Spotlight
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How do women entrepreneurs turn faith into a resource when money runs short?

A study of 25 Ethiopian women entrepreneurs shows how spiritual bricolage sustains motivation under scarcity.

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Most entrepreneurship research treats resources as things you can count: cash, equipment, staff, contacts. When those run thin, the usual advice is to find more or make do with less. But there is a resource that appears on no balance sheet and never runs out, and a new study argues it can be one of the most important assets an entrepreneur has when the material ones are gone.

Drawing on the life stories of 25 women running businesses in Addis Ababa, Tigist Tesfaye, Magdalena Markowska, Ethiopia L. Segaro and Lucia Naldi examine how faith and spiritual practice work not as private comfort but as a working tool — something entrepreneurs repurpose, recombine and lean on to keep going when the odds are against them. They call it *spiritual bricolage*.

Before faith enters the picture, these women are already relentless resource managers. Of the 25, only six kept their original business idea; the other 19 adapted, sometimes repeatedly. They close unprofitable ventures fast, pivot, diversify, and often run several businesses at once — one began in sewing, moved into construction after a chance encounter, imported goods from Dubai, then switched to selling fruit and vegetables, freeing resources from one venture to seed the next. Scarcity makes them agile: they can tell you at any moment how the business is faring and how much money is in hand, because they cannot afford to lose any of it.

The setting sharpens the question. Ethiopian women entrepreneurs face restricted access to capital, education and networks, alongside strong cultural norms about what women should and should not do. Businesses run by women in Ethiopia are roughly two and a half times more likely to fail than those run by men. Add a run of national shocks since 2018 — drought, floods, locust infestations, conflict, touching some 91% of households — and the puzzle is not how these women optimise. It is how they persist at all.

WHAT WE STUDIED

The team conducted 52 life-story interviews with 25 women entrepreneurs in Addis Ababa, all of them mothers running ventures across sectors as varied as hospitality, manufacturing, beauty, fashion, agro-processing, construction and import–export. The women ranged from 23 to 65 years old. Interviews were held in Amharic; most participants were interviewed twice, and the 1,672 minutes of recordings were transcribed, translated and checked by a bilingual member of the team.

Analysis followed the Gioia method, an inductive approach that builds theory from the ground up by coding what participants actually say before grouping it into broader themes. The original aim was narrower — how mothers juggle business and family under scarcity. But spirituality kept surfacing, unprompted and insistent. Some women had even changed religion over the course of their entrepreneurial journey. The researchers followed the data.

One framing choice is worth stating plainly. This is not a family-business study, and the authors do not pretend otherwise. The sample is women entrepreneurs, not family firms. The mechanism they describe, though — how founders draw on intangible, values-based resources to stay in the game — travels easily to business families, where faith, legacy and shared purpose often do similar work.

KEY INSIGHTS

Spirituality is a resource, not just a feeling

The women did not treat faith as a Sunday matter. They treated it as something to be used. One described the Bible as her life manual. Others spoke of prayer as a daily input to business decisions, of scripture as a source of resilience, of faith as the thing that let them carry motherhood and a venture at once without coming apart. The researchers call these spiritual resources: intangible, transcendent and, crucially, never depleted by use. You can run out of cash. You cannot run out of prayer.

The accounts are concrete. Danawit seeks direction before every business step and ties her decisions to her reading of scripture. Meron credits prayer with helping her run the business and raise her children at the same time. Fatuma uses religious principles to keep her dealings clean — no interest-bearing loans, no dishonest sales. The thread is not piety for its own sake; it is spirituality pressed into service as a practical instrument of running a company.

Bricolage explains how they used it

Bricolage is the art of making do with whatever is at hand. The study identifies three moves. The women drew on spiritual resources already in their repertoire. They repurposed those resources for business ends — using religious principles to set ethical rules, refusing interest-bearing loans, committing to honest dealing even when it cost them. And they recombined them, sometimes blending elements of different traditions into a personal framework that fit their lives and ventures. One participant merged an Orthodox upbringing with Protestant practice; another carried beliefs from a Muslim background into a later Christian one.

The recombination is vivid in individual stories. Tsehay's shift from Orthodox to Protestant first cost her customers and then, after she relocated, won her more; she came to read the whole episode as a blessing rather than a blow. Bizunesh moved from Islam to Protestant Christianity after her child's recovery and describes spirituality since as the cornerstone that carried her through both personal and business trials. In each case the women were not simply adopting a belief — they were assembling a usable framework out of the spiritual materials around them.

Three strategies, and they are not equal

Here the paper makes its sharpest point. The women related to spiritual resources in one of three ways. *Adventurous sourcing* meant actively seeking new spiritual resources outside the current pool — nine of the 25 changed religion to do so. *Diligent embedding* meant going deeper into an existing faith. *Relational anchoring* meant leaning on others — a mother, a husband, children — for spiritual guidance rather than cultivating it directly.

The strategies differ in what they produce. Women who sourced adventurously or embedded diligently tended to experience the biggest shifts in how they read their situation. Those who relied mainly on relational anchoring did not get the same lift. This is the most useful finding in the paper for anyone designing support: faith-based coping is not uniformly generative, and the difference lies in whether the entrepreneur is actively working the resource or passively receiving it.

Faith changes the read on risk

One reframing dimension is worth dwelling on. Several women described spirituality not as a safety net but as a spur to aim higher — a bigger dream, a more hopeful read of what was possible. The authors capture a recurring feeling participants called a sense of overflowing, an abundance that did not match their external circumstances and yet shaped how they approached risk. A constrained environment did not produce a cautious mindset. The spiritual resource did the opposite, widening the field of what felt worth attempting.

The mechanism is reframing

What links spiritual bricolage to staying motivated is a cognitive process the authors name *entrepreneurial reframing* — reconstructing the meaning of risk, resources, constraints and legitimacy. It runs along four lines. Spirituality alters how women perceive risk, encouraging bigger ambitions and a more hopeful read of the future. It expands the resource pool, adding courage, patience and a felt sense of access to help. It reframes constraints, turning obstacles into things that can be overcome or even welcomed. And it rebuilds moral legitimacy, giving women a basis to justify their choices when families or customers disapproved.

The cost was real for some. Of the women who changed religion, several lost customers from their former community; one watched her café empty after her conversion when former patrons stayed away. What stands out is what they did with the loss — relocating, rebuilding, recasting the setback as a blessing that pushed them to grow.

TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND ADVISORS

For anyone designing programmes for entrepreneurs in hard environments, the study reframes what counts as a resource worth supporting.

- Motivation is not always rational or performance-driven. Under scarcity it can come from meaning,

purpose and belief, and programmes that ignore this miss part of what keeps founders going.

- Intangible resources can be mobilised on purpose. These women were not passive recipients of faith; they used it, adapted it, recombined it. Support can help entrepreneurs name and work their non-material assets.
- The how matters more than the what. Active engagement — deepening or searching — generated more than passive reliance, so encouraging interpretive and legitimacy work beats encouraging dependence.

For business families the parallel is hard to miss: the same values and shared sense of purpose that anchor an enterprise can be an active resource in a downturn, not just a sentiment to invoke at anniversaries.

IMPACT

The contribution is conceptual as much as practical. Bricolage theory has long centred on material and social resources — tools, money, contacts. By extending it to the spiritual domain, the authors show that the logic of making do applies to intangible, culturally embedded resources too. And by naming entrepreneurial reframing, they offer a cleaner account of why bricolage sustains motivation and not only operations: it changes how entrepreneurs interpret their world, not just what they do in it.

A caution is built into the findings. Spiritual bricolage is mostly a positive force here, but it carries a short-term downside — breaking with a religious community can hit a business hard before any benefit appears. The strategy that produced the strongest reframing, adventurous sourcing, was also the one most likely to provoke backlash.

The study is candid about its limits. The sample is all women, all mothers, all in one city. Life-story interviews lean on memory and can invite tidier narratives than lived reality. Whether the same mechanisms hold in wealthier ecosystems or different cultural settings remains open — and is a question worth asking before treating these findings as universal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Treat intangible resources as legitimate inputs. When advising entrepreneurs under scarcity, ask about values, purpose and belief alongside cash flow and market fit — these often carry the motivation that keeps a venture alive.
2. Encourage active engagement over passive reliance. Help founders work their non-material resources deliberately rather than wait for guidance from others; deepening and searching are what generated real shifts in perspective.
3. Build meaning-making into support programmes. Mentorship, peer groups and community initiatives give entrepreneurs space to reconstruct legitimacy and connect their work to a larger purpose, which matters most where formal institutions are weak.
4. Anticipate the social cost of change. Where reframing means breaking with a community, expect a short-term hit and plan for the rebuilding period rather than treating early losses as failure.

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