

Sustaining Heritage, Sustaining Livelihoods: A Qualitative Study of Gendered Pathways in Craft-Based Cultural Heritage Entrepreneurship in Jodhpur, Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage in India operates not merely as a symbolic repository of collective identity but as an active economic domain that sustains livelihoods across millions of artisan households. Despite the sector's considerable scale encompassing an estimated 64.66 lakh artisans, 318 geographically indicated products, and approximately 455 classified craft categories heritage-based enterprises remain peripheral within mainstream entrepreneurship scholarship, which has historically privileged formal, growth-oriented, and institutionally embedded forms of enterprise. More significantly, the gendered dimensions of craft-based heritage entrepreneurship have received insufficient scholarly attention: women, who account for sixty-four per cent of artisans nationally and constitute the primary production workforce in regions such as Rajasthan, continue to be represented as skilled workers or auxiliary contributors rather than as autonomous entrepreneurs whose labour sustains both cultural continuity and household economic security. This study proposes a qualitative, cross-sectional exploration of cultural heritage entrepreneurship in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, with a specific focus on how gender structures entrepreneurial pathways, mediates access to resources and markets, and shapes livelihood outcomes for craft-based producers. Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with thirty heritage entrepreneurs comprising fifteen women and fifteen men the research examines how individuals mobilise inherited cultural practices as economic resources, how they negotiate the competing demands of tradition, household responsibilities, and market engagement, and how gendered social structures produce differential experiences of ownership, decision-making, and economic recognition. The study adopts an interpretivist orientation and an exploratory design, enabling a nuanced engagement with the meanings that participants attribute to their work and the strategies through which they navigate economic precarity and institutional constraints. By integrating perspectives from management and entrepreneurship studies, gender scholarship, and development literature, this research contributes to a theorisation of cultural heritage entrepreneurship as a gendered economic practice embedded within informal economies. The findings are expected to advance entrepreneurship theory by foregrounding informal and heritage-based enterprises as legitimate analytical objects; to contribute to gender studies by illuminating the invisible and undervalued dimensions of women's labour within family enterprises; and to inform policy discourse by identifying persistent gaps between institutional support mechanisms and the lived realities of artisan communities. Ultimately, the study argues that sustaining cultural

heritage and sustaining livelihoods are deeply interconnected processes whose dynamics are inseparable from the gendered social structures within which craft-based entrepreneurship is practiced.

Keywords: Cultural heritage entrepreneurship, gender and crafts, informal economy, women artisans, Rajasthan, qualitative research, livelihood

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage in India extends far beyond monumental architecture or curated museum collections; it persists as a living continuum of inherited knowledge, skills, and creative practice transmitted through families and communities across successive generations. Practices such as handloom weaving, pottery, metalwork, embroidery, wood carving, and painting constitute not merely artistic traditions but active livelihood systems for millions of artisan households, particularly in rural regions where formal employment opportunities remain scarce and agricultural livelihoods are subject to ecological uncertainty. Craft production within these contexts is organised predominantly through informal, household-based arrangements in which technical competence is acquired through intergenerational transmission rather than structured institutional training, and economic activity is inextricably interwoven with domestic life and social obligation. In regions such as Western Rajasthan encompassing districts including Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, and Nagaur; handicrafts constitute the foundational pillar of the rural economy, historically rooted in nomadic and pastoral traditions and shaped by the distinctive ecological and cultural conditions of an arid landscape. Within these settings, entrepreneurship rarely manifests through registered enterprises or growth-oriented business models; rather, it operates through the everyday practices of production, exchange, cultural adaptation, and market navigation, through which heritage-based worksimultaneously sustains households and preserves the collective identity of artisan communities (Wood, 2012; UNESCO, 2018).

Existing scholarship on traditional crafts in India has predominantly engaged with cultural heritage through frameworks of preservation, identity maintenance, and intergenerational continuity rather than through entrepreneurial or economic lenses. A considerable body of research documents craft traditions as expressions of intangible heritage, emphasising their role in sustaining regional identities, collective memory, and accumulated technical knowledge, while positioning them primarily as cultural practices requiring institutional safeguarding. Parallel literature within entrepreneurship studies has focused largely on formal, innovation-oriented, and growth-driven enterprises, offering limited theoretical engagement with the informal, home-based economic activities that characterise the majority of craft production in India. Where crafts do appear within entrepreneurship or development discourse, they are frequently framed as subsistence mechanisms or welfare-oriented interventions rather than as entrepreneurial processes involving market navigation, resource mobilisation, and risk negotiation. Gender-focused scholarship further reveals that women constitute a substantial proportion of the craft workforce, particularly within home-based and family-run production systems, yet are routinely represented as skilled workers or supplementary contributors rather than as autonomous entrepreneurs or enterprise owners. While women's involvement in craft production is widely acknowledged in the literature, the structural dynamics shaping gendered disparities in ownership, income control, market access, and decision-making authority within informal heritage-based economies remain insufficiently examined (Satpathy, 2015; Kumar, 2022).

These convergent gaps conceptual, empirical, and methodological underscore the need for scholarship

that situates craft-based heritage work within an entrepreneurial framework while foregrounding gender as a primary analytical lens. India's handicraft sector currently sustains an estimated 64.66 lakh artisans across rural and semi-urban regions, with women accounting for seventy-one per cent of handloom weavers and sixty-four per cent of total artisans as of August 2025. Despite their numerical centrality to the sector's productive base, women's economic contributions remain structurally constrained by limited access to formal capital, restricted market participation, social mobility norms, and the persistent invisibility of their labour within official and scholarly accounts. In Jodhpur, Rajasthan a region with centuries-old artisanal traditions spanning textiles, leatherwork, metalwork, and furniture craftsmanship these dynamics are particularly pronounced, as craft production operates within social hierarchies shaped by gender, caste, and household organisation. Existing quantitative studies and policy evaluations, while valuable in mapping structural parameters, do not adequately access the meanings, negotiations, and everyday constraints that constitute heritage entrepreneurship as lived experience. An interpretive, qualitative methodology is therefore not merely appropriate but epistemologically necessary to recover the subjective realities of craft-based entrepreneurs whose voices have been largely absent from both academic and policy discourse (Ministry of Textiles, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how gender shapes entrepreneurial pathways within craft-based cultural heritage livelihoods in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. Drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with thirty heritage entrepreneurs fifteen women and fifteen men the research examines how individuals engage with inherited traditions as economic resources, how they navigate market demands alongside household obligations, and how gendered social structures mediate differential access to resources, ownership, and decision-making authority. The study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and cross-sectional design grounded in an interpretivist research orientation, enabling nuanced engagement with participants' own accounts of their entrepreneurial experiences and the meanings they attach to their work. By integrating perspectives from management studies, gender scholarship, and development literature, the research contributes to a theorisation of craft-based heritage entrepreneurship as a gendered economic practice embedded within informal economies one that is simultaneously sustained by and constrained through prevailing social arrangements. The following sections present the conceptual background, a review of the relevant literature, the theoretical framework, the methodological approach, and the study's significance for theory, policy, and practice (Kumar, 2023; Maharshi & Bishnoi, 2024).

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Cultural heritage has traditionally been understood as a repository of collective memory, identity, and tradition, encompassing both tangible forms including artefacts, built environments, and archaeological sites and intangible forms such as skills, ritual practices, knowledge systems, and artistic expressions. In many societies, particularly across the Global South, cultural heritage is not confined to protected sites or institutional collections but is actively practiced and reproduced within everyday economic life. In India, a vast range of livelihoods continues to depend on heritage-based activities, including handloom weaving, embroidery, pottery, metalwork, folk arts, indigenous food production, and ritual performance, all of which form integral components of the cultural fabric of communities across the subcontinent (UNESCO, 2018; Meneghin & Re, 2018).

Over recent decades, the discourse surrounding heritage has progressively expanded to incorporate its economic dimensions. Frameworks such as cultural industries, creative economies, and cultural

entrepreneurship have emerged to describe the processes through which cultural resources are mobilised for income generation, employment creation, and local development. International development organisations and governmental bodies increasingly recognise heritage as a potential driver of inclusive growth, tourism-led revenue, and sustainable livelihoods, reflecting a broader conceptual shift from heritage as an object of preservation to heritage as a productive economic resource. However, much of this discourse remains anchored within formal market structures, privileging growth-oriented, export-driven, or tourism-facing enterprise models that bear limited resemblance to the realities of most heritage-based livelihoods in India (Meneghin & Re, 2018).

A significant proportion of heritage-based economic activity in India continues to operate within informal or semi-formal contexts. These enterprises are characteristically small-scale, family-based, and deeply embedded in social relations, relying on inherited knowledge, intergenerational skill transmission, and community networks rather than on formal training or institutional support. Although such enterprises contribute substantially to employment, cultural continuity, and household income security, they remain largely invisible within official economic statistics and marginal within business and management scholarship. This invisibility has important consequences for policy design, resource allocation, and theoretical development, as it systematically obscures the economic agency of heritage practitioners and forecloses recognition of the entrepreneurial dimensions of their work (Das, 2016; Singh et al., 2020).

Gender plays a structurally significant role in shaping these heritage-based livelihoods. Women are frequently central to the production, preservation, and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, yet their labour is routinely unpaid, undervalued, or framed as an extension of domestic responsibilities rather than recognised as entrepreneurial activity warranting economic and social acknowledgement. Men, by contrast, tend to occupy more visible roles related to market interaction, enterprise ownership, and external representation, reflecting broader patriarchal structures that govern access to public economic space. These gendered divisions of labour are reinforced by social norms, family authority structures, and systematically unequal access to capital, mobility, networks, and institutional support.

Despite growing scholarly attention to women's entrepreneurship and gender inequality in business studies, cultural heritage entrepreneurship remains a comparatively underexplored domain. Existing research tends to treat heritage as a primarily cultural or anthropological concern, while entrepreneurship is examined through formal, market-based lenses, producing a disciplinary gap at precisely the intersection where the lived realities of most heritage practitioners reside. The intersection of heritage, gender, and entrepreneurship particularly within informal economies remains insufficiently theorised and empirically underdeveloped, with significant consequences for both scholarship and practice in the context of inclusive development and sustainable livelihoods.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While cultural heritage-based livelihoods play a vital role in sustaining millions of households across India, they remain peripheral within mainstream entrepreneurship and management scholarship. Existing studies tend to prioritise formal enterprises, high-growth entrepreneurship, or tourism-oriented cultural industries, thereby overlooking the informal, small-scale, and deeply gendered nature of most heritage-based economic activity. This conceptual marginalisation means that the entrepreneurial competencies embedded within heritage-based livelihoods resource mobilisation under constraint, adaptive market

engagement, and the management of culturally embedded enterprises remain untheorised within management discourse.

Furthermore, women's contributions to cultural heritage entrepreneurship are frequently rendered invisible or positioned as secondary. Although women are often the primary actors responsible for sustaining skills, traditions, and production processes, they rarely receive equivalent recognition, ownership entitlements, or economic returns. Gendered social norms constrain women's mobility, access to capital and credit, decision-making authority, and market engagement, limiting their capacity to benefit fully from entrepreneurial opportunities within the sector. The result is a systematic misalignment between women's productive contributions and their economic recognition, a dynamic that existing scholarship has acknowledged but inadequately theorised.

There is also a pronounced lack of qualitative, empirically grounded research that captures the lived experiences of heritage entrepreneurs themselves. The existing literature relies predominantly on policy reports, quantitative surveys, or sector-specific institutional case studies, none of which adequately address how gender structures entrepreneurial pathways across different heritage domains, how informal enterprises actually function as livelihood strategies, or how structural inequalities are simultaneously reproduced and contested within heritage-based economic activity. This methodological gap has significant implications for theory, policy design, and development practice, particularly in contexts where the voices of artisan communities and especially women artisans have historically been marginalised in favour of institutional and technocratic perspectives.

The present study addresses these interrelated conceptual, empirical, and methodological limitations by providing qualitative, grounded evidence of how gender shapes the entrepreneurial experiences of craft-based heritage producers in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. The central research question guiding the study is: how does gender structure entrepreneurial pathways, resource access, and livelihood outcomes within craft-based cultural heritage enterprises in Jodhpur? This question is elaborated through four subsidiary objectives: to understand how cultural heritage work becomes a source of livelihood through entrepreneurial practice; to examine gender-based differences in access to resources, markets, and ownership within craft-based enterprises; to explore how women and men negotiate tradition, family responsibilities, and business demands; and to identify structural and informal barriers affecting heritage entrepreneurs, with particular attention to gendered constraints (Kumar, 2023; Maharshi & Bishnoi, 2024).

4. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The present review synthesises scholarship across four interconnected domains: the conceptualisation of cultural heritage as a living economic practice; craft production as an informal livelihood strategy; entrepreneurship theory within non-formal and traditional contexts; and gender, work, and power within craft-based enterprises. The review culminates in the identification of critical analytical gaps that justify the methodological and theoretical approach adopted in this study.

4.1 Cultural Heritage, Crafts, and Livelihoods

4.1.1 Cultural Heritage as Living and Practiced Tradition

Cultural heritage scholarship has undergone a significant conceptual evolution over recent decades, shifting from an emphasis on the preservation of tangible artefacts and monumental sites toward a recognition of heritage as a dynamic, living, and socially embedded process continuously reproduced

through practice. International frameworks, most notably those articulated through UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, distinguish between tangible heritage encompassing physical objects and built environments and intangible cultural heritage, which includes oral traditions, performing arts, ritual practices, social customs, knowledge systems, and the technical proficiencies required to produce traditional crafts. The significance of intangible heritage, as UNESCO emphasises, lies not in the cultural manifestation per se but in the accumulated knowledge and skills transmitted through it from one generation to the next, ensuring cultural continuity through lived practice rather than archival preservation alone.

Traditional craftsmanship occupies a central position within this conceptualisation, materialising in a wide array of forms from intricate embroidery and detailed metalwork to robust weaving and pottery each embodying region-specific technical knowledge, aesthetic sensibilities, and ecological adaptations developed across centuries of practice. Scholars working within heritage studies emphasise that cultural practices of this kind are neither static nor museum-bound; they are actively practiced and reinterpreted within households, communities, and local economies in response to changing social and economic conditions. This understanding of heritage as dynamic rather than fixed, as practised rather than merely preserved, is foundational to the present study's positioning of craft-based work as an active form of economic and cultural agency rather than a residue of a disappearing past.

4.1.2 Crafts as Livelihood Strategies in Rural India

The economic dimensions of cultural heritage are particularly evident within India's handicraft sector, which sustains livelihoods for millions of artisan households across rural and semi-urban regions. The sector encompasses an estimated 64.66 lakh artisans, with women accounting for seventy-one per cent of handloom weavers and sixty-four per cent of total artisans, reflecting the sector's disproportionate importance to female economic participation outside formal employment structures. Handicrafts serve as both primary and supplementary income sources, embedded within broader household economies that may also involve agricultural labour, seasonal migration, and informal trading (Ministry of Textiles, 2025).

Research consistently documents that craft-based livelihoods are organised predominantly within home-based, family-run settings in which production processes are deeply interwoven with domestic responsibilities and household management. These enterprises operate primarily through inherited knowledge rather than formal institutional training, and their viability depends substantially on social networks, community trust, and intergenerational skill transmission. Mehlawat's scholarship on cultural heritage and employment underscores that investing in craft-based livelihoods is simultaneously an act of cultural preservation and a strategy for inclusive economic development, positioning heritage not merely as an identity resource but as a driver of resilient, community-anchored growth in developing societies. Despite their economic significance, however, these enterprises remain largely invisible within official economic accounting and marginal within scholarly analyses of entrepreneurship and enterprise development.

4.1.3 The Western Rajasthan and Jodhpur Context

Western Rajasthan presents a particularly significant context for examining craft-based heritage livelihoods. Districts including Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, and Nagaur are recognised for their rich artisanal traditions rooted in nomadic and pastoral histories, encompassing crafts such as block-printed textiles, embroidery, leatherwork, pottery, stone carving, and metalwork. In these arid ecological zones, handicrafts have historically formed a critical pillar of the rural economy, providing livelihood

continuity during periods of agricultural uncertainty and serving as a primary basis of cultural identity and regional distinctiveness.

Jodhpur occupies a particularly central position within this artisanal landscape. The district has functioned for centuries as a hub of craft production, with its handicraft industry constituting a vital component of both the local economy and Rajasthan's broader cultural heritage. The sector employs a significant proportion of skilled women, many of whom operate within small, household-based, and informal settings where access to formal financial resources and institutional support remains structurally constrained. Research by Sharma and Kumar on social networks and female artisans in Jodhpur documents the sector's role as a historically embedded livelihood system dependent on community-based support mechanisms rather than formal institutional infrastructure. More recent work by Maharshi and Bishnoi highlights that artisan communities in Western Rajasthan face persistent socio-economic challenges—including market intermediation, income volatility, and inadequate policy recognition—that constrain enterprise sustainability and household welfare, particularly for women.

4.2 Craft Production within the Informal Economy

Informality is a defining structural feature of craft-based production in India rather than a transitional or aberrant condition. Heritage-based enterprises characteristically operate outside formal regulatory frameworks, lacking official registration, legal documentation, or recognition within institutional support systems. They rely on inherited skill rather than certified training, on social networks rather than formal credit arrangements, and on community-based trust relationships rather than contractual market agreements. Early scholarship tended to frame informality in deficit terms, associating it with low productivity, limited growth potential, and economic vulnerability. More recent theoretical work offers a corrective perspective, recognising informal enterprises as dynamic, adaptive, and economically substantive, representing rational responses to regulatory barriers, high compliance costs, and the relative inaccessibility of formal institutions for communities with limited capital, education, and political representation.

Home-based production constitutes the predominant organisational form within informal craft economies. Work and domestic life coexist within the same physical and temporal space, with production activities integrated into the rhythms of household management. Family labour—including contributions from women, children, and elderly members supplements or replaces hired labour, creating enterprises that are simultaneously economic units and social institutions governed by familial norms and obligations. These arrangements structurally blur conventional distinctions between productive and reproductive labour, rendering the boundary between enterprise and household analytically indeterminate and creating conditions in which women's productive contributions are particularly susceptible to being framed as domestic or cultural rather than economic activity.

Research on craft clusters and artisan communities in India, including the work of Das on rural cluster economies and the value chain analyses conducted in districts such as Barmer, illustrates how craft enterprises navigate complex commercial environments while maintaining household-based organisational structures. Artisans operating within these systems mobilise resources through community networks, identify market opportunities through kinship and trader relationships, and manage production under conditions of significant uncertainty activities that constitute substantive entrepreneurial practice even where they diverge from formal institutional models of enterprise.

4.3 Rethinking Entrepreneurship in Traditional and Informal Contexts

4.3.1 Critique of Dominant Entrepreneurship Frameworks

Mainstream entrepreneurship theory has been constructed around a particular model of enterprise: individually driven, innovation-oriented, growth-seeking, and institutionally embedded within formal market structures. This model privileges the recognition of market opportunities, calculated risk-taking, and the creation of scalable ventures as the defining characteristics of entrepreneurial practice. While these frameworks have generated significant theoretical progress within their domain of application, they are premised on structural assumptions stable institutional environments, accessible formal capital, separation of business from household life, and freedom from social obligations that constrain economic decision-making that do not hold for the majority of heritage-based enterprises operating in rural and informal contexts within developing countries.

The consequences of this theoretical bias are significant and cascading. Enterprises that do not conform to the dominant model are systematically excluded from entrepreneurship research and categorised instead as subsistence activities, welfare interventions, or survival strategies. Heritage-based craft work is particularly vulnerable to this marginalisation, occupying a liminal position that renders it simultaneously too cultural for entrepreneurship theory and too economic for heritage studies. This disciplinary gap means that the genuine entrepreneurial competencies embedded within craft-based livelihoods adaptive resource mobilisation, market navigation under constraint, management of culturally embedded value chains, and the creative balancing of tradition and contemporary demand remain largely invisible within both scholarly and policy discourse.

4.3.2 Informal, Subsistence, and Necessity Entrepreneurship

The emergence of literature on informal, micro-scale, and necessity-driven entrepreneurship has begun to address these conceptual limitations. Scholars working within this tradition emphasise the entrepreneurial agency of individuals operating within structurally constrained contexts, arguing that livelihood strategies combining inherited practice with adaptive market engagement constitute forms of enterprise that deserve scholarly recognition on their own terms rather than as imperfect approximations of formal models. The conventional binary distinction between necessity entrepreneurship driven by the absence of viable employment alternatives and opportunity entrepreneurship driven by the proactive recognition of market possibilities has been widely criticised for its analytical simplicity. Most informal enterprises reflect complex combinations of motivation, including inherited cultural obligation, economic adaptation, and opportunistic market engagement, that resist neat categorical assignment.

In the context of craft-based heritage livelihoods, entrepreneurship manifests through the creative adaptation of traditional skills to contemporary market demands, the negotiation of pricing and value chain relationships, the management of household-based production systems, and the cultivation of networks that connect artisans to regional, national, and increasingly digital markets. Research suggests that these practices embody substantial entrepreneurial competencies, even where they lack formal institutional expression. Recognising them as such is a prerequisite for developing theoretical frameworks adequate to the diversity of entrepreneurial practice across the full range of social and economic contexts in which it occurs.

4.3.3 Heritage Entrepreneurship

Heritage entrepreneurship understood as the process of generating economic value from cultural resources while sustaining their cultural significance represents an emergent conceptual territory that brings together concerns from entrepreneurship studies, cultural economics, and development research.

Existing work in this area has focused predominantly on formal or semi-formal contexts, particularly cultural tourism, creative industries, and arts-based enterprise, where heritage assets are mobilised within market frameworks that assume institutional support, legal recognition, and access to external networks and capital. Surti and colleagues have drawn attention to the economic potential of cultural heritage for advancing women's empowerment within the creative economies of developing countries, positioning heritage not merely as a cultural resource but as a vehicle for inclusive economic participation.

The application of heritage entrepreneurship concepts to informal, household-based, and family-run enterprises remains considerably underdeveloped within the literature. Heritage entrepreneurs operating within these contexts navigate distinctive challenges, including the tension between cultural authenticity and market adaptability, the negotiation of intergenerational knowledge transmission alongside economic innovation, and the management of enterprises governed by social and familial obligations rather than commercial logic alone. These challenges are experienced differentially across gendered lines, raising questions about whose heritage is being mobilised, whose labour sustains it, and who ultimately benefits from its commercialization questions that existing literature has not systematically addressed.

4.4 Gender, Work, and Power in Craft-Based Enterprises

4.4.1 Gendered Division of Labour in Craft Production

Research on gender and craft production in India consistently demonstrates that artisanal work is organised along deeply gendered lines. Women are concentrated in home-based, production-intensive activities, including weaving, embroidery, fabric printing, and finishing work, while men occupy more visible roles in market-facing, commercial, and representational functions such as sales, trading, and negotiation. Women constitute approximately sixty-five per cent of artisans in the handicraft sector nationally, performing skilled and often labour-intensive production tasks; yet their participation in pricing decisions, market negotiations, enterprise ownership, and income management remains significantly constrained. Geographical studies of the handicraft economy in Western Rajasthan document that women earn approximately twenty to thirty per cent less than men for comparable work, reflecting the structural undervaluation of female labour within craft enterprises.

This gendered division of labour is not an incidental feature of craft organisation but reflects broader social norms governing female mobility, household authority, and the culturally demarcated domains of appropriate male and female economic activity. In the patriarchal social structures prevalent across much of rural India, and particularly within traditional communities in Rajasthan, men are positioned as primary economic decision-makers and market intermediaries, while women's economic contributions are naturalised as extensions of their domestic, familial, and cultural roles. The result is a persistent structural asymmetry in which women's labour is simultaneously indispensable to enterprise functioning and systematically undervalued within the distribution of economic recognition and returns.

4.4.2 Women's Entrepreneurship in Informal Craft Economies

Women's entrepreneurship in informal craft economies is shaped by a distinctive and compounding set of structural constraints that differ markedly from those encountered by male counterparts. Restricted physical mobility governed by community and familial norms regarding women's movement outside the domestic sphere limits women's access to markets, supplier networks, financial institutions, and training opportunities. Domestic responsibilities, encompassing childcare, elder care, and household

management, create competing temporal demands that constrain productive hours available for craft work and enterprise management. Limited access to formal education, particularly in business management, financial literacy, and technology use, further reduces women's capacity to engage with formal market systems or navigate institutional credit channels.

Despite these structural barriers, women demonstrate considerable entrepreneurial resourcefulness within the constraints they negotiate. Self-help groups, community cooperatives, and informal kinship networks function as alternative organisational mechanisms through which women access collective resources, share market information, pool skills, and exercise negotiating leverage that individual producers cannot achieve alone. Research by Srivastava on women as custodians of living heritage in Rajasthan documents how women artisans, entrepreneurs, and community leaders have actively engaged in transforming practices historically embedded within domestic life into avenues for income generation, creative expression, and economic independence. Increasingly, digital platforms create new possibilities for market access that partially circumvent mobility constraints, enabling women artisans to connect with consumers and intermediaries without requiring physical presence in formal market spaces.

4.4.3 Intra-Household Power and the Invisibility of Women's Labour

Family-based enterprises in the craft sector exhibit a characteristic pattern of shared productive labour combined with unequal authority, in which multiple household members contribute to production while control over income, strategic decision-making, and market relationships remains concentrated in male hands. Research by Arora on gendered labour in the artisanal industry documents how women artisans are frequently unable to control the economic dimensions of their craft work including pricing, costing, and commercial negotiation which remain governed by male family members irrespective of women's productive contributions. This arrangement renders women economically dependent even within enterprises whose viability depends substantially on their own skill and effort.

Feminist economic scholarship characterises this dynamic as the systematic invisibility of women's labour: economic work that is productive and economically significant but performed within domestic or culturally defined spaces is excluded from recognition as entrepreneurial activity. When women's craft work is framed as cultural practice, family tradition, or domestic contribution rather than enterprise, it is excluded from business statistics, development programmes, and support mechanisms designed to promote entrepreneurship. The consequences are cumulative: invisibility perpetuates underinvestment in women's economic capabilities, limits policy responses to the structural barriers they face, and reinforces inequalities in the distribution of income, assets, and economic agency across households and generations.

4.5 Methodological Gaps and the Necessity of Qualitative Inquiry

Scholarship on India's handicraft sector has been dominated by quantitative surveys, value chain analyses, and policy evaluation studies that privilege structural and sectoral metrics over interpretive depth. Studies examining artisan income levels, production volumes, market linkages, and policy implementation outcomes such as Maharshi and Bishnoi's assessment of artisan development in Western Rajasthan, Singh and colleagues' value chain analysis in Barmer district, and AIACA's comprehensive policy gaps study have generated valuable structural knowledge but offer limited access to the lived experiences, relational negotiations, and meaning-making processes that constitute heritage entrepreneurship as a social practice. The qualitative dimensions of craft-based enterprise how artisans narrate their relationship to inherited tradition, how they negotiate the competing demands of household

and market, how they experience and resist gendered constraints on their economic agency remain substantially underexplored within existing methodological approaches.

Das and other scholars working on craft clusters and rural livelihoods have advocated for ethnographic and interpretive qualitative approaches as necessary correctives to this methodological bias, enabling access to artisans' subjective entrepreneurial realities and the relational dynamics that shape their daily working lives. The present study responds to this documented lacuna by adopting an interpretive, qualitative design based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with craft-based heritage entrepreneurs in Jodhpur. By positioning artisans' own accounts as the primary analytical resource, the study foregrounds lived experience as a site of theoretical insight and contributes methodological pluralism to a field characterised by quantitative and policy-driven forms of enquiry. This approach is essential not merely as a methodological preference but as an ethical and epistemological commitment to recovering perspectives that have been structurally marginalised within both scholarship and policy.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on an integrated theoretical framework that brings together feminist economic theory, informal economy perspectives, and the concept of heritage entrepreneurship as a socially embedded economic practice. This multi-perspectival framework is necessary given the interdisciplinary nature of the research questions and the inadequacy of any single theoretical tradition to capture the full complexity of gendered heritage entrepreneurship within informal economies.

Feminist economic theory provides the central analytical lens through which gender inequalities within heritage-based enterprises are examined. By challenging mainstream economic models that privilege formal, monetised, and market-based activity, feminist economics draws attention to the systematic undervaluation of unpaid, informal, and care-related work predominantly performed by women. Applied to the craft-based context, this theoretical perspective enables recognition of women's heritage-based labour as economic activity in its own right, irrespective of whether it is formally compensated or institutionally recognised. It also provides the conceptual vocabulary for examining how household dynamics, power relations, and social norms mediate women's access to the economic benefits of their own productive work, illuminating the paradox through which high cultural value coexists with low economic recognition.

Informal economy theory, as developed within development economics and economic sociology, provides the second theoretical pillar. The study adopts a perspective that understands informality not as a deficit or transitional condition but as a structural context shaped by regulatory environments, institutional barriers, and socially embedded modes of economic organisation. This framing enables a non-pathologising analysis of heritage enterprises that operate outside formal institutional structures recognising their adaptive rationality, their dependence on social capital and community networks, and the specific constraints they face in accessing formal resources, markets, and legal protections. Informality here is understood as a dimension of context rather than a characteristic of individual entrepreneurs, shifting analytical attention from deficiencies of the enterprise to the structural conditions that produce and reproduce informality.

Together, these theoretical perspectives are oriented around the concept of gendered entrepreneurial pathways, understood as the socially structured and individually navigated routes through which men and women engage with heritage-based economic activity. The framework proposes that cultural heritage resources form the material foundation of entrepreneurial practice, but that access to and control

over these resources, the visibility and recognition of the labour invested in them, and the distribution of economic returns from their commercialisation are all mediated by gender as a structuring principle intersecting with other social dimensions including caste, class, and locality. Livelihood outcomes are, consequently, not uniform within heritage-based enterprises but are shaped by these mediating structures in ways that systematically advantage male over female participants.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research approach to examine how gender structures entrepreneurial pathways within craft-based cultural heritage livelihoods in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. An interpretivist orientation rests on the philosophical premise that social phenomena are constituted through processes of meaning-making and social interaction that cannot be adequately captured through measurement, quantification, or the testing of pre-specified hypotheses. Heritage entrepreneurship, as a domain shaped by inherited cultural practices, gendered social norms, household power relations, and subjective experience, demands a methodological approach capable of engaging with the complexity and contextual specificity of participants' lived realities. A qualitative approach enables precisely this kind of engagement, generating rich, contextually grounded accounts of how individuals understand and navigate their entrepreneurial circumstances rather than producing decontextualised measurements of observable behaviour (Kumar, 2023; Maharshi & Bishnoi, 2024).

6.2 Research Design and Temporal Framework

The study employs an exploratory research design, which is particularly suited to contexts in which existing theoretical frameworks inadequately account for the phenomena under investigation and the research objective is to generate new insights rather than to test established propositions. Given the limited empirical literature treating craft-based heritage work as entrepreneurial practice and the insufficient theoretical attention afforded to gender as an analytical lens within this domain, an exploratory orientation allows thematic patterns to emerge organically from participants' narratives rather than being constrained by pre-existing conceptual categories. The study follows a cross-sectional temporal framework, with data collected during a single, defined period of fieldwork in Jodhpur. This approach enables an in-depth examination of participants' present entrepreneurial practices, experiences, and gendered roles at a particular historical moment, without the aim of tracking longitudinal change across time. The cross-sectional design is appropriate for the study's descriptive and exploratory objectives and is consistent with established practice in qualitative research on livelihoods and informal enterprise.

6.3 Study Setting

The research was conducted across selected craft-producing localities in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. Jodhpur was selected as the study site on the basis of several methodologically grounded considerations. The district hosts a diverse and concentrated cluster of craft-based enterprises encompassing textiles, embroidery, leatherwork, metalwork, furniture, woodwork, and jewellery production, providing access to a range of heritage-based entrepreneurial practices within a geographically defined setting. The sector operates predominantly within informal, household-based organisational structures, aligning directly with the study's theoretical focus on non-formal enterprise. Women constitute a substantial share of the artisan workforce in the district, making Jodhpur an appropriate context for examining the gendered dimensions of heritage entrepreneurship with adequate participant diversity. The region's documented

socio-economic challenges including market intermediation, limited access to institutional capital, and social norms constraining female mobility create conditions in which gendered inequalities within craft enterprises are both analytically visible and practically significant, generating the kind of empirical variation necessary for productive qualitative enquiry (Kumar, 2023; Maharshi & Bishnoi, 2024).

6.4 Sampling Strategy and Sample Composition

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants whose characteristics and experiences were most directly relevant to the research objectives. This strategy enables the deliberate selection of information-rich cases capable of yielding detailed, contextually grounded insights into the phenomena under investigation, in contrast to probability-based approaches designed to achieve statistical representativeness. Initial contact was established through local artisan cooperatives, self-help group networks, and craft cluster organisations operating within Jodhpur district. Subsequent access was extended through snowball referrals, which proved particularly valuable in reaching home-based producers operating independently of formal institutional networks and therefore less visible through organisational channels alone.

Participants were required to meet three inclusion criteria: active engagement in craft-based heritage work as a primary or significant supplementary source of household income; direct involvement in production processes and/or enterprise-related decision-making within their households or businesses; and current residence within Jodhpur district. Individuals engaged solely in wage-based artisanal labour without any entrepreneurial engagement broadly defined to include ownership, production management, or active market participation were excluded from the sample.

The final sample comprised thirty craft-based heritage entrepreneurs, including fifteen women and fifteen men, representing a range of artisanal traditions including textile and embroidery work, leatherwork, metalwork, pottery, and woodcraft. Participants ranged in age from twenty-two to sixty-seven years and varied in terms of enterprise scale, household composition, years of experience, and degree of formal market integration. Equal gender representation was deliberately established to enable systematic comparative analysis of men's and women's entrepreneurial experiences, which constitutes a central objective of the study. Sampling proceeded iteratively, with data collection continuing until thematic saturation was reached and additional interviews ceased to generate substantially new thematic content.

6.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in participants' preferred local language, predominantly Rajasthani Hindi. The semi-structured interview format was selected for its capacity to elicit detailed personal narratives, entrepreneurial accounts, and reflections on gendered experience while maintaining sufficient thematic consistency across the sample to enable systematic comparative analysis. An interview guide was developed through iterative review of the relevant literature and pilot testing with two participants not included in the final sample. The guide addressed core research concerns including the origins and history of participants' craft engagement; the organisation of production, enterprise management, and market interactions; household and family dynamics governing work arrangements and income allocation; experiences of resource access and institutional engagement; and participants' own perceptions of how gender shapes their entrepreneurial roles and opportunities.

Individual interviews ranged from approximately forty-five to ninety minutes in duration, with extended conversations accommodated where participants demonstrated willingness to engage in greater depth.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' prior informed consent and subsequently transcribed in full. Transcripts from the local language were translated into English by a bilingual researcher with relevant contextual familiarity; back-translation was applied to a subset of transcripts to verify translational fidelity. Supplementary observational field notes were maintained throughout the fieldwork period, documenting contextual details of participants' production environments, household settings, and interpersonal interactions, providing additional data to inform and contextualise interpretive analysis.

6.6 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, a methodology that enables researchers to identify, organise, and interpret patterns of meaning within qualitative data through a process of active engagement and theoretical reflection rather than procedural coding alone. Following Braun and Clarke's reflexive approach, the analytical process comprised several iterative phases: initial familiarisation with transcripts through close and repeated reading; generation of preliminary codes capturing semantically significant features of the data; development of provisional themes through the grouping of conceptually related codes into meaningful clusters; review and refinement of themes against the full dataset to ensure both internal coherence and adequate coverage of the data; and finalisation of themes through systematic naming and definition in direct relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Comparative analysis was conducted systematically throughout the process to examine similarities and differences between women's and men's entrepreneurial accounts. Themes were assessed for their presence, salience, and configuration across both gender groups, enabling identification of patterns that were either common across the full sample, gender-specific, or shaped by intersecting contextual factors including enterprise type, age, caste affiliation, and household composition. All analytical decisions and interpretive reasoning were documented in a reflexive research journal maintained throughout fieldwork and analysis, supporting methodological transparency, accountability, and self-critical reflection.

6.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical governance was maintained rigorously throughout all phases of the study. Prior to data collection, all participants received comprehensive written and verbal information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, anticipated outputs and their uses, and their rights as research participants, including the unconditional right to withdraw at any stage without explanation or consequence. Informed consent was obtained individually from each participant prior to the commencement of any data collection activity.

Participant anonymity was protected through the systematic use of pseudonyms and the removal or alteration of identifying biographical details in all transcripts, analytical memoranda, and published outputs. Given the household-based and sometimes sensitive nature of the topics discussed including intra-household power dynamics, income control, financial dependency, and family conflict particular care was exercised to ensure that participants' accounts could not be attributed to them by others within their communities or professional networks. Audio recordings are stored securely on password-protected institutional servers and will be deleted following completion of the project in accordance with institutional data management requirements and applicable data protection regulations.

7. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

7.1 Contribution to Entrepreneurship and Management Theory

From a management and entrepreneurship perspective, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship calling for more contextually grounded, socially embedded, and institutionally diverse approaches to understanding entrepreneurial practice. By situating craft-based heritage enterprises at the analytical centre, the research challenges mainstream entrepreneurship theory's privileging of growth-oriented, formally structured, and innovation-driven enterprise as the normative model, and offers an alternative conceptualisation grounded in inherited knowledge, informal organisation, and culturally embedded value creation. The findings advance theoretical understanding of how micro-entrepreneurs manage resources, risks, and social relationships under conditions of structural constraint, enriching entrepreneurship literature and small business research with perspectives drawn from contexts that have historically been marginalised within the discipline.

7.2 Contribution to Gender Studies and Feminist Economics

The study makes a substantive contribution to gender studies and feminist economic analysis by illuminating the invisible and undervalued dimensions of women's productive labour within craft-based family enterprises. By documenting how women's heritage-based work is simultaneously indispensable and unrecognized economically productive yet framed as domestic, cultural, or supplementary the research contributes to theoretical debates on the gendering of economic agency, the boundaries of entrepreneurship, and the structural mechanisms through which gender inequalities are reproduced within informal economies. The qualitative approach enables an examination of how these dynamics are experienced, negotiated, and occasionally resisted by women in their everyday working lives, generating grounded insights that aggregate statistical analyses cannot provide.

7.3 Implications for Policy and Development Practice

The study carries important implications for policy design and development practice in the domains of heritage livelihood promotion and women's entrepreneurship support. By identifying persistent gaps between policy intent and the lived realities of heritage entrepreneurs, the research can inform the development of gender-sensitive entrepreneurship programmes, more inclusive heritage and cultural economy policies, and support mechanisms better calibrated to the structural realities of informal, household-based enterprises. The findings argue against blanket approaches to formalisation that fail to account for the social, cultural, and economic constraints that shape artisan livelihoods, and instead advocate for nuanced, participatory interventions that recognise existing practices, build on available resources, and address the specific barriers that constrain women's economic agency within the craft sector.

7.4 Contribution to Sustainable Livelihoods Discourse

Finally, the study contributes to debates on sustainable development by demonstrating the interconnections between cultural heritage preservation and livelihood security at the household and community level. Sustainability here is understood not only in its economic dimension but in its social and cultural dimensions as well, encompassing the preservation of skills, the maintenance of community identity, and the intergenerational continuity of artisanal knowledge systems. By linking these dimensions of sustainability to the gendered dynamics of craft-based enterprise, the research offers an alternative perspective on sustainable development that is grounded in the everyday practices of artisan communities rather than in macro-level policy frameworks, contributing to a more grounded and human-centred understanding of what it means to sustain both heritage and livelihoods in contemporary India.

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