

Experiences of Women Entrepreneurs in Central Asia and Globalization

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ABSTRACT

Many Central Asian women are starting their own businesses to gain independence and control over their lives; they seek not only income but also confidence and recognition. This qualitative study examines how globalization impacts the emergence and development of women entrepreneurs in Central Asia.

The study also focuses on global tools, platforms, and opportunities to support women in launching and growing their own businesses, as well as what kinds of challenges they continue to face. The results of this study showed that globalization has opened up significant pathways for entrepreneurial growth, especially through digital technologies and international networks.

However, many women continue to encounter structural inequalities, lack of mentorship, and societal expectations that hinder their full participation in the business world. This study also recommends offering more practical training, encouraging partnerships between women in different countries, and using online communities to help women connect, learn, and grow their businesses.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an increasing number of women across Central Asia have begun to enter the world of entrepreneurship. This shift is not merely an economic move. It represents a broader transformation in the region's social fabric. For many women, launching a business is a way to gain personal and financial independence, build self-confidence, and earn recognition in a traditionally male-dominated society. The decision to become an entrepreneur often stems from a desire to take control over one's own future and contribute meaningfully to both family and community life. Whether it is a small shop, a digital platform, or a regional enterprise, women-led businesses are becoming more visible and impactful throughout Kazakhstan.

However, while this change is evident on the ground, research often overlooks one of the key forces that may be enabling this trend: globalization. Globalization is a complex and powerful phenomenon that has connected the world through technology, trade, information, and culture. It shapes how people

communicate, what opportunities are available, and how businesses operate in nearly every country. In the context of Central Asia, globalization has brought new ideas, market access, role models, and digital tools that were previously unavailable or limited. Yet, little is known about how these global forces specifically affect women in business. Even less is known about how Central Asian women are using them to grow and sustain their entrepreneurial efforts.

This study aims to explore this gap. While much has been written about globalization and business in general, or about women's empowerment in isolated case studies, few academic works focus on the intersection of all three: globalization, women, and entrepreneurship in the Central Asian context. This research examines how global trends - such as access to online platforms, cross-border networking, global consumer preferences, and exposure to international role models - influence the rise of women entrepreneurs in the region. It also looks at the challenges women face despite these opportunities, including cultural expectations, gender bias, limited access to funding, and lack of policy support.

Women entrepreneurs come from a variety of backgrounds, including educated professionals, family members as part of family businesses, and small-scale enterprise owners. Many are motivated by the desire for financial independence, personal growth, and greater control over their careers. Beyond income, they often seek confidence, social recognition, and a sense of personal fulfillment through entrepreneurship. Women in Central Asia are interested in doing their own businesses looking for a career and financial independence.

The Central Asian region offers a unique lens for this topic. Historically influenced by Soviet legacy, traditional customs, and post-independence reforms, these countries present a blend of old and new values. As they open up to the global market and modern technologies, women in particular are experiencing both benefits and barriers. Some find empowerment through digital entrepreneurship or international collaborations, while others struggle to navigate the pressures of global competition and conservative social norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globalization and Women Entrepreneurs

Globalization has reshaped economies worldwide, opening new opportunities and creating unique challenges for women entrepreneurs. In Central Asia, this phenomenon intersects with cultural, social, and economic transitions, making it a crucial area of study. As global markets expand and digital technologies evolve, Central Asian women are increasingly engaging in entrepreneurship, seeking independence and growth beyond traditional roles and inequalities.

Recent literature highlights that globalization has played a significant role in shaping the landscape of women's entrepreneurship worldwide. Although globalization has expanded markets and increased awareness of women's roles in the economy, many women still face considerable challenges [1]. These include limited access to financial resources, digital inequality, and a lack of structural support systems.

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Similarly, while global connectivity has improved visibility for women entrepreneurs, deep issues such as gender inequality and uneven resource distribution remain prevalent across regions [4]. These global perspectives underline that the benefits of globalization are not universally experienced and often depend on broader socio-economic contexts.

The video “Globalization’s Double-Edged Sword: Barriers and Breakthroughs for Women Entrepreneurs” [21] explores how globalization presents both opportunities and challenges for women in business. It emphasizes that while globalization increases competition that is - often disadvantageous to small businesses. It also provides tools and access to global markets that can empower women entrepreneurs. For example, digital platforms and remote work have allowed women, especially in developing regions, to bypass traditional employment structures and enter the global economy on their own terms. The video also highlights how ethical and social entrepreneurship have emerged as responses to labor exploitation, enabling women to build fair-trade, values-driven businesses. Despite risks such as intellectual property theft and supply chain disruptions, many women are using globalization to build more resilient, tech-enabled enterprises. Furthermore, digital tools and social media now allow women to create niche brands and compete internationally, even without the resources of large corporations. These insights align with the growing recognition that while globalization can reinforce existing inequalities, it also opens pathways for innovation, autonomy, and international leadership among women entrepreneurs, particularly when they are equipped with knowledge, digital access, and supportive networks.

Central Asia presents a particularly important but underexplored context. Recent research in Kazakhstan reveals that women’s entrepreneurial motivations and leadership styles differ from broader regional trends, suggesting a need for localized study [8]. Moreover, women across Central Asia face a “double burden” of managing both business and household responsibilities, with challenges amplified during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these obstacles, women in the region are increasingly visible in leadership, innovation, and entrepreneurship, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in reshaping economic landscapes [23].

Kazakhstan provides a compelling example of how regional dynamics intersect with global trends in women’s entrepreneurship/business. Recent research in Kazakhstan reveals that women’s entrepreneurial motivations and leadership styles differ from broader regional trends, suggesting a need for localized study [8]. Moreover, women across Central Asia face a “double burden” of managing both business and household responsibilities, with challenges amplified during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic [6]. Today, their increasing presence in business leadership and innovation reflects not only resilience, but a growing ability to navigate and shape the region’s evolving economic future. For example, by launching online marketplaces, social enterprises, and tech-driven services that cater to both local and international audiences.

Recent studies emphasize how globalization supports the rise of women entrepreneurs, especially in developing and rapidly changing regions. While not focused solely on Central Asia, the research offers relevant insights. Women worldwide are launching businesses at increasing rates, empowered by access to education and digital tools [16]. In Asia, entrepreneurial trends vary from necessity-driven ventures in

less developed countries to tech-based startups in more advanced economies (Lee & Kim, 2022). Mobile learning programs in Nepal helped women overcome cultural and logistical barriers, boosting income and ambition [18]. In China, digital finance significantly improved women's access to funding and strengthened their decision-making power [19]. Global platforms like microfinance and crowdfunding have also enabled women across various regions to grow and scale their businesses (Alhassan & Li, 2022). Together, these examples show how globalization can empower women entrepreneurs, even though challenges remain.

Structural barriers remain a major concern in the region. Women across Central Asia face similar limitations, including difficulties in securing funding and underrepresentation in leadership positions [3]. These local constraints reflect global patterns, but are often intensified by cultural norms and gender gaps. Nevertheless, some researchers present a more optimistic perspective. McDaniel (2025) [3], for instance, argues that global trade and advancing technologies have expanded the freedom and flexibility for women to enter and grow within the business sector. In line with this, when women receive proper training and access to capital, their businesses are more likely to succeed [9]. Their findings highlight the importance of both local and international partnerships, such as NGOs and global networks, in supporting women-led enterprises.

Finally, broader reflections on the subject emphasize the dual nature of globalization. Gheaus (2017) suggests that while globalization can be a powerful force for women's empowerment, it must be approached critically to ensure that progress is inclusive and equitable. Overall, existing literature acknowledges the potential of globalization to improve women's economic participation but also stresses the importance of addressing persistent structural and cultural barriers - especially in transitional regions like Central Asia.

While these studies provide valuable insights, few of them directly examine the role and the rise of globalization in shaping women's entrepreneurship in Central Asia. Questions about how global markets, digital tools, and international exposure influence women-led businesses remain underexplored.

To address this gap, this qualitative study will employ interviews with 7 women entrepreneurs across Kazakhstan. This approach aims to gain both general and personal insights into how globalization-through technology, networks, and global values-has shaped their entrepreneurial journeys. By collecting real-life stories and data, this research will contribute meaningful context to the growing literature on women in business in the region and help other independent women start their own business/entrepreneurship.

Global Trends in Women's Entrepreneurship

Women's entrepreneurship is increasingly swelling to a global phenomenon which is deeply being shaped by globalization. The past two decades have seen an increase in the number of women joining the business workforce, which has been enabled by global markets and technologies [3],[4]. This is

particularly pronounced in developing and transitional economies where entrepreneurship is seen as a means of economic and social empowerment.

Globalization has changed the landscape of digital tools, international markets, and financial resources, and provided women with new ways to access these networks. With the help of the digital age, women can now engage in entrepreneurial activity from small towns and even rural areas [1]. In addition to this, mobile technologies, online platforms, and international trade have been making it easy and fast for female entrepreneurs to be more visible and expand their businesses [10].

However, this advancement is not evenly distributed. Increased participation is not resulting in widening women's challenges, such as difficulty in accessing education, restricted cultural and capital opportunities, and persistent cultural and structural biases [7],[17]. Although the literature is expanding, there is still a significant gap in addressing the issue of systemic gender bias [4]. Women entrepreneurs, in contrast to their male counterparts, faced a greater propensity to be confined to the informal sector in most Asian countries [7].

The situation in Central Asia, while characterized by specific features, is still the same. In the fields of e-commerce, wellness, education, and agriculture, women entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are leveraging digital and regional networks [8],[5]. However, there is a positive note in that some institutions and organizations are developing more inclusive frameworks. Purposeful mentorship, access to credit, as well as education, serve as vital resources for supporting policymakers to aid women-led businesses in Europe and Central Asia [6]. Similar to this, grassroots organizations like the Business Women's Association of Uzbekistan serve to aid women with training and advocacy to help them overcome entrepreneurial challenges [12].

To sum up, with the persistent barriers alongside globalization, women have been provided with immense opportunities as entrepreneurs. To allow women to participate fully in the worldwide entrepreneurial ecosystem, address institutional and cultural biases, targeted networks, and advocacy campaigns for women's rights have to be put in place.

Globalization and Economic Change in Central Asia

Globalization has significantly changed Central Asia's economic environment, especially with regard to women's entrepreneurship. The region's integration into transnational business networks, digital economies, and international trade systems has grown over the last 20 years. In developing and transitioning economies, where entrepreneurship is viewed as a means of both economic survival and empowerment, this rise is especially noticeable.

According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2023 report, nearly 250 million women around the world are currently engaged in entrepreneurial activity [24]. The highest rates of female entrepreneurship are found in low- and middle-income economies, where necessity-driven businesses account for over 70% of women's ventures. Additionally, women now make up approximately one-third

of all growth-oriented entrepreneurs globally, reflecting an important shift in both participation and ambition.

Globalization has significantly reshaped the economic landscape for women in Central Asia, lowering geographic and technological barriers that once restricted their entrepreneurial potential. Global supply chains, remote work platforms, and online marketplaces have expanded the range of activities available to women - particularly through platforms like Etsy, Instagram, and Alibaba, which now allow women to sell goods and services far beyond their local communities [10].

However, the benefits of globalization are not distributed equally. While some women have embraced these new possibilities, longstanding structural inequalities continue to limit access for many others. Without parallel institutional reforms, globalization can in fact deepen gender disparities [7]. In countries such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, women often face restricted access to digital tools, financial resources, and business education, overall critical components for succeeding in a globalized economy. These constraints mean that many women are unable to fully participate in or benefit from new market opportunities.

The legacy of the post-Soviet economic transition adds another layer of complexity. Kazakhstan's shift from a centrally planned to a market-based economy opened the door for entrepreneurship [5]. But despite this progress, women remain underrepresented in high-growth sectors like finance, technology, and manufacturing. Instead, many female entrepreneurs are concentrated in lower-capital, service-based industries such as retail, food, and cosmetics — areas that often offer limited opportunities for growth or sustainable income.

Support networks play a critical role in navigating these challenges. Organizations like the Business Women's Association of Uzbekistan work to connect local women with global opportunities, offering mentorship, training, and access to new markets. Such associations are essential in bridging the gap between local constraints and global ambitions [12]. Yet their impact is often hindered by limited funding and bureaucratic obstacles, which reduce their ability to scale or reach underserved communities.

Importantly, the effects of globalization in this region cannot be understood in purely economic or technological terms. Feminist economists like Parekh and Wilcox (2020) argue that we must also consider the cultural and social dimensions of globalization [11]. In Central Asia, deeply rooted gender roles and expectations continue to shape women's ability to participate fully in entrepreneurship. For example, while digital platforms may enable women to work from home, their entrepreneurial growth is still constrained by social expectations around childcare and domestic responsibilities.

The arrival of global franchises and multinational brands further complicates the picture. While these entities can create jobs and increase market dynamism, they can also push out local, women-led microenterprises that cannot compete with large-scale marketing and supply chain systems. This dynamic often marginalizes small businesses and especially those run by women, in favor of dominant international players [9].

In summary, globalization has opened exciting new pathways for women entrepreneurs across Central Asia, but these advances are still limited by entrenched institutional and cultural barriers. For globalization to serve as a truly inclusive force, targeted policies must address the unequal distribution of access to resources, digital tools, and social support. More inclusive legal frameworks and better-resourced business associations could help ensure that women from all backgrounds are able to participate meaningfully in the global economy.

Barriers Faced by Women in Business in Kazakhstan

Despite recent progress, women entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan continue to face challenges that limit their full participation in business. These barriers are not only economic but also shaped by cultural norms, social expectations, and institutional systems. Compared to men, women often face a steeper path into entrepreneurship, with unequal access to finance and fewer support networks.

One of the most persistent challenges is financing. Women in Kazakhstan are less likely than men to receive formal loans [6]. When they do, the terms are often less favorable, with higher interest rates and stricter collateral requirements. These issues reflect wider inequalities, as women typically own fewer assets and have less financial literacy. The problem is even more serious in rural areas, where women often lack access to banks, financial education, or business support [5].

Because of these barriers, many women turn to informal sources of funding such as family loans or community savings groups. While these methods help with small startup costs, they rarely provide the capital needed to grow a business or take risks. What is missing are financial tools designed for women, such as microloans, grants, and government-backed programs that can create stable opportunities.

Cultural expectations also strongly influence women's entrepreneurial paths. Traditional gender roles in Kazakhstan still place women primarily in caregiving and household positions [2]. This not only reduces the time and flexibility women have for business but also affects how others view them. Many women report not being taken seriously by male investors or partners, which affects their credibility and confidence [4].

A further barrier is the lack of mentorship and professional networks. Compared to men, women often have less access to alumni associations, business groups, or investor circles that provide advice and contacts. Many women feel isolated at the start of their business journey, with limited guidance or support. This lack of networks makes it harder to expand their businesses or enter larger markets [8].

Legal and bureaucratic systems also present difficulties. While some reforms have simplified procedures for starting a business, policies still do not reflect women's specific needs. Areas such as maternity leave, affordable childcare, and protections from gender-based discrimination remain underdeveloped. These gaps create additional pressures that discourage women from staying in business long-term.

Finally, education and training highlight another challenge. Although women in Kazakhstan are generally highly educated, their academic background often does not prepare them for practical business skills. Many struggle with areas like digital marketing, financial planning, and international trade. Training should not be generic but instead focus on gender-sensitive, practical learning that gives women the confidence to succeed in business [1].

Legal and bureaucratic hurdles also continue to shape women's entrepreneurial experiences in Kazakhstan. Although recent reforms have simplified certain processes for starting a business, existing institutional frameworks rarely reflect the specific needs of women. Issues such as maternity leave, access to affordable childcare, and legal protection against gender-based discrimination in the business sphere remain underdeveloped. These gaps create systemic pressures that constrain women's opportunities for long-term entrepreneurship [23].

Education and training present another complex dimension. While women in Kazakhstan are, on average, highly educated, formal education often fails to translate into the practical competencies required for entrepreneurship. Several participants in this study noted that they felt unprepared in areas such as digital marketing, financial decision-making, and international trade. This reflects a broader gap between academic knowledge and market-oriented skills. Training programs need to move beyond generic content to offer gender-sensitive, practice-oriented learning opportunities that build confidence and enable women to engage effectively in business [1].

Psychological barriers also emerged as a recurring theme. Many women described fear of failure, self-doubt, and internalized cultural expectations as significant obstacles. These challenges are not simply individual but are reinforced by long-standing social narratives that discourage risk-taking and entrepreneurial ambition among women. A lack of visible female role models further exacerbates these dynamics, limiting women's ability to envision themselves as successful entrepreneurs. As Pofeldt (2015) emphasizes, documenting and amplifying real-life accounts of women entrepreneurs is not only empowering but also essential for expanding the range of possibilities women can imagine for themselves [16].

Recent studies indicate a steady increase in the number of women-led enterprises, particularly in the digital and service sectors (World Bank, 2023). These developments demonstrate that despite persistent structural and cultural barriers, women in Kazakhstan are actively redefining entrepreneurial norms and contributing to economic diversification.

Summary of Gaps in Existing Research

Despite a growing body of work on global entrepreneurship and Central Asian economic development, there is still a significant lack of intersectional, localized, and gender-aware research. Most studies on women's entrepreneurship either stay at the surface level, highlighting general statistics or success stories, or are heavily focused on formal economic indicators. Few studies investigate the real lived experiences

of women, especially those who are starting businesses from scratch, restarting after personal or financial hardship, or operating outside of major cities.

One major gap is the lack of research on how globalization and digitalization intersect with gender in Kazakhstan. The global economy increasingly favors those who are digitally connected, globally informed, and able to innovate quickly. Yet women in Kazakhstan often face digital exclusion, lack access to global business knowledge, and are excluded from international networks or partnerships. There is little to no research exploring how global trends such as e-commerce, remote work, global mentorship platforms, or startup ecosystems are being adapted (or ignored) by Kazakhstani women entrepreneurs.

Another key gap is the failure to provide comparative gender-based statistics, such as direct comparisons between men and women in business ownership, access to capital, loan approval rates, or investor support. This kind of data is critical for designing effective gender policies, but in Kazakhstan, such comparative analysis is either outdated or missing altogether. Without this information, it's difficult to understand how far-reaching gender inequality in entrepreneurship truly is.

Moreover, financial barriers and social norms are underrepresented in scholarly and policy discussions. While it is widely recognized that women in Kazakhstan face greater challenges in accessing funding, little research has examined how this unfolds in practice: how bank officers evaluate women-led projects, how investors perceive female founders, or how informal attitudes toward “women in business” shape decision-making. These systemic inequalities are often absent from official reports but strongly influence real entrepreneurial journeys.

This research bridges these gaps by combining literature with firsthand insights from Kazakhstani women entrepreneurs themselves. Through interviews, narratives, and data analysis, the study sheds light on the hidden barriers, overlooked opportunities, and complex realities faced by women in Kazakhstan's changing business environment. The goal is not just to add information to the field, but to reframe the conversation around gender, innovation, and local entrepreneurship through a lens that is realistic, inclusive, and future-oriented.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation of this research is grounded in the concept of economic globalization and its impact on gender and entrepreneurship. This study examines how globalization generates both opportunities, such as access to international markets and digital tools, and challenges, including increased competition and unequal access to resources. In addition, the research draws on feminist economic theory, which highlights the role of social norms, cultural expectations, and individual empowerment in shaping the experiences of women in business. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding how women entrepreneurs navigate local and global economic environments.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed in-depth interviews with seven women entrepreneurs from different regions of Kazakhstan. The aim was to gain both broad and personal insights into how globalization has shaped their entrepreneurial paths. The research explored the use of digital tools, the influence of family and social support, and the impact of access to global markets on participants' business strategies. By focusing on direct experiences, the study adds empirical depth to existing research on women's entrepreneurship.

Research Design

A qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews was used to allow participants to share their experiences in their own words while maintaining a consistent framework of guiding questions. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because women's entrepreneurial experiences are often personal, emotional, and shaped by social and cultural contexts, which structured questionnaires alone cannot fully capture.

Interviews were conducted using multiple formats, including voice notes via WhatsApp, Instagram direct messages, and short phone or video calls. Each format provided participants with flexibility and comfort, enabling them to reflect and share their stories authentically. A semi-structured guide consisting of 14 open-ended questions covered themes such as personal motivation, family and societal support, use of digital tools, and financial challenges, while participants were encouraged to expand beyond the scripted questions.

A total of seven interviews were conducted, each lasting between 15 and 45 minutes, depending on the depth of conversation and participants' availability. The approach allowed for a rich understanding of women's entrepreneurial journeys in the context of globalization.

Participants and Method of Data Collection

The participants were selected using purposeful sampling. I reached out to women who had already started their own businesses, were in the process of launching new projects, or were returning to entrepreneurship after a break. Some of them were currently on maternity leave, using that time not only to care for their families but also to explore new business ideas and take meaningful steps toward financial independence. Others had already opened new ventures in fields like education, wellness, and tourism, or were preparing to launch second projects after first experiences.

Many of them were also mothers and spoke openly about balancing business with family life. Several said their husbands were supportive - not only emotionally but also financially. Others mentioned that living in large families made it easier to delegate household duties, freeing up time for work. One participant said

her biggest challenge is still just starting due to fear and doubt. Another emphasized how much global platforms like Instagram and 2Giz (an app that helps to search and navigate places) helped her grow.

The data was collected through interviews that were conducted in person, over the phone, and through messaging social media apps like WhatsApp and Instagram. This flexibility allowed the participants to speak comfortably on their own terms (whether in voice messages, texts, or live conversations).

All interviews were recorded (with consent) and later transcribed. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved close reading of each interview, identification of key ideas, and organization into themes such as reasons for starting a business, family support, financial barriers, use of technology, and connection to global markets. This process highlighted patterns and contrasts across women's entrepreneurial journeys.

RESULTS

The results of the study suggest that globalization plays a significant role in supporting women entrepreneurs through access to digital platforms, new markets, and global communities. Many women feel more independent and motivated due to global exposure. However, the research also reveals ongoing challenges such as limited funding, lack of support from local institutions, and the pressure of traditional gender roles. The study concluded that while globalization offers critical opportunities, the success of women entrepreneurs in Central Asia still heavily depends on social and cultural conditions. These findings can inform future support programs, policymaking, and development initiatives for female-led businesses in the region.

This section presents and analyzes the key findings based on interviews with seven women entrepreneurs from Central Asia. Four major themes emerged from the data: family support, financial barriers, use of global tools and digital platforms, and gendered societal expectations. These themes illustrate the complex interplay between globalization and women's entrepreneurial journeys.

Family Support

Family support played a vital role in the entrepreneurial journeys of women in Central Asia. Many participants in this study reported that encouragement and assistance from family members, especially spouses, parents, and siblings, were crucial in the early stages of launching their businesses. This support often came in the form of emotional encouragement, childcare assistance, or even initial financial help.

However, the extent of family support varied. Some women described strong backing from progressive family environments, while others faced resistance due to traditional gender expectations. In more conservative households, women had to negotiate their entrepreneurial goals alongside domestic responsibilities. Despite these challenges, many women demonstrated resilience and creativity in balancing their roles at home and in business, showing that family dynamics can either enable or limit a woman's ability to benefit from global opportunities.

Family support emerged as one of the most influential factors shaping entrepreneurial decisions and the overall sustainability of ventures. Across all interviews, participants emphasized that emotional, moral, or

practical assistance from family members, particularly spouses and parents, was crucial to initiating and maintaining businesses.

Aurora (P. No 1) highlighted that her internal drive, combined with family encouragement, enabled her to create a lasting venture in rhythmic gymnastics. She described family support as a source of confidence and motivation, framing entrepreneurship as both professional growth and a way to contribute to the community. Lyra (P. No 2) described her husband as an “anchor” who offered emotional support and encouraged risk-taking, while also referencing a family culture of independence and proactive behavior.

Selena (P. No 3) credited living in a large family during maternity leave with enabling her to delegate domestic responsibilities and focus on business development. Elara (P. No 4) and Safiya (P. No 5) emphasized that family assistance with childcare and early business operations allowed them to balance domestic and entrepreneurial roles. Amira (P. No 6) reflected on the emotional dimension, noting that while fear of failure existed, family help with domestic duties made entrepreneurship manageable. Noor (P. No 7) described how her parents’ guidance in financial planning allowed her to manage budgets effectively while developing a tourism project.

While some participants benefited from hands-on involvement from family members, others drew strength from psychological reassurance or a cultural legacy of independence. Most women indicated that success depended on motivation, mutual understanding, and personal commitment rather than solely on family structure or size.

The experience of Selena (P. No 3) , one of the study participants, illustrates this dynamic. Becoming a mother at a young age initially constrained her career options. However, rather than perceiving motherhood as a limitation, she described it as a source of motivation and resilience: “Maternity gave me strength — not just responsibility, but the energy to pursue my own potential.” She has since established her own business, simultaneously providing for her child and challenging pervasive stereotypes about women’s capacities in entrepreneurship.

This example underscores a broader pattern observed across the interviews: family support extends beyond providing basic assistance and serves as an active catalyst in women’s entrepreneurial journeys. Rather than simply offering a safety net, encouragement and practical involvement from relatives created conditions in which challenges could be reframed as opportunities for growth. When combined with individual determination, such support allowed participants to balance domestic responsibilities with business development, demonstrating how women entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan draw on both personal motivation and family backing to overcome structural constraints and establish sustainable ventures.

Financial Barriers Faced by Women Entrepreneurs

Access to finance remains one of the most consistent and pressing challenges for women entrepreneurs in Central Asia. Participants of this study highlighted difficulties in obtaining bank loans, finding investors, and securing grants, particularly when starting out. Traditional financial institutions often required collateral or guarantors, which many women lacked due to limited ownership of property or assets.

While globalization has introduced new funding models such as crowdfunding platforms and online grant opportunities, these tools are not always accessible due to language barriers, limited digital literacy, or lack of awareness. The financial barrier is further compounded by gender bias in local lending institutions

and limited state support targeted at women entrepreneurs. These findings reflect patterns seen in feminist economic theory, which emphasize how structural inequalities in finance hinder women's participation in the broader economy.

Financial support was less uniformly available than family support. Access to funding, whether through personal savings, household income, or external sources, was influenced by individual circumstances, strategic decisions, and life stage.

Noor (P. No 7) reported relatively few financial challenges due to early guidance from her parents, which helped her maintain stability while monetizing a tourism project. She emphasized that financial literacy within families has long-term impacts on entrepreneurial readiness. Lyra (P. No 2), who was beginning to engage with investors, acknowledged the unpredictability of funding environments and reflected on her earlier decision not to involve her husband in financial planning. She recognized that strategic support could have been beneficial.

Elara (P. No 4) and Safiya (P. No 5) shared intentions to pursue external funding such as grants as part of future expansion plans. Aurora (P. No 1) described the use of family collaboration to mitigate financial pressures. Selena (P. No 3) emphasized that while capital was necessary, mission-driven work and personal motivation were primary drivers. Participants generally did not attribute funding challenges to gender discrimination, instead viewing financial difficulties as situational and dependent on preparation and strategic decision-making.

Use of Global Tools and Digital Platforms

Digital tools and global platforms were essential to business development and growth, reflecting the impact of globalization. All participants discussed the use of online platforms for communication, branding, marketing, and reaching wider audiences.

Aurora (P. No 1) employed specialists in social media marketing to maintain visibility and competitiveness. Lyra (P. No 2) described digital presence as an extension of identity, using platforms such as Instagram not only to share products but also to communicate values, team dynamics, and the emotional journey of entrepreneurship. Safiya (P. No 5) leveraged Instagram and Tilda to promote her children's play center and expressed plans to launch a second business in education, emphasizing adaptation to global trends in learning.

Selena (P. No 3) used digital tools to continue teaching and offering services during maternity leave, noting that free online resources allowed her to grow professionally without a large team. Amira (P. No 6) highlighted systemic and domestic limitations, pointing out that some women lacked access to basic tools such as laptops, quiet time, or reliable internet. Despite these barriers, participants recognized that online platforms enabled engagement beyond local contexts, facilitated learning, and provided opportunities for international exposure.

Gender Roles and Societal Expectations

Traditional gender norms continued to shape the entrepreneurial environment, especially regarding balancing caregiving and career responsibilities. However, participants frequently reframed these expectations as motivational challenges.

Selena (P. No 3) described maternity leave as a period of emotional transformation, noting that social feedback reminded her of her professional identity beyond motherhood. Lyra (P. No 2) faced indirect societal comments but used them as motivation to challenge stereotypes. Amira (P. No 6) emphasized growing independence among women in Kazakhstan, noting that internal barriers such as self-doubt often had a stronger impact than societal expectations.

Participants consistently agreed that marital status or family size did not determine entrepreneurial success. Motivation, strategy, and support systems were considered more important. All seven women expressed the belief that they were part of a global entrepreneurial movement, emphasizing that geography should not limit ambition. Aurora (P. No 1), Lyra (P. No 2), Selena (P. No 3) and the others highlighted that globalization allowed local expertise to attract global attention, whether through mentorship, grants, social media outreach, or international collaborations.

Discussion

The findings of this study aligned with global research on women's entrepreneurship, particularly the importance of social, financial, and cultural factors in shaping entrepreneurial success. Theoretical frameworks from the literature, such as economic globalization and feminist economics, suggest that while global tools can democratize business opportunities, access to these tools remains uneven.

In the context of Central Asia, globalization has clearly opened doors, especially through digital marketplaces, online education, and exposure to global success stories. However, the benefits of globalization are filtered through deeply rooted local norms. For instance, a woman might have access to an international e-commerce platform but may not have the time, support, or confidence to use it effectively due to family duties or societal expectations.

This dual reality points to the need for a localized approach to entrepreneurial support: one that combines the advantages of globalization with targeted cultural and institutional changes. Training programs must consider not just business skills but also the social context in which women operate.

Family Support as Legitimacy and Resilience

Family support played a central role in women's entrepreneurial activities. Participants described how encouragement and practical assistance from relatives strengthened their confidence and helped legitimize their business decisions in the eyes of others. At the same time, this reliance underscored the absence of institutional mechanisms that could otherwise provide stability. Entrepreneurship was therefore sustained largely by personal networks, which both enabled women to continue their ventures and revealed the fragility of support structures outside the family.

Financial Challenges in Entrepreneurial Pathways

Access to finance was consistently reported as one of the most significant barriers. Participants encountered difficulties in obtaining loans, faced requirements for collateral that they could not provide, and had limited engagement with formal banking services. These conditions restricted opportunities for growth, often forcing them to depend on personal savings or informal lending arrangements. The findings suggest that financial barriers are structural rather than situational, with women disproportionately excluded from mainstream economic opportunities.

Use of Digital Tools for Global Engagement

Digital platforms emerged as critical resources for reaching customers and extending businesses beyond local markets. Participants emphasized that tools such as Instagram and WhatsApp reduced entry barriers and enabled them to operate with relatively limited resources. However, this also created dependence on unstable online visibility and underscored unequal access to digital literacy. The results indicate that while digital engagement broadened opportunities, its benefits were unevenly distributed and often contingent on prior knowledge and technical skills.

Gender Norms and Entrepreneurial Identity

Traditional gender expectations strongly shaped the experiences of women entrepreneurs. Many participants described the constant challenge of balancing household responsibilities with business demands, often under pressure to prioritize family duties. These constraints limited the time and energy available for business development and reinforced the perception of entrepreneurship as secondary to women's domestic roles. At the same time, entrepreneurship was also portrayed as a means of asserting independence and reshaping identity, reflecting women's agency in negotiating and resisting restrictive social norms.

Intersections of Local Support and Global Opportunities

Overall, the findings reveal a landscape in which women's entrepreneurship is simultaneously enabled and constrained by intersecting forces. Family and community networks provide essential forms of support but also reproduce traditional expectations. Structural barriers to finance restrict opportunities for growth, while digital tools create access to wider markets but require skills and capacities not equally accessible to all. These intersecting dynamics demonstrate the complexity of women's entrepreneurial pathways in Kazakhstan and highlight the pressing need for more consistent and institutionalized forms of support.

Limitations

One limitation is that some women may not feel comfortable sharing personal details, especially about finances or family, which could affect the depth of the data. With only a few participants, the findings may not represent all women in Central Asia. There may also be challenges in finding willing participants or dealing with time and access constraints.

Moreover, one of the challenges was the time it took to gather responses from the women I reached out to. Some participants could not take part in the interviews because of work commitments, while others found it difficult to make time due to childcare and household responsibilities. Waiting for their responses sometimes delayed the process, but it also gave me valuable insight into how women entrepreneurs, many of them mothers, balance their businesses with family obligations. This lived reality itself became part of the findings, showing the everyday pressures women face when trying to combine professional and personal responsibilities.

Another limitation was the availability of reliable data. Gender-disaggregated entrepreneurial statistics across Central Asia remain limited and often inconsistently reported. This made it difficult to place the qualitative findings of this study into a broader regional context. Although the interviews offered rich, personal insights, the absence of comprehensive data restricted the ability to compare these experiences with larger patterns across the region.

The research centered on gender but did not fully address how other intersecting identities—such as ethnicity, class, age, or rural/urban location—shape entrepreneurial opportunities. This intersectional lens is important, as women's experiences are not uniform and may be compounded by additional forms of disadvantage.

This study focused exclusively on women entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan and did not extend its scope to other Central Asian countries. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to the wider regional context, where cultural norms, state policies, and market conditions may differ significantly. Comparative research across Central Asia would be necessary to situate the Kazakhstani experience within broader regional patterns.

Recommendations and Future Directions

After speaking with all these women, one clear pattern stood out: many women, especially those on maternity leave, feel a strong inner push to begin something meaningful outside of motherhood. That time at home, when caring for a baby, often becomes a period of self-reflection — a moment when women begin to rediscover who they are beyond being mothers. That emotion can transform into motivation, and that motivation can become a business, a project, or a calling.

Selena (P. No 2) is a clear example. While on maternity leave, she felt overwhelmed by emotions and strongly desired to start something of her own. She described how, when people reminded her that she was a physics teacher, it would “turn something on” inside her. She felt energized, moved faster, and became motivated to create and contribute. That is how she began giving lessons, even for free. For her, it was never about money but about regaining her sense of self.

Many women on maternity leave experience this kind of shift in identity. While spending time with their children and families, they often lose touch with their individual goals and sense of self. Several participants described an internal feeling of energy — a quiet reminder that they still had ideas to share and ambitions to pursue. This feeling was often the first sign that they were ready to begin something new. The data suggests that maternity is not the end of personal development. For many, it becomes a key period of reflection and transformation.

Aurora (P. No 1) illustrates this point further. With years of experience in rhythmic gymnastics, she chose to open her own private school. What made her case notable was the clarity of her decision. Rather than experimenting with something unfamiliar, she focused on an area where she already had skill, experience, and passion. That decision gave her confidence and direction. She also highlighted the importance of family support. For her, this included not only practical help but also mutual respect, belief in each other's potential, and shared responsibility. Her business became a team project with her husband rather than an individual effort.

Her story supports the idea that many women can begin from what they already know and love. It is not always necessary to start from scratch or invent something new. Building on personal experience can be just as impactful.

Lyra (P. No 3) followed a very different path. She founded Ratio, a digital science platform designed to make topics like physics accessible to young people. Her goal was to make science clear, relevant, and even enjoyable. She described her motivation as a strong inner push to act. Her project was not driven by profit but by a desire to create lasting impact and shift public perceptions of science. Her family gave her space to take risks. Her husband told her she could always change her mind if things did not work out. This gave her the emotional freedom to experiment without fear.

For women with nontraditional or creative business ideas, her experience demonstrates the value of emotional support. Having the freedom to try, to change direction, or to make mistakes can be critical in early stages of entrepreneurship.

Not all stories in this research were about immediate action. Amira (P. No 4), a mother of three, shared her experience of starting a business and then stopping. She began selling aromatherapy products but eventually returned to her comfort zone. Although her family was supportive and she observed more independence among women around her, she still hesitated to restart. She noted that when a person has strong will, much becomes possible. Her story shows that fear and self-doubt are common, even among motivated and capable individuals.

For women who are hesitant to begin, this case highlights that taking small steps may be more realistic than waiting for the perfect moment. Comfort zones are not always permanent. Even a small beginning can lead to larger change.

Elara (P. No 5) took a more structured approach to entrepreneurship. She expressed interest in applying for grants and emphasized the importance of involving family in financial planning. Rather than seeing this as dependency, she framed it as a smart and collaborative decision. This supports the idea that shared decision-making and asking for help are strategic choices. They can reduce risk and increase clarity during the early phases of business growth.

Across all interviews, one theme was consistent. Each woman viewed herself as part of a global world. Whether through online communication, plans for international expansion, or regular engagement with global platforms, participants showed no sense of limitation based on geography. They did not see themselves as restricted to Kazakhstan. They identified as global actors with valuable contributions to offer.

This study suggests that women entrepreneurs in Central Asia are not only responding to globalization but also actively participating in it. They are using global tools, integrating personal values, and redefining business as something personal, relational, and mission-driven. For many of them, geography was not a barrier. It was simply a starting point.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that globalization is a powerful force in shaping the landscape of women's entrepreneurship in Central Asia, offering new tools, knowledge, and connections. It has given women the means to launch and grow businesses in ways that were previously difficult or impossible. However, the path is not without obstacles. Family dynamics, financial limitations, and traditional gender roles continue to pose significant barriers.

While global platforms and digital tools are essential, they are not enough on their own. Support systems such as community networks, accessible funding, and culturally sensitive training are equally important. The findings of this research highlight the importance of addressing both global and local factors in supporting women entrepreneurs. Future initiatives and policies should aim to bridge this gap by creating environments where women can fully leverage global opportunities without being held back by local constraints.

This research explored the relationship between globalization and women's entrepreneurship in Central Asia, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. The findings show that globalization provided women with unprecedented access to digital tools, international markets, and new findings, while family support, resilience, and community encouragement remained critical for sustaining their ventures.

The study contributes to existing research by centering women's lived experiences and demonstrating how they are not only adapting to globalization but actively shaping it in ways that reflect their cultural contexts and personal goals. By showing that emotional resilience, purpose-driven work, and informal support systems matter as much as financial or structural resources, this research adds a nuanced perspective to the growing scholarship on women in entrepreneurship.

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