal when exporting. Our goods are at the Mersin customs and will be loaded onto a ship there and sent to Cyprus. I need to log in to the system to approve the e-invoice, but our e-signature period has expired. It doesn't work without it; we can't solve it. What did we do? We have good relations with the public institutions here, and more importantly, these people know how well our company works. We immediately went to the manager of the public institution about the issue. He took care of the issue and solved it…'*

Hale explains the collaborations they have made with public institutions to receive support for the social responsibility projects they have carried out in their businesses as follows:

> *'…Annually, we carry out a very big social responsibility project. For this, we work with the Police Chief, the Governor's Office and the National Education Directorate. We now have acquaintances at these institutions through our past collaborations. Every year, we contact them and receive support for our project.'*

Social Networks Usage Patterns

It was determined that women entrepreneurs interviewed frequently gained five common benefits from their networks: financial support, customer acquisition, personnel sourcing, informational support, and motivational/emotional support.

a) Financial support: The scarcity of financial resources, a major challenge for entrepreneurs in general, poses an even greater obstacle for women entrepreneurs (Panda, 2018). In this study, it was found that women entrepreneurs sought financial support from their strong-tie contacts. While only one participant used an institutional mechanism, the other participants stated that family members were the most important source of their financial resources.

Zehra, who closed her previous business and started a new one in the city she moved to after marriage, shared that her husband provided financial support for her new venture, saying:

> *'...I closed my factory in the city of Burdur's Organised Industrial Zone. When I was reestablishing a business in Antalya, I brought only 5 machines. When my own savings were not enough for my new venture, I received capital support from my husband…'*

Research indicates that women entrepreneurs predominantly rely on their spouses, family members, and close networks to secure start-up capital for their ventures, rather than utilising support from government programs, banks, or other formal institutions (Kwong *et al*., 2012). This finding aligns with existing literature on the financing preferences and behaviours of women entrepreneurs.

b) Customer access: Social networks are regarded as a means of accessing new customers (Witt, 2004). The perspectives of Turkish women entrepreneurs reinforce this claim.

Demet explains how she gets clients through the associations, stating:

> *'…Collaboration through associations naturally brought clients once people saw our work and consistency …'*

Zehra exemplifies one of the most notable cases of customer sourcing among female entrepreneurs. She tells the story of how she expanded her network thanks to a senior manager in the military with whom she coincidentally worked, and how she grew her business and was able to establish a factory in the process:

> *'…When I quickly met the military unit's furniture needs in Burdur, I gained the commander's trust, and thanks to him, I produced furniture for the Governor's house. Then, whichever city the Governor was assigned to, he recommended me to his acquaintances. They made me produce and sell furniture all over Türkiye…'*

Burcu explains that she tried to contact a potential customer abroad with the information she received from her friends in the association:

> *'…Friends from KAGİDER (an NGO) went abroad. They told me about a tomato company they saw there. We are currently trying to establish contact to sell our products. There is such a useful exchange of information…'*

c) Staff access: Women entrepreneurs see their staff as colleagues. It is seen that they provide their staff, especially those in key positions, with references from their personal networks.

Renan noted that they always hire craftsmen with specialised skills in furniture work through referrals.

> *'…But for jobs that require expertise, we hire personnel entirely by reference, having heard from someone. Somebody says there is a master here. We negotiate with that master…'*

Hilal mentions that, in addition to the many benefits she has gained through her membership in GOSD (an NGO), the association has also contributed to the recruitment of personnel:

> *'…It can make a significant contribution to personnel supply. When you tell your friends about the qualifications of the personnel you need, there is someone in their pool who will meet that, or there is definitely someone they will recommend…'*

Zehra stated that she received help in finding staff from faculty members in her personal network and those she knew academically:

> *'I urgently needed a graphic designer for my company. I reached out to a university faculty member with whom I work in the same association. She referred me to a graphic design student. We agreed and have been collaborating for a long time.'*

d) Information access: One of the most important and valuable resources in establishing and developing a business is information. Obtaining the right information at the right time and using it effectively are major factors in the success of the business. Social networks are considered trustworthy sources of information because individuals tend to rely on information shared by people they are familiar with and trust (Hernández-Carrión *et al*., 2019).

Burcu, who is engaged in agricultural production, explains that she benefited from her mother-in-law's knowledge and experience in the early days of her venture, and later received support from NGOs when her business grew:

'…I benefited a lot from my mother-in-law's knowledge. My mother-in-law is an 'old timer'. She didn't know the scientific part, but I gave an example: when it goes into the greenhouse, you can plant it now at this temperature, or it's still too early, you shouldn't plant it.' When the leaves of my plants turned slightly yellow, I would panic. I would go to her. She would say, 'No, that won't happen honey, it will get better by evening.' It really gets better by evening. She would say, 'If you leave the plant without water, it will be stronger…'

Hacer talked about the technical support she received from her husband in her venture as follows:

'…My husband is also very knowledgeable about technical aspects, machinery, and installations. He supported me in technical matters…'

Renan;

'…If I had not joined ANSIAD (a business association), my vision would not have been this broad. …The speeches, seminars and exchanges with other businesspeople at ANSIAD support my vision and progress…'

Zehra mentions that she benefited from her strong ties, especially the support of her extended family members, when she was getting information for her initiative:

'…My husband's sister is an industrial designer. I get help from her. I consult with her and her team. There are actually very few of us in the industry. Everyone helps each other…'

It appears that women entrepreneurs primarily seek information support from individuals with whom they have strong ties. Women entrepreneurs tend to seek information directly by contacting people in their social networks whose knowledge and experience they trust, from whom they can get the information they need.

e) Emotional support: Emotional support plays a key role in sustaining and empowering women entrepreneurs, helping them navigate challenges with confidence and resilience. Below are some of the excerpts from the interview data.

Nihal described the motivational support she received from her family, fellow association members and social networks after the major disaster that resulted in financial losses for her initiative:

'… After our business burned down, we were morally down. We had insurance to cover the damage financially, but it was very sad to see all the things you had done spiritually destroyed. We got through that period thanks to the emotional support of our colleagues, customers, suppliers and friends from the GOSD group…'

Hacer;

'…My husband was very supportive. If there was any success, it was because of his support. Because, leave aside his financial support, I would have somehow managed it with loans or something else, but his moral support, encouragement and guidance were very important.'

Gonul:

'…My mother said, 'You can do it.' Even when I was working in the atelier, as a young girl and even in my childhood, my mother would say, 'You will do your own job in the future.' She would say, 'You know and have learned everything.' …..My husband also did not withhold his support both financially and morally…'

These accounts demonstrate that, beyond financial, informational and other resources, emotional support is a crucial element that empowers women entrepreneurs, reinforcing their ability to overcome difficulties and achieve long-term success.

Social Network Usage Behaviour Across Different Stages of Enterprise Development

Social networks are dynamic (Greve & Salaff, 2003), and entrepreneurs might rely on different compositions of social networks at different stages of the entrepreneurial process due to varying resource needs and resource-acquisition challenges (Klyver & Hindle, 2007). Interview data revealed that women entrepreneurs use social networks at every stage of their enterprises. However, the types of networks used and how they are used vary depending on the stage of the enterprise.
One of the participants expressed her experience as follows:

> *'My husband and family supported me both financially and morally during the establishment of my business. They volunteered to work in the business when necessary. For example, when I could not find enough staff during the harvest season, there were times when my own family and my husband's family would work with us.' (Burcu)*

As we can see from the quote below, the places where participants apply for financial support diversify during the growth phase, and they also receive support from more formal institutions.

> *'The mechanisms I applied for financial support during the establishment and growth phases changed. We were more amateur during the establishment phase. We were doing our business in a room in our house. After a while, we decided to open a store and not just sell from home. At this stage, we received financial support from formal public institutions.' (Hacer)*

As Johannisson *et al*. (1994) emphasised, at the growth stage, entrepreneurs continue to depend on networks for business information, advice, and problem-solving, with certain contacts offering multiple resources. This is what most participants emphasised in the interviews. For example, according to İdil:

> *'As our business grew, our interest in business networks also increased. During the establishment phase, we worked day and night to stay afloat. Now that things are settled, I can be more active in business associations. For example, by entering the KGK (an NGO), I found new customers, and when I was looking for employees, I could ask our member friends.'*

This evidence suggests that during the development stages of their businesses, women entrepreneurs tend to establish more professional and institutional relationships to manage and expand their ventures effectively.

Discussion

This study explored the social networks and networking practices of women entrepreneurs operating medium- and large-scale manufacturing firms in Antalya, Türkiye. By focusing on a traditionally male-dominated sector, the findings extend existing research on women's entrepreneurship by illuminating how network structures, purposes, and dynamics unfold in an industrial context that differs substantially from the service-oriented environments that dominate prior studies.

The findings indicate that women entrepreneurs in manufacturing actively engage in networking practices, with their networks expanding and diversifying as their ventures evolve. While networks were relatively limited during the start-up phase, they became more heterogeneous over time, supporting Dubini and Aldrich's (1991) and Johannisson's (1987) emphasis on learning and experience in network development. Importantly, this evolution was not linear but adaptive: different types of networks were mobilised for distinct purposes at different stages of the venture life cycle. The identification of four core network types, personal networks, influential mentors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and public institutions, highlights the multifunctional and dynamic nature of networking in manufacturing entrepreneurship.

Consistent with prior research, strong ties within personal networks, particularly family members, spouses, and close friends, played a central role in women entrepreneurs' ventures, especially during the establishment phase. These ties provided not only emotional and moral support but also critical financial resources, confirming findings by Greve and Salaff (2003), Brüderl and Preisendörfer (1998), and Poggesi *et al*. (2016). However, unlike some studies that emphasise the constraining

effects of strong family ties (Hite & Hesterly, 2001), the present findings suggest that in the Turkish manufacturing context, family networks function more as enabling mechanisms than as barriers. This pattern can be understood through Türkiye's socio-cultural characteristics. The collectivist structure of Turkish society (Hofstede, 1980; Sargut, 1999), combined with relatively low levels of generalised trust and weak institutional trust (Buğra, 1994; Sargut, 2003), encourages reliance on trusted, close-knit networks. In this context, strong ties compensate for institutional uncertainty and reduce perceived risk, particularly in capital-intensive manufacturing ventures where failure costs are high. This finding refines existing theories by showing that the value of strong ties is not universally constraining or enabling but is highly context-dependent.

One of the most striking findings of this study is the prominence of influential mentors, often referred to by participants as 'abi' or 'abla,' within women entrepreneurs' networks. Notably, nearly half of these mentors were male. While prior research has acknowledged the importance of mentors and role models for women entrepreneurs (Welter, 2006; Laukhuf & Malone, 2015), the present study adds nuance by situating mentorship within the gendered power structures of the manufacturing sector. The prevalence of male mentors cannot be explained solely by the male-dominated nature of manufacturing. Rather, it also reflects deeper cultural dynamics regarding authority, legitimacy, and expertise. In a sector where technical knowledge, industry experience, and informal influence are often concentrated among men, guidance from an older, well-established male figure may carry symbolic legitimacy, facilitating access to resources and reinforcing credibility in business interactions (Isakova & Stroila, 2025). These relationships function not merely as sources of advice but as mechanisms through which women entrepreneurs navigate gendered barriers and negotiate acceptance within male-dominated networks (Shaymardanov *et al*., 2023). Interestingly, mentorship relationships often evolved from initially weak ties, such as academic advisors or professional contacts, to strong ties characterised by trust and regular consultation. This finding challenges the conventional dichotomy between strong and weak ties by illustrating their fluidity and underscoring the importance of relational processes over static network categories.

Engagement with NGOs emerged as another key dimension of women entrepreneurs' networking practices. Unlike findings from service-sector studies, where professional associations are often framed primarily as instrumental networking tools, NGOs in this study functioned as hybrid spaces that combined business networking with social responsibility. Women entrepreneurs perceived participation in NGOs not only as a strategic activity but also as a moral obligation, reflecting culturally embedded notions of contribution and reciprocity. Many participants held active roles within these organisations, including board memberships, dedicating significant time and effort to sustaining these networks. This level of engagement suggests that NGOs play a critical role in fostering trust-based, peer-oriented networks that are particularly valuable in contexts where formal institutional support is perceived as limited or inaccessible (Lindberg *et al*., 2010). This finding points to the importance of policy interventions that strengthen and legitimise such intermediary organisations.

Although public institutions appeared in women entrepreneurs' networks, the findings suggest that access to these institutions was often mediated by personal connections rather than formalised support mechanisms. For example, resolving regulatory or administrative issues often depended on knowing the 'right person' within an institution rather than on systematically using government programs or SME support schemes. This distinction is important, as it indicates that institutional engagement in this context is relational rather than procedural. This pattern contrasts with much of the entrepreneurship literature from developed economies, where formal institutions are assumed to operate as transparent and accessible support systems (Busenitz *et al*., 2000; Bruton *et al*., 2010). In the Turkish manufacturing context, personal brokerage within institutions appears to substitute for formal institutional effectiveness, reinforcing the continued importance of social capital even at later stages of venture development.

Taken together, the findings suggest a dynamic and stage-sensitive model of women entrepreneurs' networking practices in manufacturing. Personal networks dominate the early stages, influential mentors and NGOs support strategic decision-making and legitimacy-building, and institutional ties, often accessed through personal relationships, become more relevant as ventures grow.

This integrative pattern highlights how different network types interact over time to meet evolving entrepreneurial needs. By explicitly contrasting these findings with service-sector–dominated literature, this study demonstrates that networking practices among women entrepreneurs cannot be fully understood without considering sectoral and cultural context. Manufacturing ventures impose distinct demands related to capital intensity, technical expertise, and legitimacy, which shape both the structure and function of entrepreneurial networks (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). These insights not only extend existing theories of gendered networking but also underscore the need for context-sensitive approaches in entrepreneurship research.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged, which also offer valuable directions for future research. First, as a qualitative study employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Instead, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of women entrepreneurs' lived experiences with social networks within a specific institutional and sectoral context. A further limitation relates to the sampling strategy. Participants were primarily recruited through the TOBB Antalya Women Entrepreneurs Board, which may have introduced a degree of sampling bias. Specifically, the study is more likely to reflect the experiences of women entrepreneurs who are already embedded in at least one formal network or support structure and who may be relatively successful in leveraging social ties. Consequently, the perspectives of more isolated women entrepreneurs, those who are not members of business associations or who have limited access to formal and informal networks, remain underrepresented. This is an important omission, as such entrepreneurs may face distinct constraints and employ different survival strategies. The study is also subject to retrospective bias, as participants were asked to reflect on earlier stages of their entrepreneurial journeys. Recollections of start-up and early growth phases may be influenced by subsequent experiences and outcomes, potentially shaping how past networking practices are interpreted and narrated. While retrospective interviews are common and valuable in entrepreneurship research, this limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings. Finally, although the study acknowledges the broader socio-cultural context of Türkiye, including its increasingly conservative dynamics, it does not explicitly examine the role of religion or religiosity in shaping women entrepreneurs' networking behaviours. Religious beliefs and practices may influence the formation of strong family ties, participation in faith-based business networks, or perceptions of appropriate social and professional interaction. The absence of this dimension represents a further limitation and an important area for future inquiry.

Building on these limitations, several avenues for future research emerge. First, future studies could focus on women entrepreneurs in manufacturing who are not affiliated with business associations or formal support organisations to better understand the barriers to network formation and the coping strategies of relatively isolated entrepreneurs. Such research would complement the present findings by illuminating less visible or less advantaged entrepreneurial experiences. Second, longitudinal research designs could provide deeper insights into how women entrepreneurs' networks evolve. Tracking a cohort of women entrepreneurs from the start-up phase onward would allow researchers to observe network development in real time, thereby reducing reliance on retrospective accounts and offering a more dynamic understanding of network formation, transformation, and decline across different stages of the venture life cycle. Third, given the cultural context, future research could explicitly investigate how religiosity and conservative values influence the structure and use of entrepreneurial networks. Examining whether and how religious norms shape trust, legitimacy, and access to resources would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gendered networking in non-Western contexts. Further research could also move beyond identifying *what* types of networks are used and *how* they are utilised to explore *why* certain networking patterns emerge. In particular, the informal mentorship relationships identified in this study, often described through culturally embedded 'abi/abla' dynamics, warrant closer examination. Ethnographic or process-oriented studies could shed light on how these relationships are formed, the expectations and obligations involved, and the mechanisms through which knowledge and support are exchanged. In addition, future studies might explore

the potential downsides or 'dark side' of social networks. While strong ties can provide emotional and practical support, they may also generate obligations, dependencies, or conflicts that constrain entrepreneurial autonomy and decision-making. Investigating these tensions would offer a more balanced and realistic account of networking dynamics. Finally, methodological diversification would further enrich this research stream. Combining qualitative approaches with quantitative methods, such as Social Network Analysis (SNA), could enable researchers to map the size, density, and structure of women entrepreneurs' networks, complementing in-depth qualitative insights with structural network data.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines how women entrepreneurs operating in medium- and large-scale manufacturing firms in Türkiye construct and utilise social networks throughout the entrepreneurial process. By focusing on a male-dominated industrial sector within an underexplored institutional context, the study addresses important gaps in the literature on gendered networking practices, which have largely concentrated on service sectors and Western economies. The findings show that women entrepreneurs' networks are dynamic and evolve in response to changing venture needs. In the early stages, strong personal ties, particularly family and close relations, play a central role by providing emotional support, financial resources, and practical assistance. As ventures grow, networks expand to include influential mentors, NGOs, and public institutions, enabling access to legitimacy, specialised knowledge, skilled labour, and strategic opportunities. Rather than replacing one another, different types of ties coexist and interact over time, highlighting an adaptive and strategic approach to networking.

The study contributes to entrepreneurship and social capital literature in several ways. First, it demonstrates that strong ties can function as enabling resources rather than constraints in collectivist and institutionally limited contexts. Second, it extends existing network theories by showing how mentorship relationships, often embedded in culturally specific 'abi/abla' dynamics, blur the boundaries between strong and weak ties. Third, it emphasises the importance of sectoral context, illustrating how the capital intensity and technical demands of manufacturing shape both the structure and function of entrepreneurial networks.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice. Support mechanisms for women entrepreneurs in manufacturing should prioritise intermediary organisations, mentoring systems, and business associations that facilitate access to resources and legitimacy. At the policy level, strengthening formal support structures and improving institutional accessibility may reduce reliance on personal brokerage and promote more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. Overall, the study offers a context-sensitive perspective on women's entrepreneurial networking by highlighting how gender, sector, and institutional conditions jointly shape network formation and use. By foregrounding women's lived experiences in Türkiye's manufacturing sector, the research contributes to a more nuanced and globally relevant understanding of women's entrepreneurship and social networks.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence

The manuscript is free of AI/GAI usage.

Conflict of Interest

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