LEADING FOR IMPACT: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF WOMEN-LED SOCIAL ENTERPRISES AND THEIR ROLE IN ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

🆔 *Olusola Sam-Sorungbe* [a]1 🆔 *Daniel Duker* [b] 🆔 *Rahul Raj* [c] 🆔 *Charles Boadi* [d]

[a] *London School of Science and Technology, United Kingdom; E-mail: olusola.sam-sorungbe@lsst.ac*
[b] *London School of Science and Technology, United Kingdom; E-mail: daniel.duker@lsst.ac*
[c] *London School of Science and Technology, United Kingdom; E-mail: rahul.raj@lsst.ac*
[d] *London School of Science and Technology, United Kingdom; E-mail: charles.boadi@lsst.ac*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contributions of women-led social enterprises (WLSEs) to gender equality and sustainable development, with particular attention to the interactions among leadership practices, social innovation, and institutional environments. Using a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, the study analyses 52 peer-reviewed journal articles and institutional reports published between 2015 and 2025. The review follows the PRISMA 2020 protocol to ensure methodological rigour, transparency, and replicability. The findings indicate that WLSEs commonly adopt feminist and relational leadership approaches characterised by empathy, collaboration, and shared decision-making. These leadership practices foster inclusive organisational cultures and enhance empowerment outcomes for marginalised populations. The review further shows that WLSEs are significant drivers of social innovation, developing locally embedded and context-sensitive solutions to socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, financial exclusion, and environmental sustainability. However, despite their impact, WLSEs continue to face persistent institutional constraints, including restricted access to finance, gender-based bias, and underdeveloped or ambiguous regulatory frameworks. To advance theoretical understanding, the paper proposes the Leadership–Innovation–Institutional Nexus (LIIN) framework, which conceptualises how gendered leadership practices and social innovation interact with institutional structures to generate systemic change. The study argues that WLSEs function as agents of transformative development rather than marginal actors within the social economy. Policy implications include the need for gender-responsive financing mechanisms, supportive legal frameworks, and robust impact measurement systems to strengthen the long-term sustainability and scalability of women-led social enterprises.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the global rise of social enterprises has transformed how societies address inequality, sustainability, and community development. Unlike traditional enterprises that focus primarily on profit maximisation, social enterprises combine market-based mechanisms with social missions, creating hybrid models of value creation that respond to persistent social and environmental challenges (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017; Doherty et al., 2014). Within this movement, women-led social enterprises (WLSEs) have emerged as compelling vehicles for inclusive development, combining entrepreneurship with advocacy to promote gender equality, economic empowerment, and sustainable growth.

WLSEs are not only economic entities; they are also *sites of transformation* where women's leadership reshapes norms, structures, and communities. In both developed and developing economies, women social entrepreneurs create jobs, advance local innovation, and bridge gaps left by weak welfare systems and discriminatory institutions (Smith et al., 2013; UN Women, 2023). Their contributions align closely with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). However, despite their expanding role, the academic understanding of WLSEs remains fragmented.

Research on women's entrepreneurship typically focuses on economic performance, motivation, and financial access, often overlooking the *social and institutional dimensions* of leadership (Elam et al., 2019). Conversely, studies of social enterprise frequently neglect gender, treating social innovation as a gender-neutral phenomenon (Battilana et al., 2015; Ebrahim et al., 2014). This disciplinary divide obscures how women's leadership practices shape organisational innovation, stakeholder relationships, and structural transformation. Furthermore, most theoretical frameworks fail to integrate the empowerment-in-action of women leaders, the meso-level dynamics of social innovation, and the macro-level institutional systems that enable or constrain them. This lack of integration limits both conceptual clarity and policy relevance.

To address this gap, the present study conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) of academic and institutional research published between 2015 and 2025, focusing on women-led social enterprises and their role in advancing gender equality and sustainable development. The review adheres to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and rigour. By synthesising 52 peer-reviewed and policy-based sources, the paper seeks to map patterns, tensions, and opportunities that characterise WLSEs globally.

From this synthesis, the study develops a novel conceptual contribution, the Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN) framework. The LIIN model conceptualises WLSEs as dynamic systems where feminist leadership (empowerment-in-action), social innovation (organisational practice), and institutional change (macro-level transformation) interact cyclically to produce sustained social impact. This framework captures how women's leadership not only generates internal empowerment but also drives structural reform and systemic inclusion across communities and policy environments.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it critically examines existing evidence on how women-led social enterprises contribute to gender equality and sustainable development, with particular attention to the roles of leadership and innovation in shaping social and economic outcomes. Second, the paper proposes and articulates the LIIN framework as an integrative theoretical model that brings together feminist leadership theory, social innovation theory, and institutional Theory, offering a unified perspective for understanding women's leadership and entrepreneurship within a gendered social enterprise context.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions: How do women-led social enterprises enact leadership and empowerment within hybrid organisational contexts? In what ways do WLSEs generate social innovation that advances gender equality and sustainable development? How do institutional structures enable or constrain the operations and impact of WLSEs? How can an integrative framework such as LIIN explain the interaction between leadership, innovation, and institutional transformation?

By answering these questions, the paper contributes to both gender and entrepreneurship scholarship and policy discourse on inclusive development. The findings not only synthesise a decade of research but also generate a new conceptual lens for understanding how women social entrepreneurs act as agents of structural change. Ultimately, this study positions WLSEs as a crucial, yet under-recognised, mechanism for achieving the SDGs through value systems grounded in equity, care, and collaboration.

Conceptual Clarifications

To support conceptual clarity and ensure consistency throughout the discussion, this study briefly defines several key terms that underpin the Leadership-Institutional-Innovation Nexus (LIIN) framework. These concepts, drawn from feminist leadership theory, institutional studies, and innovation scholarship, form the analytical foundation for interpreting the empirical findings. The definitions below clarify how these terms are applied in this research and distinguish their contextual use from broader theoretical interpretations.

Key Concepts and Definitions

For conceptual clarity and consistency, this study employs the following key terms throughout the analysis. These definitions provide a typical frame of reference and reflect the specific ways in which each concept is used within the *Leadership–Institutional–Innovation Nexus (LIIN)* framework.

Table 1. Key Concepts and Definitions

Concept	Definition
Feminist Leadership	A leadership approach grounded in inclusivity, relational power, and collective empowerment. It emphasises collaboration, empathy, and social justice as pathways to transformative change, particularly in contexts of gendered inequality.
Institutional Bricolage	The creative recombination of existing norms, relationships, and resources to navigate institutional voids or constraints. It reflects how actors repurpose familiar structures to enable innovation and sustain legitimacy in resource-limited settings.
Embedded Innovation	Innovation that emerges organically from within local communities rather than being externally imposed. It reflects a bottom-up, participatory problem-solving process aligned with contextual realities.
Empowerment-in-Action *(also referred to as Micro-Level Agency)*	The everyday enactment of agency by individuals or groups who create social change from within institutional systems. The two terms are used interchangeably in this study to denote how actors exercise autonomy and influence despite structural limitations.
Hybrid Value Creation	The process by which social enterprises generate both social and economic value, balancing competing institutional logics through adaptive and context-sensitive practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's Entrepreneurship and Leadership

Women's entrepreneurship has long been associated with economic participation, empowerment, and social mobility. However, its evolution over the past two decades reveals a more profound shift from survival-driven entrepreneurship toward value-driven leadership (Elam et al., 2019). Contemporary literature recognises that women entrepreneurs do not simply replicate traditional business models; they redefine entrepreneurship by integrating social and ethical considerations into economic activity (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Research consistently shows that women's leadership tends to emphasise relational and transformational qualities such as empathy, collaboration, and participatory decision-making (Northouse, 2022). These traits are often associated with inclusive workplace cultures and stronger community engagement. Empirical studies also indicate that women leaders are more likely to invest in social initiatives and employee welfare, demonstrating a broader conception of success that extends beyond financial outcomes (Santos, 2012).

Nevertheless, systemic barriers persist. Limited access to credit and venture capital, exclusion from entrepreneurial networks, and cultural stereotypes continue to constrain women's entrepreneurial potential globally (Nieuwenhuizen, 2022). In developing economies, where patriarchal norms and institutional biases are more pronounced, these barriers become structural rather than incidental (Elam et al., 2019). This imbalance highlights the importance of analysing women's entrepreneurship not only through an economic lens but also through sociocultural and institutional frameworks that account for power relations, gender norms, and intersectionality.

Social Enterprise and Hybrid Value Creation

Social enterprises (SEs) are hybrid organisational forms that aim to create both social and economic value. Their dual mission, balancing financial sustainability with social impact, has been described as the "hybrid paradox" (Doherty et al., 2014; Battilana et al., 2015). Scholars argue that managing these dual logics requires adaptive leadership, cross-sector partnerships, and innovative governance structures (Ebrahim et al., 2014).

Hybrid value creation is central to understanding how SEs operate. It involves generating economic surplus while simultaneously producing measurable social or environmental outcomes (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017). This balancing act demands continual negotiation between social mission and market realities. Effective SEs cultivate trust among stakeholders, reinvest profits into community development, and maintain transparency in governance (Spear et al., 2009). However, much of the literature is grounded in Western contexts, where supportive institutional ecosystems and social investment markets already exist (Littlewood & Holt, 2015). Less attention has been given to SEs in emerging economies, which often arise in institutional voids where formal regulatory or financial structures are weak. These enterprises depend on informal networks, community trust, and adaptive leadership, characteristics particularly pronounced in women-led initiatives. Hence, understanding hybrid value creation through a gendered lens can deepen insights into resilience, innovation, and social capital formation in under-researched contexts.

Gender, Social Innovation, and Leadership

The intersection of gender and social innovation introduces a critical dimension to entrepreneurship research. Women social entrepreneurs often address social inequalities through creative problem-solving rooted in empathy and community connection (Wilson & Post, 2011). Their enterprises frequently operate as mechanisms of social change, challenging traditional hierarchies and redistributing power within local communities (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013).

Social innovation theory posits that sustainable transformation occurs when individuals and collectives co-create new solutions to unmet social needs (Phills et al., 2019). Within this framework, women's leadership can be understood as a form of social activism—using enterprise as a platform to challenge systemic exclusion (Calás et al., 2009). Feminist leadership perspectives reinforce this view, arguing that women-led ventures represent "alternative rationalities" centred on care, cooperation, and collective well-being (Brush & Cooper, 2012).

Despite increasing attention to gender and innovation, empirical synthesis remains limited. The literature is fragmented across disciplines, often treating gender as an incidental variable rather than a core analytical lens. Additionally, few studies provide comparative insights across regions or systematically link women's leadership styles to measurable innovation outcomes. Addressing these limitations requires integrating feminist leadership theory with social innovation and institutional perspectives to capture the complexity of gendered entrepreneurship.

Women-Led Social Enterprises (WLSEs): Evidence and Emerging Patterns

Women-led social enterprises (WLSEs) exemplify the convergence of gender empowerment, innovation, and sustainable value creation. These enterprises commonly emerge in sectors such as microfinance, education, agriculture, and healthcare—areas that directly affect family welfare and community resilience (Nieuwenhuizen, 2022). WLSEs often rely on participatory governance models that involve beneficiaries as co-producers of social value, creating horizontal power structures and mutual accountability (Smith et al., 2013).

Several studies highlight WLSEs' distinctive contribution to empowerment. By employing women from marginalised groups, offering flexible work arrangements, and reinvesting profits into social programmes, WLSEs create self-sustaining cycles of inclusion. For instance, female-led cooperatives in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have been instrumental in expanding access to healthcare, education, and financial services among rural women (UNDP, 2022). Similarly, digital WLSEs, such as platforms offering microlearning, e-commerce, or peer lending, are enabling women to overcome geographic and social barriers (OECD, 2023).

However, scalability remains a challenge. WLSEs frequently operate in undercapitalised ecosystems and face biases in funding allocation. Investors often perceive women-led ventures as "riskier" despite evidence showing higher repayment rates and stronger community loyalty (Spear et al., 2009). Moreover, the lack of gender-sensitive performance metrics prevents accurate evaluation of social impact. Most frameworks prioritise financial indicators, neglecting qualitative dimensions such as empowerment, confidence, and community well-being.

Impact Measurement and SDG Contributions of WLSEs

The global policy landscape, shaped by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasises entrepreneurship as a key driver of inclusive growth and equality. SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) directly relate to women's participation in entrepreneurship and leadership. WLSEs sit at the intersection of these goals, yet systematic evaluation of their contributions remains sparse.

Scholars note that traditional impact measurement tools, such as Social Return on Investment (SROI) and balanced scorecards, tend to undervalue gendered outcomes (Nicholls, Gabriel, & Simon, 2020). They often quantify success in financial or output-based terms, failing to capture transformative indicators such as empowerment, agency, and social capital. Recent frameworks advocate for more inclusive metrics that integrate both quantitative and qualitative measures of social change. For example, the Gendered Enterprise Framework (GEF) proposed by UN Women (2023) encourages assessment through empowerment outcomes, leadership development, and intra-household decision-making power.

The alignment of WLSE activities with SDGs extends beyond gender equity. Many WLSEs also contribute to SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). In practice, this multidimensional impact underscores WLSEs' potential as catalysts for systemic change. However, policy and academic recognition remain limited, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where gender-disaggregated data are scarce (OECD, 2023).

A further challenge lies in institutionalising impact measurement. While social enterprises often adopt participatory evaluation methods, these processes can be resource-intensive and context-specific. This has led to calls for hybrid models that blend local participatory indicators with globally comparable metrics (Nicholls & Huybrechts, 2014). For WLSEs, such hybrid evaluation models could provide more substantial evidence of their role in achieving SDGs and strengthen advocacy for inclusive funding mechanisms.

The review revealed a noticeable underrepresentation of studies from Latin America and the Middle East. This gap may result from several factors, including language barriers that limit the inclusion of non-English publications, differing institutional priorities regarding social enterprise research, and publication bias favouring Global North contexts. Recognising these omissions underscores the need for more inclusive research that captures diverse socio-political realities and leadership models in the Global South and beyond.

The literature demonstrates that WLSEs are central to advancing gender equality and sustainable development. They operate as hybrid organisations that balance social and commercial goals while fostering inclusive leadership and community empowerment. However, gaps persist between Theory and practice—particularly in gender-sensitive impact measurement, policy support, and cross-regional synthesis. These gaps justify the present study's systematic review approach, which integrates feminist leadership, social innovation, and institutional theories to develop a more holistic understanding of WLSEs as drivers of sustainable transformation.

Theoretical Framework: The Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN)
Rationale for Theoretical Integration

Existing scholarship on social enterprises and women's entrepreneurship often treats leadership, innovation, and institutional context as discrete analytical domains. This separation limits understanding of how women social entrepreneurs generate transformative impact across multiple levels, individual, organisational, and systemic.

This paper responds to that gap by integrating three theoretical perspectives: Feminist Leadership Theory, Social Innovation Theory, and Institutional Theory into a unified conceptual model: the Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN).

The LIIN framework proposes that women-led social enterprises (WLSEs) function as interdependent systems in which:

- Feminist leadership drives empowerment and collective agency (micro-level).
- Social innovation translates leadership into actionable, community-rooted solutions (meso-level); and
- Institutional engagement enables the reconfiguration of structural norms and policies (macro-level).

Through this nexus, WLSEs act not only as economic entities but as catalysts of systemic transformation, advancing gender equality and sustainable development by linking internal values with external impact.

Feminist Leadership Theory: The Micro-Level of Empowerment

Feminist Leadership Theory provides the foundation of the LIIN model by reframing leadership as a collective, inclusive, and value-driven process.

Traditional leadership models tend to prioritise authority, hierarchy, and efficiency, constructs that often marginalise women's approaches to influence (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Northouse, 2022). In contrast, feminist leadership emphasises *empathy, collaboration, reflexivity,* and *shared power*.

Within WLSEs, leadership manifests as empowerment-in-action: women leaders use relational and participatory methods to build trust, inspire co-ownership, and mobilise collective agency among employees and beneficiaries (Al-Dajani

& Marlow, 2013). Leadership is therefore not only positional but transformational, extending empowerment beyond the leader herself to include her community and stakeholders.

Feminist leadership also bridges the personal and the political, integrating self-awareness, social justice, and institutional critique (Calás et al., 2009). In WLSEs, these values materialise in decisions about hiring practices, governance structures, and profit redistribution, which collectively redefine what "success" means in entrepreneurship.

In the LIIN model, this micro-level leadership serves as the initiating force of transformation. It establishes a moral and emotional foundation from which innovation and institutional reform can emerge.

Social Innovation Theory: The Meso-Level of Organisational Transformation

Social Innovation Theory conceptualises innovation as the process of generating and implementing new ideas that meet social needs more effectively than existing solutions (Phills et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2010). Unlike technological innovation, which prioritises efficiency or profitability, social innovation focuses on empowerment, inclusion, and sustainability.

WLSEs embody this form of innovation by translating lived experience into creative responses to community problems. Their innovations are not always technological; they are often process-based, new governance mechanisms, participatory training programmes, or cooperative business models that redistribute value (Littlewood & Holt, 2015; Nieuwenhuizen, 2022).

The LIIN framework positions social innovation as the linking mechanism between leadership and institutional change. Feminist leadership creates the trust, empathy, and participation necessary for innovation to occur, while social innovation operationalises these values into systems, products, and services that deliver measurable impact.

Moreover, innovation in WLSEs is inherently contextual, rooted in local knowledge, culture, and resource constraints. This adaptability demonstrates how gendered leadership fosters not just creativity but resilience in uncertain environments. The innovation process becomes a manifestation of feminist leadership values in action, an applied form of care and collective problem-solving.

Institutional Theory: The Macro-Level of Structural Transformation

Institutional Theory explains how organisations operate within, adapt to, and influence broader social, legal, and cultural systems (Scott, 2014). For WLSEs, these systems include both formal institutions, such as regulatory frameworks, financing structures, and market rules, and informal institutions such as social norms, gender expectations, and cultural attitudes toward women in leadership (Mair & Marti, 2009; Amankwah-Amoah, 2018).

From this perspective, WLSEs function in institutional voids, where state or market mechanisms fail to address social needs. Women leaders navigate these gaps through institutional bricolage, the creative recombination of local resources, networks, and norms to build legitimacy and resilience (Mair & Marti, 2009).

As WLSEs mature, they often evolve from adaptation to institutional entrepreneurship, advocating for gender-sensitive policies, inclusive procurement, and social investment reforms (UN Women, 2023). Through this process, WLSEs transform their operating environment, challenging patriarchal norms and reframing women's economic roles.

In the LIIN model, Institutional Theory represents the systemic endpoint of transformation: the stage at which micro-level leadership and meso-level innovation generate macro-level change. Institutional reform, in turn, feeds back into leadership development by expanding access, recognition, and legitimacy for future women entrepreneurs.

The Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN): An Integrated Model

Bringing these three perspectives together, the Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN) conceptualises WLSEs as *dynamic ecosystems* that operate across interlinked levels of transformation.

At the micro level, feminist leadership activates empowerment and trust at the meso level, social innovation converts those values into action and impact, and at the macro level, institutional change consolidates these impacts into structural reform and social legitimacy.

These interactions form a cyclical feedback loop; institutional reform enhances women's legitimacy, fostering new leaders and innovators who continue the cycle.

Figure 1. The Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN) conceptual model

This model advances Theory by integrating agency, action, and structure into a coherent framework. It posits that women-led social enterprises are not simply outcomes of gender empowerment but engines of institutional renewal. Their leadership values drive innovation, their innovations reshape institutions, and their institutional success reinforces future leadership, creating a sustainable cycle of inclusive development.

Building on the preceding discussion, the Leadership–Innovation–Institutional Nexus (LIIN) framework is summarised visually in Figure 2. The model conceptualises how feminist leadership at the micro level stimulates inclusive social innovation at the meso level, which in turn drives institutional transformation at the macro level. These interactions form a dynamic and iterative cycle in which leadership values, innovative practices, and structural change continuously reinforce one another, sustaining women-led social enterprises as agents of empowerment and systemic reform.
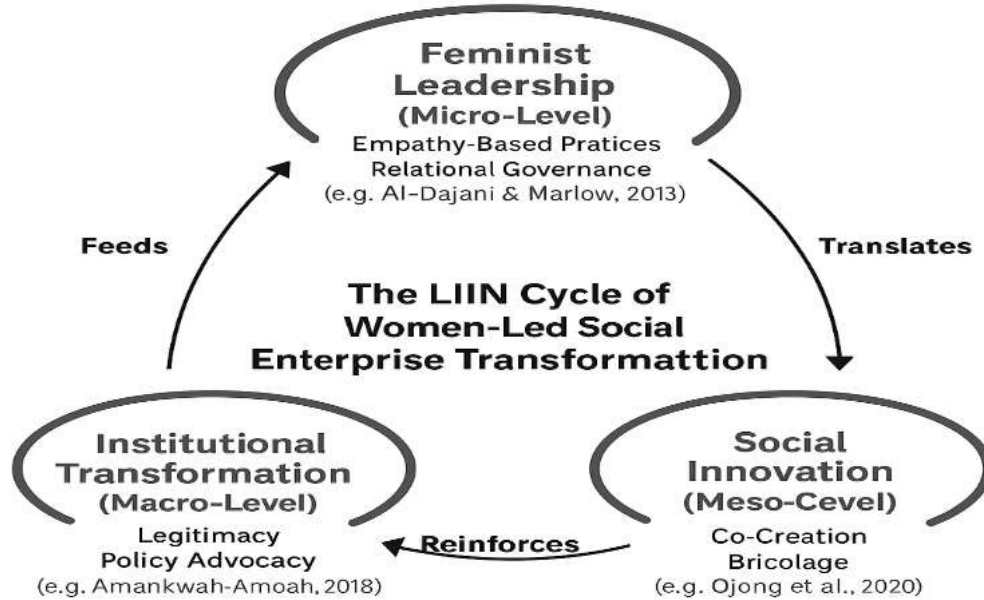

Figure 2. The Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN) Cycle of Women-Led Social

Enterprise Transformation

This conceptual diagram illustrates the cyclical relationship between feminist leadership (micro level), social innovation (meso level), and institutional transformation (macro level). The model illustrates how leadership practices generate innovation, which in turn legitimises women-led enterprises within institutional contexts, and institutional change fosters inclusive leadership ecosystems.

Linking the Theoretical Framework to the Methodology

The LIIN framework provides the analytical foundation for the methodological choices in this study. By positioning feminist leadership, social innovation, and institutional transformation as interdependent dimensions, the model informed the inclusion criteria, coding structure, and thematic synthesis applied in the systematic review. The framework guided data extraction across studies by identifying evidence of micro-level leadership agency, meso-level innovation practices, and macro-level institutional shifts. This ensured conceptual coherence between Theory and evidence, enabling the synthesis to generate an integrated understanding of how women-led social enterprises create value and enact change across diverse institutional contexts.

Building on the Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN) framework, this study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) to ground the model in existing research empirically. The LIIN framework provides the analytical lens for interpreting how feminist leadership, social innovation, and institutional change interact within women-led social enterprises (WLSEs). Rather than testing the framework quantitatively, the review uses it as a conceptual scaffold to guide the extraction, coding, and thematic synthesis of evidence from prior studies.

The decision to employ an SLR method aligns with the study's aim to consolidate fragmented research across disciplines such as gender studies, entrepreneurship, and social innovation. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), the methodology ensures transparency, replicability, and comprehensiveness in identifying, screening, and analysing relevant literature. In this context, the LIIN framework operates both as an interpretive tool for categorising findings and as a theoretical output derived from iterative synthesis. This dual role enables the study to move beyond descriptive aggregation toward the generation of new theoretical insights about how WLSEs function as multi-level systems of empowerment, innovation, and institutional transformation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to examine how women-led social enterprises (WLSEs) contribute to gender equality and sustainable development through leadership, innovation, and institutional

transformation. The SLR method was chosen because it enables a structured, transparent, and replicable synthesis of existing evidence (Snyder, 2019). In line with the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), the review aimed to ensure methodological rigour and reproducibility throughout the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

The review integrates academic and institutional literature to capture the multidisciplinary, practice-based nature of WLSEs. Academic sources provide conceptual and empirical insights, while institutional publications (e.g., from UN Women, OECD, and UNDP) offer policy and global development perspectives. This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of the leadership-innovation-institutional nexus (LIIN) across theoretical and practical dimensions.

Search Strategy
The literature search was conducted between January and March 2025 across four major academic databases:
- Scopus
- Web of Science (WoS)
- EBSCOhost (Business Source Complete)
- ProQuest (Social Sciences & Development Studies)

To capture grey literature and policy insights, supplemental searches were performed on:
- UN Women Publications Database
- OECD iLibrary
- World Bank Open Knowledge Repository
- Google Scholar (for institutional and recent open-access sources)

Boolean search strings were adapted to each database using the following keywords and operators:
("women-led social enterprise" OR "female social entrepreneur" OR "gender and social innovation" OR "women in hybrid organization")
AND ("sustainable development" OR "SDGs" OR "institutional change" OR "inclusive growth" OR "gender equality")
All retrieved records were exported to Zotero for reference management and duplicate removal.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
To ensure relevance and quality, a two-stage screening process was applied using explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2).

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication period	2015–2025	Before 2015
Language	English	Non-English
Document type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, book chapters	Editorials, conference abstracts, dissertations
Focus	Studies focusing on women-led or gendered social enterprises, leadership, innovation, or institutional contexts	Studies on entrepreneurship without gender or social mission focus
Methodology	Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method studies	Opinion pieces without empirical or conceptual grounding
Accessibility	Full-text available	Abstract only or inaccessible full text

Screening Process and PRISMA Flow Description
The search initially yielded 1,134 records across databases. After removing 214 duplicates, 920 unique studies remained.
- Stage 1 - Title and Abstract Screening: 920 records were screened based on titles and abstracts. 640 records were excluded for irrelevance (e.g., unrelated to WLSEs, general entrepreneurship).
- Stage 2 - Full-Text Review: 280 articles were assessed in full. 228 were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria (e.g., lacking gender analysis or failing to address social enterprise dimensions).
- Stage 3 - Final Inclusion: A total of 52 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. These comprised 41 peer-reviewed journal articles, 7 institutional reports, and 4 book chapters.

PRISMA Flow Diagram (Narrative Description)
The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 3) illustrates the review process from identification to inclusion.
1. Identification: 1,134 records identified through database searches (Scopus = 410, WoS = 268, EBSCOhost = 247, ProQuest = 143, Grey Literature = 66).
2. Screening: After duplicates (n = 214) were removed, 920 records were screened.
3. Eligibility: 280 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility.
4. Inclusion: 52 studies met all inclusion criteria and were synthesised qualitatively.
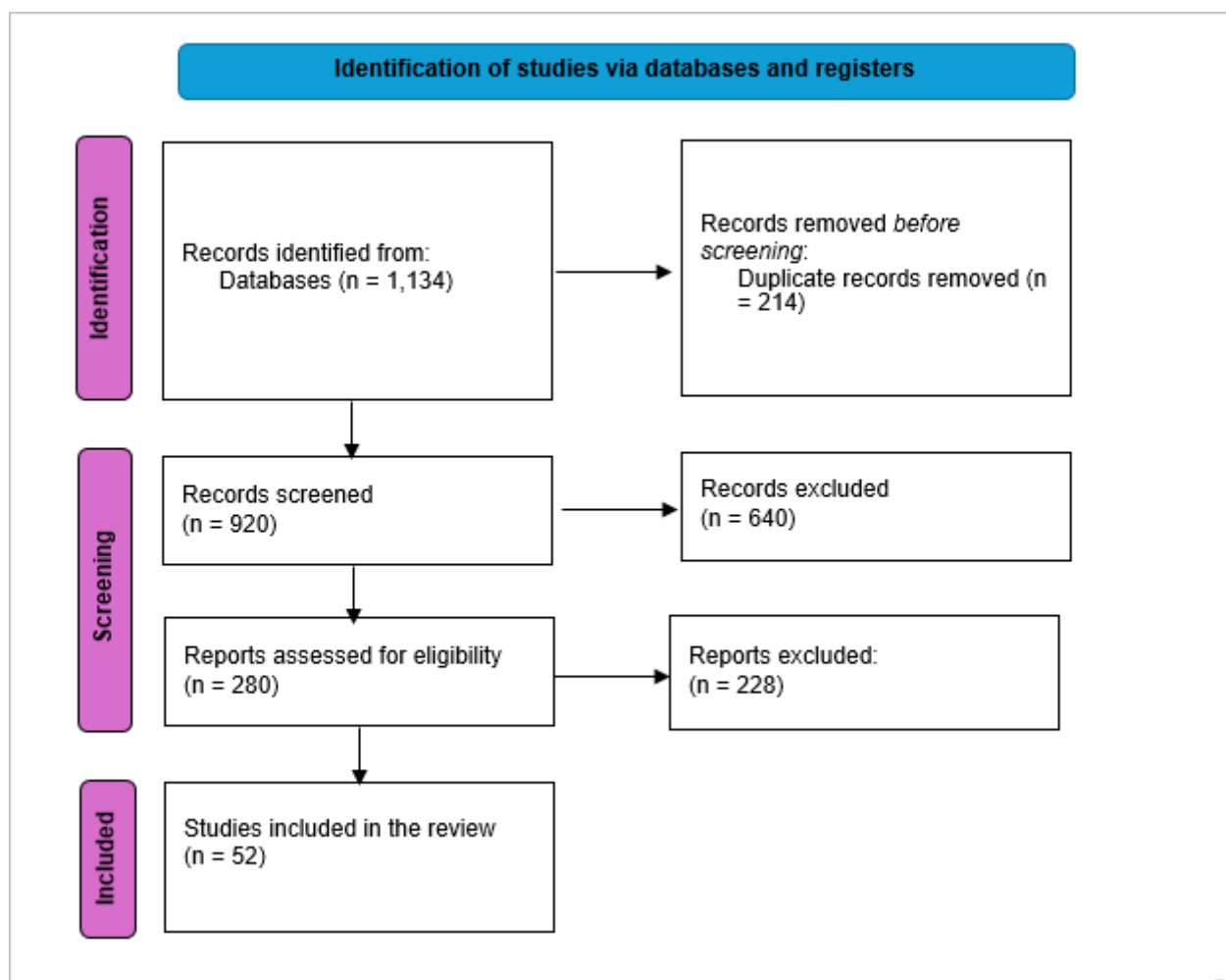
Figure 3. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies in the systematic literature review on women-led social enterprises (2015–2025).

Data Extraction and Synthesis

A data extraction matrix was developed to capture key bibliographic details (author, year, context, methodology) and thematic dimensions aligned with the LIIN framework: leadership, innovation, and institutional transformation. Each article was coded manually using a hybrid deductive–inductive approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008):

- Deductive codes were derived from the three LIIN dimensions.
- Inductive codes emerged from patterns and insights identified across studies.

Thematic synthesis was conducted iteratively in NVivo, allowing emergent subthemes to refine and strengthen the conceptual model. Patterns and relationships were compared across geographic regions, methodological approaches, and organisational types to enhance interpretive validity.

Methodological Rigour and Reflexivity

To ensure credibility and reliability:

- A transparent audit trail of search decisions was maintained.
- Data extraction was verified by peer cross-checking of 20% of entries.
- Triangulation across academic and institutional sources reduced publication bias.
- Reflexivity was applied throughout to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and gendered assumptions in the entrepreneurship literature.

Findings and Thematic Analysis

This section presents the findings of the systematic literature review, organised according to the three analytical dimensions of the Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN) framework:

- Feminist Leadership and Empowerment,
- Social Innovation and Organisational Practice, and
- Institutional Transformation and Systemic Change.

Together, these themes illustrate how women-led social enterprises (WLSEs) act as interconnected systems of empowerment that translate leadership values into sustainable impact.

Feminist Leadership and Empowerment (Micro-Level)

Across the reviewed studies, feminist leadership consistently emerged as the foundation of women-led social enterprise operations. This leadership style differs from traditional models by centring empathy, inclusion, collaboration, and social responsibility (Eagly & Carli, 2007). WLSE founders often described leadership not as positional authority but as *collective influence*, mobilising others toward shared social goals.

Empirical studies across Africa, Asia, and Europe have revealed a strong emphasis on relational leadership practices, in which women leaders invest in capacity-building, mentorship, and participatory decision-making (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013). This inclusive style fosters employee commitment and community ownership, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and sustainability of social enterprises.

Several studies have highlighted that feminist leadership within WLSEs often stems from lived experiences, particularly marginalisation, care work, or social exclusion. These experiences inform a leadership ethos grounded in empathy and service rather than competition (Nieuwenhuizen, 2022). For example, Indian women social entrepreneurs frequently invoked care ethics as a guiding principle for decision-making, creating workplace cultures based on trust and dignity.

Another prominent pattern was the dual role of leadership, both as empowerment and as resistance. In patriarchal contexts, WLSE leaders act as both organisational heads and agents of social change, challenging gendered stereotypes that restrict women's visibility in economic life (Amankwah-Amoah, 2018). By adopting horizontal organisational structures and transparent governance, women leaders redistribute power internally, redefining what it means to "lead" in entrepreneurship.

Finally, feminist leadership within WLSEs proved instrumental in cultivating psychological empowerment among employees and beneficiaries. Studies in Uganda and Pakistan found that leadership behaviours grounded in emotional intelligence, compassion, and mentorship enhanced women's confidence and sense of agency. Collectively, these findings confirm that leadership in WLSEs is *transformational rather than transactional*, serving as the micro-level catalyst of social change in the LIIN model.

Social Innovation and Organisational Practice (Meso-Level)

The second thematic strand of the LIIN framework, social innovation, captures how WLSEs operationalise feminist leadership values into tangible products, services, and systems that create community impact. Across the reviewed literature, WLSEs demonstrated a consistent capacity to generate context-specific solutions to social problems, reflecting both creativity and adaptability (Phills et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2010).

Many studies described social innovation as a process of co-creation between women leaders and their communities. In Nigeria and Ghana, for instance, Ojong et al. (2020) found that WLSEs introduced microfinance schemes, recycling initiatives, and vocational training programmes designed in collaboration with beneficiaries. This participatory approach strengthened social legitimacy and improved service uptake.

WLSEs also play a critical role in bridging digital and economic divides. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, women social entrepreneurs across Africa and Asia leveraged technology to maintain service delivery, develop e-commerce models, and support virtual education or health access. These adaptive innovations reflect a broader trend of digital social entrepreneurship, in which technology serves as a tool of inclusion rather than disruption.

The literature further shows that WLSEs are often embedded innovators; their proximity to communities allows them to identify needs more precisely than top-down interventions (Littlewood & Holt, 2015). Such enterprises frequently transform constraints into creative opportunities, a phenomenon Mair and Marti (2009) refer to as *bricolage*. Through bricolage, women entrepreneurs combine limited resources, local knowledge, informal networks, and community trust to develop viable social business models.

A recurring insight across studies is that WLSE innovations tend to prioritise collective well-being over scalability. While this orientation limits rapid growth, it enhances long-term sustainability and social embeddedness (Nieuwenhuizen, 2022). For example, WLSEs in Kenya and India preferred maintaining deep community engagement over aggressive market expansion, illustrating a value-driven approach to innovation.

Overall, the evidence underscores that WLSEs operationalise leadership ethics through innovative organisational practices, embedding empowerment, care, and resilience within the very design of their business models. In the LIIN framework, social innovation represents the *meso-level mechanism* that converts leadership values into institutional influence.

Institutional Transformation and Systemic Change (Macro-Level)

The third analytical dimension, institutional transformation, reflects how WLSEs engage with and influence broader social, political, and economic systems. Drawing from Institutional Theory (Scott, 2014), the reviewed studies highlight that women social entrepreneurs operate within institutional voids where formal structures are weak or exclusionary. WLSEs navigate these spaces through institutional bricolage, reconfiguring norms and rules to legitimise new forms of gendered enterprise (Mair & Marti, 2009; Amankwah-Amoah, 2018).

WLSEs often serve as agents of institutional entrepreneurship, advocating for gender-sensitive policies and inclusive economic systems. Empirical evidence from Africa (Nieuwenhuizen, 2022) and Asia indicates that women-led organisations actively influence policy through collective associations, partnerships with NGOs, and advocacy networks. Their engagement has led to reforms in procurement, access to credit, and recognition of informal work sectors.

A consistent finding across studies is that institutional legitimacy remains a central challenge. WLSEs face funding barriers due to gender bias, limited collateral, and the undervaluation of care-oriented sectors (OECD, 2023). Despite these

constraints, WLSEs often build legitimacy through social proof, demonstrating impact, fostering trust, and creating alliances with government and development partners.

At the macro level, WLSEs contribute to systemic social transformation by modelling alternative institutional logics grounded in inclusion and accountability. They redefine entrepreneurship as a socially embedded practice rather than an individualistic pursuit, aligning with SDG principles of equity and sustainability (UNDP, 2022; UN Women, 2023). Through advocacy, partnership, and demonstration effects, WLSEs gradually reshape gender norms and institutional attitudes toward women's economic participation.

The reviewed literature, therefore, supports the LIIN model's assertion that institutional transformation is both an outcome and an enabler of feminist leadership and social innovation. Institutional shifts, such as gender-inclusive policy reforms or legitimised hybrid financing, feed back into the system, creating new pathways for women leaders and entrepreneurs. This cyclical feedback underscores the systemic interdependence at the heart of the LIIN framework.

Cross-Level Synthesis: The LIIN Cycle in Action
Synthesising across the three levels reveals a cyclical, mutually reinforcing relationship among leadership, innovation, and institutional transformation.

- Feminist leadership initiates change through empowerment and shared vision.
- Social innovation operationalises these values through context-driven solutions.
- Institutional transformation consolidates and amplifies these impacts, reshaping environments to support the emergence of further leadership.

Empirical patterns across regions demonstrate that the most sustainable WLSEs are those able to navigate and align all three levels, cultivating values (micro), embedding practices (meso), and influencing systems (macro). This cyclical relationship distinguishes WLSEs from conventional entrepreneurship, establishing them as *multi-level engines of sustainable development*.

DISCUSSIONS
The findings of this systematic review confirm that women-led social enterprises (WLSEs) are not merely business entities responding to social problems; they are complex socio-economic systems that simultaneously challenge gender hierarchies, create new institutional norms, and model sustainable development in practice. By integrating evidence across 52 studies published between 2015 and 2025, this research demonstrates how feminist leadership, social innovation, and institutional transformation function as interconnected dimensions of change. These very components underpin the proposed Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN) framework.

Advancing Theory: From Fragmented Insights to the LIIN Framework
The LIIN framework advances existing Theory by uniting three distinct yet complementary traditions: Feminist Leadership Theory, Social Innovation Theory, and Institutional Theory. Previous research on women's entrepreneurship has typically examined these dimensions in isolation, focusing either on individual empowerment, organisational innovation, or structural constraints. The LIIN framework integrates these into a single model that captures multi-level value creation, aligning with recent calls in social enterprise research for more holistic, systems-oriented theorisation (Doherty et al., 2014; Defourny & Nyssens, 2017).

At the micro level, feminist leadership emerges as the moral and emotional foundation of enterprise practice. WLSEs demonstrate that leadership rooted in empathy and collective care is not antithetical to economic performance; instead, it *drive*s organisational trust and legitimacy. This insight challenges traditional leadership theories, which often prioritise competitiveness, rationality, and hierarchy (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

At the meso level, social innovation operates as the vehicle through which leadership values are translated into community outcomes. The reviewed studies illustrate how WLSEs transform lived experiences into organisational design, embedding inclusion and equity into their business models. This process aligns with the "innovation-as-justice" paradigm proposed by Murray et al. (2010), where creativity serves not only market needs but also social repair.

At the macro level, institutional transformation closes the LIIN cycle. WLSEs, through their advocacy, partnership, and modelling practices, act as institutional entrepreneurs who legitimise new gender norms within economic systems (Mair & Marti, 2009). This finding extends institutional Theory by demonstrating that even small, resource-constrained enterprises can exercise structural influence through moral legitimacy and social demonstration effects.

Collectively, these dimensions validate the LIIN framework as a multi-level theory of social transformation, showing how leadership, innovation, and institutions interact dynamically to sustain gender-equitable development.

The LIIN Framework as a Generative Cycle
A significant contribution of this study lies in conceptualising the LIIN not as a linear model but as a cyclical and generative system. The findings reveal a recursive process in which each level feeds back into the next: feminist leadership inspires social innovation; innovation legitimises institutional change; and institutional change reinforces conditions for further leadership.

This cyclical understanding contrasts with traditional entrepreneurship frameworks, which often assume linear causality, from opportunity identification to venture growth. In the LIIN model, causality is reciprocal and relational, reflecting the lived realities of women entrepreneurs who continuously negotiate personal values, community needs, and institutional constraints.

This insight is critical in the Global South, where formal institutions are often weak or exclusionary. Here, WLSEs rely on relational networks, cultural legitimacy, and informal coalitions to enact change, effectively filling institutional voids (Amankwah-Amoah, 2018). The LIIN framework captures these dynamics by acknowledging that institutional transformation is both an outcome *and* an enabler of empowerment.

Thus, the LIIN is not only a descriptive framework but a normative one; it articulates how social change *should* occur in gendered entrepreneurial systems: through empathy-driven leadership, inclusive innovation, and structural transformation working in concert.

Bridging the Micro–Macro Gap in Gender and Entrepreneurship Research

A long-standing limitation in gender and entrepreneurship literature is the micro-macro gap, the disconnection between individual agency and structural change (Elam et al., 2019). The LIIN framework addresses this by situating women entrepreneurs within overlapping systems of power, knowledge, and institutions. It recognises that empowerment does not occur in isolation; it is co-produced through social interactions and institutional feedback.

By showing how WLSEs create enabling environments for others, this study reframes women's entrepreneurship as collective agency rather than individual achievement. This perspective aligns with feminist leadership economic theory, which emphasises interdependence and social reproduction as integral to development. In doing so, the LIIN framework contributes to a paradigm shift, from viewing women entrepreneurs as "add-ons" to recognising them as architects of institutional renewal.

This theoretical repositioning also challenges the persistent gender-neutrality of social enterprise research. By explicitly incorporating feminist principles, the LIIN model offers a gendered re-theorisation of hybridity, demonstrating how women leaders balance economic and social logics through ethical, relational, and participatory practices.

Policy and Practice Implications

The findings have significant implications for policy, development practice, and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

First, policymakers should recognise WLSEs as strategic partners in achieving the SDGs, rather than merely as beneficiaries of aid or social investment. Gender-responsive policies, such as targeted financing, tax incentives, and procurement preferences, can enable WLSEs to scale impact sustainably (OECD, 2023; UNDP, 2022).

Second, entrepreneurship support programs must incorporate leadership development and mentorship structures rooted in feminist principles. These can strengthen confidence, negotiation power, and inter-organisational collaboration, all of which are essential for navigating male-dominated markets.

Third, funding agencies should adopt gendered impact measurement frameworks, as proposed by, to capture social value beyond financial returns. Current assessment tools often overlook relational and empowerment-based outcomes that are central to WLSE effectiveness.

Finally, at the community level, WLSEs should be recognised as grassroots institutions of change. Their participatory models and locally grounded innovations can inform broader policy experiments in inclusive governance, especially in post-conflict or low-resource settings where formal institutions struggle to reach marginalised populations.

Reframing Social Enterprise Research through the LIIN Lens

The integration of the LIIN framework offers a new conceptual vantage point for future research. It positions WLSEs as *relational systems* that link personal transformation to structural evolution. Rather than treating social enterprise as a fixed organisational type, the LIIN encourages scholars to study it as a process of continuous interaction between leadership ethics, innovation practices, and institutional dynamics.

Future studies could empirically apply or test the LIIN framework, for instance, through longitudinal or comparative case studies, to explore how these dimensions evolve or differ across cultural and policy contexts. Quantitative researchers could operationalise LIIN variables (e.g., leadership inclusivity, innovation depth, institutional engagement) to examine causal relationships or moderating effects on social impact outcomes.

By foregrounding women's lived experiences and agency, the LIIN framework shifts the research lens from "how women fit into entrepreneurship" to how women transform entrepreneurship itself. This marks a crucial step toward reimagining social enterprise as a feminist space of innovation and institutional renewal.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for social enterprise leaders, policymakers, and development practitioners working to foster sustainable, inclusive innovation in resource-limited settings. Central to these implications is the recognition that leadership within hybrid organisations extends beyond positional authority to encompass relational influence, contextual adaptability, and collective empowerment.

First, the study underscores the importance of leadership as an enabling process rather than a structural role. Social enterprise leaders, particularly women operating within constrained institutional environments, demonstrated that innovation often emerges from their capacity to interpret, negotiate, and reshape institutional boundaries. Training and leadership development initiatives should therefore emphasise adaptive capacity, reflexivity, and context literacy over technical management skills alone.

Second, the empirical evidence highlights institutional bricolage as a legitimate and strategic approach to innovation in the global South. Policymakers and support organisations can build on this by recognising informal and hybrid practices as sources of legitimacy and creativity, rather than signs of weakness or non-compliance. This implies a shift in

how development partners design support programmes, moving away from top-down replication models toward locally responsive and participatory forms of capacity building.

Third, the study demonstrates that feminist leadership principles, such as shared decision-making, empathy, and collective accountability, can drive both organisational resilience and community empowerment. Integrating these principles into leadership frameworks and funding criteria could enhance gender-sensitive social innovation and ensure that interventions are inclusive, sustainable, and contextually grounded.

Finally, the LIIN framework offers practitioners a diagnostic and reflective tool for examining how leadership practices interact with institutional structures to produce innovation. Practitioners can use the framework to identify points of friction or opportunity within their organisations, encouraging continuous learning and adaptive strategy. When applied in leadership training, programme design, or policy evaluation, LIIN provides a structured yet flexible lens for navigating the inherent tensions of hybridity and for advancing social value creation in complex environments.

Implications for Theory

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the understanding of leadership and hybrid value creation within social enterprises. The development of the *Leadership-Institutional-Innovation Nexus (LIIN)* framework offers a fresh conceptual perspective that integrates leadership theory with institutional and innovation studies. It advances the conversation on hybridity by framing leadership not merely as an organisational function but as a dynamic process of *institutional negotiation and adaptive sensemaking*.

First, LIIN repositions leadership as a mediating mechanism in the hybridity discourse. Previous models, such as those of Brush and Cooper (2012) and Battilana et al. (2015), have primarily explained hybrid organising through structural tensions between social and commercial logics. This study extends those models by showing that leadership operates at the intersection of these logics, enabling organisations to recalibrate legitimacy and impact continuously. Leadership, in this view, is both the *driver* and *outcome* of hybrid adaptation.

Second, the study contributes to institutional Theory by demonstrating that institutional bricolage is not only a response to constraint but also a *leadership strategy* that transforms existing norms into resources for innovation. By highlighting how women-led social enterprises engage in bricolage, the research adds a gendered and contextual dimension to institutional adaptation theories, which have often been critiqued for their Western and organisational-level focus.

Third, the findings deepen feminist leadership theory by illustrating how relational and collective leadership practices produce measurable organisational and community outcomes. The study bridges feminist perspectives on empowerment with leadership and innovation literatures, revealing how inclusive, empathy-driven practices function as strategic levers for navigating institutional complexity. This enriches theoretical understandings of power, agency, and leadership effectiveness in socially embedded contexts.

Finally, the *LIIN framework* advances innovation theory by conceptualising innovation as an embedded and iterative process shaped by social relationships and institutional negotiation. It shifts the focus from innovation as a product or outcome to innovation as a *relational and adaptive process* sustained by leadership practice. This reconceptualisation opens new avenues for theorising how context, culture, and leadership co-produce innovation within hybrid organisational systems.

Collectively, these theoretical implications position LIIN as a bridging framework that links leadership, institutional Theory, and social innovation within a unified, context-sensitive lens. It invites scholars to move beyond static representations of hybridity toward a more dynamic understanding of how leaders continually create, negotiate, and sustain value in complex social systems.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to explore how women-led social enterprises (WLSEs) contribute to gender equality and sustainable development, and to develop a novel conceptual framework that captures the dynamics underlying their impact. Through a systematic literature review of 52 studies published between 2015 and 2025, the research identified consistent patterns of empowerment, innovation, and institutional engagement that define the practice of WLSEs across global contexts.

The study's principal contribution lies in the formulation of the Leadership-Innovation-Institutional Nexus (LIIN) framework, an integrative model that unites Feminist Leadership Theory, Social Innovation Theory, and Institutional Theory. The LIIN framework presents women-led social enterprises as multi-level systems of transformation that operate across interconnected layers. At the micro level, feminist leadership fosters empowerment, empathy, and collective agency, shaping how individuals engage, make decisions, and exercise leadership. These values are then carried forward at the meso level, where social innovation converts them into sustainable organisational practices that guide operations, governance, and impact creation. At the macro level, the effects extend beyond individual organisations, as institutional transformation embeds these outcomes within broader structural and policy reforms, contributing to more inclusive and equitable systems.

The cyclical interaction between these levels forms a generative feedback loop that sustains social change. By theorising this dynamic relationship, the LIIN framework moves beyond traditional gender and entrepreneurship models that treat leadership, innovation, and institutions as separate spheres. Instead, it offers a relational and systemic understanding of how women entrepreneurs catalyse inclusive development.

The findings also highlight that WLSEs, despite operating under significant structural constraints, including financial exclusion, policy ambiguity, and gender bias, continue to drive transformative impact. Their hybrid strategies of moral legitimacy, participatory leadership, and contextual innovation demonstrate that social value creation is inseparable from gendered agency. In this way, WLSEs are not peripheral actors in development but central architects of institutional change.

This study makes four key contributions to the growing scholarship on leadership, innovation, and institutional negotiation in social enterprises. While the findings are interconnected, each contribution advances a distinct strand of Theory and practice. Together, they deepen understanding of how leadership enables social value creation in contexts shaped by institutional constraints, gendered realities, and resource scarcity. Table 3 below maps each contribution to the corresponding findings and sections of the study to enhance clarity and traceability.

Table 3. Contribution to the corresponding findings and sections of the study to enhance clarity and traceability

Contribution	Description	Linked Section/Finding
1. Development of the LIIN Framework	Introduces the *Leadership–Institutional–Innovation Nexus (LIIN)* framework, which explains how leadership mediates the dynamic interaction between institutional constraints and innovation processes in social enterprises.	Section 5.3 – Cross-case synthesis
2. Contextualising feminist leadership in African social enterprise	Highlights how women leaders mobilise relational, collective, and community-based leadership practices to create social value and empower marginalised groups.	Section 4.2 – Case narratives (Mamamoni, Footprint of David)
3. Empirical evidence of institutional bricolage in gendered contexts	Demonstrates how women-led social enterprises creatively repurpose existing institutional norms and limited resources to create sustainable solutions, reframing constraints as opportunities.	Section 5.1 – Thematic findings
4. Theoretical extension of hybrid value creation logics	Advances hybrid organisation theory by conceptualising LIIN as a dynamic, adaptive process that bridges leadership, institutional, and innovation dimensions beyond existing hybrid models.	Section 6.2 – Theoretical implications

The first contribution lies in the development of the LIIN framework, which offers a new conceptual lens for understanding how leadership, institutional context, and innovation interact to shape social value creation. Unlike existing hybrid models such as Brush and Cooper's (2012) framework, which primarily examine hybrid entrepreneurship as a process of resource integration, LIIN explicitly foregrounds *leadership as the mediating force* through which institutional pressures are negotiated and innovation is enabled. Similarly, while Battilana et al. (2015) focus on the structural tensions between social and commercial logics, LIIN extends this discussion by demonstrating how leaders actively navigate legitimacy and stakeholder expectations through *adaptive and context-sensitive practices*. This theoretical refinement positions LIIN as both a conceptual and a practical bridge between leadership studies and hybrid value-creation research.

The second contribution enriches the understanding of feminist leadership in African social enterprises by showing how women leaders embody inclusivity, relational power, and community participation. The findings reveal that leadership is often exercised collectively, reflecting a culturally embedded form of agency that aligns with feminist and postcolonial perspectives on empowerment. This challenges the individualistic, performance-driven models of leadership that dominate Western discourse.

Thirdly, the study contributes empirical evidence of institutional bricolage in gendered contexts, illustrating how women-led social enterprises creatively navigate resource constraints and institutional voids. Through the strategic recombination of norms, relationships, and informal mechanisms, these leaders transform structural limitations into platforms for empowerment. This finding strengthens the growing literature that views bricolage as a vital mechanism of institutional adaptation in developing economies.

Finally, the research offers a theoretical extension of hybrid value-creation logics by positioning LIIN as a dynamic, iterative process rather than a static structure. It captures how leadership practices and institutional negotiation evolve alongside innovation processes, creating a feedback loop that sustains organisational legitimacy and social impact over time. This contribution encourages future studies to conceptualise hybridity not merely as an organisational form, but as an *adaptive practice* shaped by leadership, context, and community participation.

Although the literature review in this study was comprehensive, it revealed notable geographical and contextual gaps in existing scholarship. Research on social enterprise leadership and hybrid value creation remains heavily concentrated in Western and, to a lesser extent, African and Asian contexts. Regions such as Latin America and the Middle East are underrepresented in both empirical studies and theoretical discussions. This imbalance may reflect linguistic and publication biases, where research published in non-English languages is less likely to appear in mainstream academic databases. It may also relate to institutional priorities and funding patterns that privilege Global North perspectives or specific development paradigms.

Recognising these omissions is important, as the socio-political and cultural contexts of underrepresented regions may yield distinctive manifestations of leadership, innovation, and institutional negotiation. For instance, social enterprises operating in Latin American contexts often draw on community-based solidarity economies. At the same time, those in the Middle East may be shaped by religious or family-based value systems. Exploring these alternative logics of practice could broaden current theoretical understandings of how social enterprises achieve legitimacy and sustainability within diverse institutional environments.

Future research should advance the LIIN framework along several important directions. One priority is geographical extension, particularly through applying the framework to Latin American and Middle Eastern contexts to understand how leadership mediates institutional negotiation within different cultural and policy environments. Comparative cross-regional studies help identify which elements of the LIIN model are broadly applicable and which are shaped by local conditions. A second direction involves theoretical deepening by examining how intersectional factors such as gender, class, and cultural identity influence leadership adaptation and value creation, thereby extending debates on feminist and inclusive leadership in hybrid organisations. A third avenue is methodological innovation, with greater use of longitudinal or participatory approaches to capture how leadership and innovation develop over time. Such methods would allow LIIN to

be understood as an evolving, iterative process rather than a fixed framework. Together, these directions can contribute to a more inclusive and contextually grounded theory of hybrid value creation that recognises diverse pathways to social impact and the varied leadership logics that sustain them.

REFERENCES

Al-Dajani, H., & Marlow, S. (2013). Empowerment and entrepreneurship: A theoretical framework. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*, *19*(5), 503–524. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijebr-10-2011-0138

Amankwah-Amoah, J. (2018). Human capital flows in failing organizations: an integrated conceptual framework. *Journal of Intellectual Capital*, *19*(4), 732–746. https://doi.org/10.1108/JIC-05-2017-0065

Battilana, J., Sengul, M., Pache, A.-C., & Model, J. (2015). Harnessing Productive Tensions in Hybrid Organisations: The Case of Work Integration Social Enterprises. *The Academy of Management Journal*, *58*(6), 1658–1685. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/24758270

Brush, C. G., & Cooper, S. Y. (2012). Female entrepreneurship and economic development: An international perspective. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, *24*(1-2), 1–6.

Calás, M. B., Smircich, L., & Bourne, K. A. (2009). Extending the Boundaries: Reframing "Entrepreneurship as Social Change" Through Feminist Perspectives. *Academy of Management Review*, *34*(3), 552–569. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2009.40633597

Defourny, J., & Nyssens, M. (2017). Fundamentals for an International Typology of Social Enterprise Models. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, *28*(6), 2469–2497. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-017-9884-7

Doherty, B., Haugh, H., & Lyon, F. (2014). Social Enterprises as Hybrid Organizations: a Review and Research Agenda. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *16*(4), 417–436. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12028

Eagly, A. H., & Carli, L. L. (2007). *Through the labyrinth: The truth about how women become leaders*. Boston, Mass. Harvard Business School Press.

Ebrahim, A., Battilana, J., & Mair, J. (2014). The Governance of Social Enterprises: Mission Drift and Accountability Challenges in Hybrid Organizations. *Research in Organisational Behaviour*, *34*(34), 81–100. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2014.09.001

Elam, A., Brush, C., Greene, P., Baumer, B., Dean, M., & Heavlow, R. (2019). Women's Entrepreneurship Report 2018/2019. *Global Entrepreneurship Research Association*. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.smith.edu/conway_research/4/

Littlewood, D., & Holt, D. (2015). Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa: Exploring the Influence of Environment. *Business & Society*, *57*(3), 525–561. https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650315613293

Mair, J., & Marti, I. (2009). Entrepreneurship in and around institutional voids: A case study from Bangladesh. *Journal of Business Venturing*, *24*(5), 419–435. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2008.04.006

Murray, R., Caulier-Grice, J., & Mulgan, G. (2010). *SOCIAL INNOVATOR SERIES: WAYS TO DESIGN, DEVELOP, AND GROW SOCIAL INNOVATION, THE OPEN BOOK OF SOCIAL INNOVATION*. Retrieved from http://temp.uefiscdi.ro/edigiregion_v2/the_open_book_of_social_innovationNESTA.pdf

Nicholls, A., Gabriel, M., & Simon, J. (2020). *New Frontiers in Social Innovation Research*. Saint Philip Street Press.

Nicholls, A., & Huybrechts, B. (2014). Sustaining Inter-organisational Relationships Across Institutional Logics and Power Asymmetries: The Case of Fair Trade. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *135*(4), 699–714. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2495-y

Nieuwenhuizen, C. (2022). Female social entrepreneurs in Africa are creating social value through innovation. *Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues*, *9*(4), 225–242. https://doi.org/10.9770/jesi.2022.9.4(12)

Northouse, P. G. (2022). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (9th ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing.

OECD. (2023). The Missing Entrepreneurs 2023. Retrieved from OECD website: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-missing-entrepreneurs-2023_230efc78-en.html

Ojong, I. N., Nsemo, A. D., & Aji, P. (2020). Routine medical checkup knowledge, attitude, and practice among health care workers in a tertiary health facility in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. *Glob J Health Sci*, *12*(8), 27.

Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., … McGuinness, L. A. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *British Medical Journal*, *372*(71). https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71

Phills, J., Deiglmeier, K., & Miller, D. (2019). Rediscovering Social Innovation (SSIR). Retrieved from Ssir.org website: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/rediscovering_social_innovation

Santos, F. M. (2012). A Positive Theory of Social Entrepreneurship. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *111*(3), 335–351. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1413-4

Scott, W. R. (2014). Institutions and Organisations: Ideas, Interests, and Identities. In *Google Books*. SAGE Publications. Retrieved from https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=NbQgAQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=Scott

Smith, W. K., Gonin, M., & Besharov, M. L. (2013). Managing Social-Business Tensions: A Review and Research Agenda for Social Enterprise. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *23*(3), 407–442. https://doi.org/10.5840/beq201323327

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, *104*(1), 333–339. ScienceDirect. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039

Spear, R., Cornforth, C., & Aiken, M. (2009). THE GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES: EVIDENCE FROM A UK EMPIRICAL STUDY. *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*, *80*(2), 247–273. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8292.2009.00386.x

UN Women. (2023). Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2023. Retrieved from UN Women – Headquarters website: https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2023

UNDP. (2022). *UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY 2022-2025*. Retrieved from https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-09/UNDP_Gender_Equality_Strategy_2022-2025_EN.pdf

Wilson, F., & Post, J. E. (2011). Business models for people, planet (& profits): exploring the phenomena of social business, a market-based approach to social value creation. *Small Business Economics*, *40*(3), 715–737. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-011-9401-0