

**The Role of Female Social Entrepreneurs in Advancing Environmental
Sustainability and Community Empowerment in Organic Agriculture: A Case
Study of California's Central Coast**

by © Maryam Mirzajani A (Thesis) submitted
To the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Management /Faculty of Business Administration
Memorial University of Newfoundland

October 2025

St. John's Newfoundland and Labrador

DEDICATION

To

my parents and friends

in recognition of their worth

an apology

“A feeling bears on itself the scars of its birth; it recollects as a
subjective
emotion its struggle for existence;
it retains the impress of what might have been, but is not.”

(Alfred North Whitehead
Process and Reality)

and hope

“If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise.”

William Blake
Proverbs of Hell

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is the culmination of an academic journey that has been shaped by the invaluable support, encouragement, and contributions of many individuals to whom I owe my deepest gratitude.

First, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Tom Cooper, for his continuous support, thoughtful guidance, and constructive feedback throughout the course of this research. His mentorship helped me stay focused, curious, and confident in navigating the complexities of this topic. I am equally grateful to Dr. John Schouten, whose insights and encouragement enriched my understanding and strengthened the foundation of this thesis.

I am grateful to Memorial University of Newfoundland, whose academic environment, library resources, and faculty support made this work possible. I am also deeply thankful to the Regional History Project at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for preserving the powerful oral histories that form the backbone of this research.

To the women social entrepreneurs whose stories and work inspired this study, thank you for your courage, innovation, and commitment to community and sustainability. Your voices have left an impression on both this thesis and me.

To my parents, family, and friends, your unwavering love, patience, and encouragement have been my greatest strength. Your belief in me made this achievement possible. This journey has been both intellectually and personally transformative, and I am grateful to everyone who supported me along the way.

Abstract of Thesis

The Role of Female Social Entrepreneurs in Advancing Environmental Sustainability and Community Empowerment in Organic Agriculture: A Case Study of California's Central Coast

by

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Master of Science in General Management

Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2025

Professor Tom Cooper

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This thesis investigates the role of female social entrepreneurs in advancing sustainability and community development through organic agriculture on California's Central Coast. In particular, it explores how these women navigate institutional, economic, and cultural barriers while contributing to environmental stewardship, local empowerment, and policy advocacy.

Social entrepreneurship offers an alternative model to traditional business by prioritizing social and environmental goals alongside economic viability. Within this framework, female social entrepreneurs play a critical but under-recognized role, often innovating in sectors that intersect with community welfare, sustainability, and inclusive development.

Yet, their contributions remain insufficiently explored in academic literature—particularly in agriculture, a sector often dominated by male narratives and market-driven analysis.

This study uses a feminist and ecological lens to analyze seventeen oral history interviews with women who helped shape California’s organic agriculture movement. These narratives, drawn from the University of California, Santa Cruz’s “Cultivating a Movement” project, offer rich insights into how gender, activism, and entrepreneurship intersect in practice. The findings highlight the ways in which these women fostered resilient local food systems, advocated for more equitable policies, and redefined leadership within their communities.

By centering the lived experiences of female social entrepreneurs, this research contributes to scholarly debates in feminist entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and institutional theory. It also provides practical insights into how gender-informed entrepreneurship can serve as a catalyst for systemic change in environmentally and socially complex sectors.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that female-led social enterprises are instrumental in creating inclusive, sustainable solutions to contemporary challenges. Their work not only transforms local ecosystems and economies but also challenges dominant models of entrepreneurship that prioritize scale over social value.

1. Chapter 1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the research focus on female social entrepreneurs in California’s organic agriculture sector, outlining the problem, purpose, significance, and research questions that guide the study.

1.1 Opening Statement and Background Information

As the global population approaches the nine billion mark, the importance of sustainable agriculture has never been more critical. Organic farming, once considered a niche sector, now emerges as a vital solution to the myriad challenges of modern agriculture. Not only does it offer a sustainable alternative to conventional farming methods, which often entail significant environmental costs, but it also presents a viable strategy to enhance food security worldwide. Rahmann et al. (2017) underscore the potential of organic agriculture to meet global food demands while minimizing environmental degradation. This approach aligns with the principles of ecological balance and resource efficiency, which are crucial for the long-term sustainability of our food systems.

Simultaneously, regions like California's Central Coast have become pivotal in the organic movement, providing unique insights into integrating organic practices in diverse agricultural settings. The area's rich biodiversity and progressive agricultural policies create an optimal environment for studying the impacts and benefits of organic farming. Zikeli et al. (2014) highlight the rapid growth of organic farming in such regions, driven by a combination of consumer demand and enhanced governmental support, underscoring its importance in both local and global contexts.

Moreover, the evolution of organic agriculture is marked by significant global shifts toward more sustainable farming practices bolstered by scientific research and consumer awareness. According to Reganold and Wachter (2016), organic farming systems—while typically producing lower yields compared to conventional methods—offer greater profitability, environmental benefits, and social well-being.

The global expansion of organic agriculture reflects its growing significance in addressing food security and environmental sustainability. Willer et al. (2024) report that the organic food market has continued to grow, reaching new heights in consumer demand and production. This growth indicates a broader recognition of organic agriculture's role in promoting ecological health, economic viability, and social equity.

In conclusion, the shift towards organic agriculture is not merely a trend but a necessary transition to address the pressing issues of environmental sustainability and food security. By embracing organic practices, we can ensure a healthier planet and a secure food future for the coming generations.

The history of organic farming is a narrative of evolving practices and shifting paradigms, moving from traditional agriculture to a systemic approach recognized for its sustainability and ecological benefits. Initially marked by the use of natural materials and the avoidance of synthetic chemicals, organic farming emerged as a distinct practice in the early 20th century. This approach was significantly influenced by agrarian and ecological thinkers like Sir Albert Howard, who is often credited with formulating the principles of organic agriculture in the West. Howard's work highlighted the importance of soil health and natural farming techniques, sparking a movement that rejected the industrial agriculture model, which relied heavily on chemical inputs (Howard & Howard, 1943).

As the environmental impact of conventional farming became increasingly apparent, the 1960s and 1970s saw a surge in ecological awareness, fostering a deeper shift towards sustainability. During this period, the role of social entrepreneurship began to take root, driven by visionaries who saw organic farming not only as a method of production but as a transformative tool for social and environmental change (Guthman, 2004). This era also

witnessed the emergence of small-scale farms that adopted organic methods to counteract the growing dominance of agribusiness and its ecological degradation.

In the context of California's Central Coast, the adoption of organic practices was notably influenced by local social entrepreneurs who integrated sustainable agriculture with community development and ecological stewardship. The region became a pioneering space for organic farming, supported by a community that valued environmental health and sustainable living. Farmers and activists established networks and organizations that promoted organic certification, farmer education, and market development, thereby embedding organic farming within the larger social fabric (Bacon et al., 2012).

The institutionalization of organic farming was further advanced by federal policies and the establishment of certification standards in the 1990s. This period marked a significant turning point, as organic farming moved from niche to mainstream, supported by a growing consumer base driven by health and environmental concerns. The National Organic Program in the United States, established in 2002, codified the practices and principles of organic farming, ensuring its growth and integration into the global market (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2002).

California's Central Coast represents a uniquely critical study area for organic agriculture due to its combination of distinctive environmental characteristics, innovative agricultural practices, and the ongoing interplay between traditional farming and modern agribusiness influences. This region, encompassing areas such as Monterey, Santa Cruz, and San Benito, has been at the forefront of organic farming in the United States. Its unique climate and soil conditions are favorable for diverse crop production, making it an ideal location for the development and implementation of sustainable farming practices.

The introduction of large agribusiness into the organic sector has marked a significant shift in the region's agricultural practices. Dominated initially by small-scale organic farms, the area has seen a growing presence of large firms adopting organic methods, albeit in a more industrialized form. This "conventionalization" of organic farming has led to a broader trend in which traditional practices are increasingly influenced by larger economic imperatives, sometimes undermining the ecological benefits traditionally associated with organic farming (Buck et al., 1997).

Moreover, the 2006 *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak linked to spinach grown in the region was a pivotal moment for food safety in the U.S. It catalyzed sweeping changes in food safety protocols and regulations aimed at preventing future outbreaks. This incident underscores the region's importance in influencing national food safety standards, which intensely focus on the pre-harvest phases of food production. However, these stringent safety protocols can sometimes conflict with sustainable agricultural practices and environmental conservation efforts, creating a complex dynamic between maintaining crop safety and preserving the ecological health of the region (Olimpi et al., 2019).

The Central Coast's role in pioneering new organic certification standards and influencing national food safety policies has made it a key area for academic and policy discussions. The interplay between stringent food safety requirements and sustainable agricultural practices poses significant challenges for local farmers, as they balance the need for safe food production with environmental conservation efforts.

In conclusion, California's Central Coast serves as a critical study area for organic agriculture due to its significant role in national food production, its influence on food safety standards, and its ongoing challenges in balancing agricultural productivity with

environmental sustainability. This makes it an exemplary region for examining how organic practices can be optimized to support both safe food production and ecological health, providing valuable insights into how local conditions and market forces can shape the practices and sustainability of organic agriculture.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Significance

Despite organic agriculture's growing importance, there remains a significant gap in understanding the unique contributions and challenges faced by female social entrepreneurs in this field. While existing studies have examined sustainability practices and entrepreneurship separately, few have explored the intersection of gender, sustainability, and social enterprise in the context of organic agriculture.

This thesis addresses this gap by investigating how female-led enterprises navigate institutional voids, market barriers, and gendered expectations, while simultaneously advancing sustainability and community empowerment. These insights are not only academically relevant but also vital for informing agricultural policy, entrepreneurship theory, and sustainable development initiatives.

By focusing on California's Central Coast, this study provides a context-rich analysis of how local actors address global sustainability challenges. The evolution of organic agriculture on California's Central Coast offers a compelling narrative of innovation and resilience, prominently featuring the underrecognized contributions of female social entrepreneurs. These women are pivotal in adopting sustainable practices, harmonizing with the region's unique environmental characteristics and cultural heritage. Despite their integral role, a substantial gap exists in the academic landscape regarding the specific challenges they face and the strategies they employ within the organic

agriculture sector. This oversight forms the core problem that this thesis addresses—bridging the research gap by highlighting the influence and innovation of female social entrepreneurs in shaping the organic agriculture movement (Thomas, 2004).

This research is significant for its multidimensional impact across several fields. Organic agriculture extends our understanding of sustainable practices through the lens of gender-influenced entrepreneurship, offering insights into the scalability and replicability of these practices. In the realm of gender studies, it provides a nuanced analysis of the barriers and catalysts women encounter in a traditionally male-dominated field, enriching the dialogue on gender dynamics within entrepreneurial contexts (Aquino et al., 2018). Moreover, within social entrepreneurship, this study elucidates the integration of social objectives with business operations, illustrating how these entrepreneurs leverage their unique positions to foster community development, advocate for supportive policies, and implement environmentally sustainable practices (Hudcová et al., 2018).

By delving into these themes, the thesis fills a critical academic gap and furnishes policymakers, practitioners, and fellow researchers with a deeper comprehension of the synergistic potential between social entrepreneurship and organic agriculture. It underscores the transformative power of female entrepreneurs in fostering sustainable development and posits them as key actors in the ongoing evolution of agricultural practices on California's Central Coast.

Despite the growing recognition of organic agriculture as a sustainable alternative to conventional farming, significant challenges remain in its widespread adoption and long-term viability. These challenges include market dynamics, regulatory barriers, limited

resource access, and the tension between environmental sustainability and economic scalability. Female social entrepreneurs are emerging as pivotal actors in addressing these challenges, yet their contributions, motivations, and the barriers they face remain underexplored in the academic literature (Reganold & Wachter, 2016).

Studies have acknowledged the role of organic farming in improving environmental sustainability through methods like crop rotation and composting. Yet, the literature primarily focuses on the technical aspects of organic farming while neglecting the social entrepreneurship dimension, particularly the gendered strategies employed by women to overcome challenges in the sector (Larsson, 2012). Existing research also highlights the importance of community empowerment and policy advocacy in achieving sustainable agricultural goals. However, the unique contributions of female social entrepreneurs, who integrate environmental, social, and economic missions within organic agriculture, have not been systematically examined.

In California's Central Coast, a hub for organic agriculture, female social entrepreneurs face distinctive challenges such as resource scarcity and the need for supportive regulatory frameworks. These obstacles underscore the urgency to study how these women navigate their roles as leaders and innovators in the organic agriculture sector, thereby contributing to sustainability and community development (Allen & Kovach, 2000).

Despite increasing attention to the role of social entrepreneurship in sustainable agriculture, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning how female social entrepreneurs uniquely navigate structural challenges such as regulatory fragmentation, market pressures, and resource scarcity. While studies have examined organic

agriculture's environmental benefits (Reganold & Wachter, 2016) and the potential of social enterprises to foster community development (Hudcová et al., 2018), the gender-specific strategies employed by women to overcome these barriers—and their impact on policy advocacy and institutional change—are underexplored. This oversight limits our understanding of how gendered leadership and ecological values intersect in entrepreneurial contexts to produce sustainable and socially transformative outcomes. By focusing on California's Central Coast, this study addresses this critical empirical and theoretical gap by investigating how female-led enterprises contribute to environmental sustainability and community resilience within an often-exclusionary policy environment.

1.3 Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this research is to explore the role of female social entrepreneurs in shaping sustainable organic agriculture on California's Central Coast. It aims to understand how these women integrate ecological principles into their enterprises, advocate for policy change, and empower local communities.

This study employs qualitative methods to analyze the experiences, motivations, and strategies of women entrepreneurs in the organic sector. Through oral history interviews, the research captures the nuanced realities of these individuals as they confront structural constraints and leverage community networks to promote systemic change.

The findings are intended to inform both scholarly debates and practical interventions, particularly in designing supportive frameworks for women-led sustainable enterprises in agriculture.

This research aims to investigate the role of female social entrepreneurs in advancing sustainable organic agriculture on California's Central Coast, focusing on how they navigate institutional barriers, engage in community empowerment, and contribute to environmental sustainability. This study aims to uncover the gender-specific strategies

these women employ to overcome regulatory fragmentation, market pressures, and limited access to resources. These factors are often underrepresented in mainstream sustainability and entrepreneurship discourse.

By analyzing oral history interviews from the “Cultivating a Movement” archive, the study highlights how female entrepreneurs embed ecological principles within their business models while engaging in policy advocacy and grassroots innovation. In doing so, the research provides a nuanced understanding of the intersection between gender, entrepreneurship, and sustainability, offering insights into how social enterprises led by women function as hybrid agents of change within constrained institutional environments. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to scholarly conversations in feminist entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, and institutional theory by offering an empirically grounded account of how women-led initiatives shape the future of food systems, environmental stewardship, and community development.

1.4 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the central research question:

How do female social entrepreneurs on California’s Central Coast influence the development of sustainable organic agriculture, and in what ways do they respond to structural barriers while advancing environmental and community-focused goals?

To explore this overarching question, the study investigates three key dimensions:

Environmental Impact: How do women-led enterprises implement ecological practices—such as biodiversity conservation, reduced chemical use, or soil regeneration—within organic agriculture?

Community Empowerment: In what ways do female entrepreneurs foster food justice, educational access, and local economic participation to empower rural communities?

Navigating Barriers: What regulatory, economic, and gender-based obstacles do they face, and what adaptive or advocacy strategies enable them to sustain their initiatives

1.5 Research Objectives

This thesis pursues four interrelated research objectives aimed at deepening our understanding of how female social entrepreneurs contribute to sustainable development in organic agriculture:

To analyze how women entrepreneurs integrate environmental sustainability into their enterprise models, focusing on specific practices such as ecological farming, biodiversity conservation, and composting, as applied within California's Central Coast.

To examine the role of women-led enterprises in advancing community empowerment through initiatives related to food access, education, and participatory governance.

To identify the key structural and institutional challenges—including policy fragmentation, market limitations, and gender-related constraints—that these entrepreneurs encounter in the organic agriculture sector.

To investigate the strategies and advocacy efforts used by female social entrepreneurs to influence policy and institutional change, and how these actions contribute to the long-term resilience of sustainable food systems. Research Design Overview:

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology to allow for an in-depth exploration and understanding of the personal narratives and business practices of female social entrepreneurs. It emphasizes interpreting subjective experiences and the context in which these entrepreneurs operate, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of their impact on environmental sustainability and community empowerment.

1.6 Definition of Term

Environmental Sustainability: Environmental sustainability, as defined by Robert Goodland, involves maintaining or enhancing the natural systems and resources that are necessary for human life and the ecosystem. This concept emphasizes managing both renewable and nonrenewable resources in ways that do not diminish their viability for future generations. Goodland highlights the critical importance of preserving environmental life-support systems, such as the atmosphere, water, and soil, ensuring they support human life and the broader ecosystem. The focus is on promoting sustainable development practices that do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs by integrating environmental, social, and economic dimensions effectively (Goodland, 1995).

Organic Agriculture: Organic agriculture refers to a farming system that emphasizes the use of renewable resources, the conservation of soil and water, and the maintenance of environmental quality. According to (Lotter, 2003) organic agriculture promotes and enhances biodiversity, biological cycles, and soil biological activity. It is fundamentally based on minimal use of off-farm inputs and management practices that restore, maintain, and enhance ecological harmony. The organic standards prohibit the use of synthetic chemicals and genetically modified organisms, aiming to produce food in a way that cycles resources, promotes ecological balance, and conserves biodiversity (Lotter, 2003).

Social Entrepreneurship: Social entrepreneurship is defined as the process of identifying and pursuing opportunities to create social value by establishing social enterprises. This involves recognizing opportunities that can have a significant impact on society and developing organizations dedicated to achieving these social goals while maintaining

financial sustainability. Social entrepreneurship combines the drive for social improvement with the innovation and risk-taking that characterizes business entrepreneurship. This approach is particularly effective in addressing social problems such as unemployment, inequality, and environmental sustainability by creating organizations that blend economic objectives with social purposes (Haugh, 2005).

Community Empowerment: Community empowerment refers to the process of enabling communities to increase control over their lives by fostering participation, access to resources, capacity-building, and shared decision-making. It emphasizes grassroots involvement in shaping economic, social, and environmental development. (Craig & Mayo, 1995)

Institutions: Institutions are formal and informal rules, norms, and structures that guide social, economic, and political interactions. They shape individual and collective behaviours and influence resource allocation, policy frameworks, and governance. (North, 1990)

1.8 Summary

As the global population approaches the nine billion marks, the imperative for sustainable agriculture becomes increasingly critical. Organic farming, once a niche sector, has now emerged as an essential solution to the myriad challenges facing modern agriculture. It offers a sustainable alternative to conventional farming methods, which often entail significant environmental costs, and presents a viable strategy to enhance food security worldwide. Studies such as those by Rahmann et al. (2017) highlight organic agriculture's potential to meet global food demands while minimizing environmental degradation, aligning with the principles of ecological balance and resource efficiency that are crucial for the long-term sustainability of our food systems.

Particularly notable is California's Central Coast, a region pivotal in the organic movement, which provides unique insights into the integration of organic practices in diverse agricultural settings. The area's rich biodiversity and progressive agricultural policies create an optimal environment for studying the impacts and benefits of organic farming. Researchers like Zikeli et al. (2013) have emphasized the rapid growth of organic farming in such regions, driven by consumer demand and enhanced governmental support, underscoring its importance in both local and global contexts.

Moreover, the evolution of organic agriculture is marked by significant global shifts towards more sustainable farming practices, bolstered by scientific research and consumer awareness. Reganold and Wachter (2016) note that while organic farming systems typically produce lower yields compared to conventional methods, they offer greater profitability, environmental benefits, and social well-being. These systems are known for producing foods with fewer pesticide residues and for providing enhanced ecosystem services, contributing to the sustainability of farming systems worldwide.

The global expansion of organic agriculture reflects its growing significance in addressing food security and environmental sustainability. Reports by Willer et al. (2024) indicate that the organic food market has continued to grow, reaching new heights in consumer demand and production. This growth is indicative of a broader recognition of organic agriculture's role in promoting ecological health, economic viability, and social equity.

2. Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews existing literature on social entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, feminist theory, and institutional challenges, identifying key themes and theoretical gaps that the study aims to address.

In the past few decades, organic farming has transitioned from a niche movement into a globally recognized approach to sustainable agriculture, offering significant ecological, economic, and social benefits for the environment, economy, and community. Organic farming, once apparently useless and politically inspired, was finally recognized for its contributions to environmental sustainability, such as crop rotation, composting, and biological pest control (Reganold & Wachter, 2016). These techniques enhance soil quality, promote biodiversity, and support ecosystem services such as pollination and natural pest control. Although organic farms may yield less than conventional ones, the premium prices for organic products, along with job creation, foster economic viability and community development (Reganold & Wachter, 2016; Allen & Kovach, 2000). This has been furthered by the coming of female social entrepreneurs to the fore, especially with projects that combine sustainability with community empowerment.

However, there are several boundaries in the way of developing organic farming. Among the main obstacles to the widespread adoption of natural practices are lack of infrastructure, financial difficulties, and strong interest in traditional agriculture (Bassi et al., 2016). These obstacles are being overcome in large part by female social entrepreneurs who oversee several community-based organic enterprises and promote sustainability while stimulating local economic development. The purpose of this study is to close the knowledge gap on the ways in which female entrepreneurs, specifically in California's Central Coast, support the growth of rural communities and the organic agriculture industry.

Social Entrepreneurship in Agriculture. Social entrepreneurship in agriculture, often referred to as "social farming," integrates agricultural production with social services, contributing to both social and economic outcomes within rural communities (Hudcová et al., 2018). Social farms offer therapeutic, educational, and employment opportunities for marginalized groups (Hassink & Van Dijk, 2006b). Female social entrepreneurs play a crucial role in advancing these initiatives, blending social missions with business sustainability to address local challenges and build resilient communities.

Notwithstanding the noteworthy entry of female social entrepreneurs, there are still gaps in the literature regarding the precise boundaries that females come across while advocating for organic agriculture. Prior research has placed an emphasis on environmental sustainability and network empowerment; however, it has not specifically addressed how female entrepreneurs deal with regulatory boundaries and market dynamics (Tillmar, 2009; Johansen, 2014). This study addresses these gaps by investigating how female social entrepreneurs contribute to organic agriculture through innovative practices that balance social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and economic viability.

Challenges and Opportunities in Organic Farming. While organic farming presents clear environmental benefits, market dynamics pose substantial challenges. Studies such as Haedicke (2012) highlight the tension between transformative environmental goals and the market expansion pressures that can dilute organic standards. Female social

entrepreneurs, as shown in case studies by Tillmar (2009) and Johansen (2014), often lead the charge in finding innovative solutions to these challenges, balancing social and environmental goals with financial sustainability.

While research on social entrepreneurship and organic farming is increasing, there is still a significant gap in research that focuses on the unique opportunities and challenges observed within different agricultural contexts. What is highly missing is research on how social entrepreneurship adapts to the intricacies of organic agricultural contexts. It is against this background that the present study focuses on those enterprise strategies adopted by women social entrepreneurs within the organic agricultural industry. With a focus on agriculture-based social businesses and the integration of social needs into organic farming, this research applies a qualitative approach and in-depth case studies to offer new insights into the elements that drive entrepreneurial strategies (Johansen, 2014; Hassink & Van Dijk, 2006b).

The rapid expansion of organic agriculture markets has sparked a debate regarding their capacity to achieve both environmental and social objectives. Allen and Kovach (2000) investigated these dynamics, revealing the motivations driving the organic movement while also identifying contradictions between the sector's original holistic ideals and the pressures stemming from market expansion. These tensions are exemplified by the challenge of balancing sustainability goals with economic demands, as organic agriculture increasingly faces pressures to substitute inputs and relax standards to meet growing consumer demand (Haedicke, 2012).

Haedicke's (2012) analysis highlights two competing cultural logics in the organic agriculture sector: a **transformative logic**, which emphasizes systemic environmental and social change, and an **expansionary logic**, which prioritizes growth and market scalability. Female social entrepreneurs often find themselves negotiating between these logics—balancing the imperative to protect ecological integrity with the need to expand operations and remain financially viable.

To understand how they navigate these tensions, this study draws on three theoretical perspectives:

Institutional entrepreneurship examines how actors initiate and drive institutional change, even when constrained by dominant structures (Battilana et al., 2009). This is relevant to understanding how these women challenge gender norms and policy limitations in agriculture.

Cultural entrepreneurship focuses on how meaning is constructed and communicated through narratives and symbols (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). This helps reveal how participants frame their work to gain legitimacy in both activist and commercial spaces.

Feminist entrepreneurship emphasizes the gendered dimensions of entrepreneurship and highlights alternative approaches to business, often rooted in collaboration, equity, and community care (Ahl & Nelson, 2010).

These frameworks collectively provide insight into the strategies and values of the women in this study. For instance, Allen and Kovach (2000) argue that the organic market can nourish civil society through transparency and democratic engagement—elements that align closely with the participants' focus on community development, advocacy, and institutional transformation.

While organic farming offers clear environmental benefits, including improved soil quality and biodiversity, the sector's rapid growth has introduced new challenges related to market pressures. Bassi et al. (2016) examined the market opportunities for social farm merchandise in Italy, demonstrating that consumer attitudes are heavily influenced by social and health awareness. Although ethical values play a key role in shaping consumer demand for organic merchandise, their observations highlighted the need for further studies to explore how these attitudes interact with market pressures across different consumer segments. Similarly, female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture must navigate these market dynamics, aligning their social missions with consumer expectations while maintaining financial viability.

The case study of organic entrepreneurs in the Swedish village of Järna, conducted by Larsson (2012), provides additional insights into how social entrepreneurship can foster local economic and social sustainability. Larsson's findings emphasize the importance of strong social networks and trust among participants in promoting collaboration and

community cohesion, which are essential for the success of social enterprises in rural areas. Similarly, female social entrepreneurs in California's Central Coast rely on strong community ties to support their initiatives, blending environmental sustainability with community empowerment to create impactful ventures. From an environmental perspective, Larsson and Granstedt (2010) emphasize how switching to organic practices can drastically reduce the amount of chemicals used, protecting biodiversity and preserving ecosystems. The female entrepreneurs in this study, who incorporate sustainability in their business models, are primarily driven by these environmental concerns.

Economically, Larsson (2012) found that local trust and public demand play a crucial role in maintaining the financial viability of organic farms, despite the higher costs and lower yields associated with organic farming practices. This aligns with the findings of Hudcová et al. (2018), who demonstrated how social entrepreneurship can act as a hybrid model, combining social services with agriculture to achieve both economic and social goals. For female entrepreneurs in organic farming, this hybrid model is particularly important as it allows them to balance the pursuit of environmental and social missions with the need for financial sustainability. Their ability to innovate, engage with local communities, and foster consumer trust is key to their success in scaling organic farming initiatives while maintaining their social and environmental commitments.

Even though previous studies provide insightful records of how social, environmental, and economic benefits are integrated into organic agriculture, most of the literature lacks a comprehensive strategy that fully captures the links between these dimensions. By offering an in-depth examination of how female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture navigate the intersection of environmental, social, and economic objectives, this study seeks to address existing gaps in the literature. Specifically, it explores how these women strike a balance between sustainability and market demands, often within institutional systems that are not designed to support small-scale or gender-inclusive entrepreneurship. Through a comparative analysis of successful initiatives—such as those in Järna and other regions—this research enhances our understanding of how

social entrepreneurship can support sustainable rural development. It demonstrates how such entrepreneurship aligns ecological integrity with social empowerment by employing culturally resonant narratives, institutional innovation, and gender-conscious leadership practices.

Social enterprises, particularly in agriculture, are increasingly seen as pivotal in advancing sustainable agriculture globally. Social entrepreneurship, as described by Powrel and Mishra (n.d.), is in a privileged position to offer solutions to the complex challenges of agriculture through innovative business models that empower smallholder farmers and create market linkages. A focus on improving economic viability and enhancing community resilience has thus become central to the operations of women social entrepreneurs.

The tension between market demands and the original holistic principles of organic farming is well-documented. Studies by Allen and Kovach (2000) have shown that as organic farming expands, the pressures to meet increasing consumer demand can lead to weakened standards and the substitution of inputs, undermining the core values of the movement. Female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture often face these same tensions, needing to scale their operations while staying true to sustainability principles. This research draws on Haedicke's (2012) idea of competing cultural logics, exploring how female social entrepreneurs balance the transformative logic, which seeks systemic environmental change, with expansionary logic, which focuses on market growth and scalability. By applying this framework, the study sheds light on how female entrepreneurs in organic farming manage these competing demands while maintaining their commitment to environmental and social missions.

Bassi et al. (2016) investigated how socially conscious farm products could attract customers. They discovered that the important aspects influencing customer demand were social and health consciousness. Although their study was limited to a single sample, it underscores the need for further investigation into how consumer attitudes and market forces influence the long-term viability of organic farming operations. According to this study, female social entrepreneurs are particularly skilled at using

consumer values to market sustainable products and align their business practices with ethical and commercial trends.

The case study of organic entrepreneurs in Järna, conducted by Larsson (2012), offers further insights into how social entrepreneurship fosters local sustainability through the creation of strong networks based on social capital and trust. These networks, which empower stakeholders and strengthen community ties, are also a key feature of female-led social enterprises in organic agriculture. Female entrepreneurs often leverage their connections to foster community engagement, which in turn supports their efforts to promote sustainable agricultural practices. Larsson and Granstedt (2010) also confirmed that social entrepreneurship initiatives focused on organic farming significantly reduce environmental impacts by reducing chemical use and enhancing biodiversity. These findings underscore the importance of social entrepreneurship as a catalyst for environmentally conscious practices, a theme central to the work of the women entrepreneurs in this study.

Economically, social entrepreneurship in organic agriculture provides a hybrid model that balances social services with economic sustainability. Research by Hudcová et al. (2018) on social farms in the Czech Republic highlights the role of social capital in addressing local challenges and supporting sustainable business models. Female social entrepreneurs often operate within hybrid frameworks that integrate environmental sustainability, community empowerment, and economic viability. These frameworks reflect the principles of feminist entrepreneurship, where social and ecological goals are pursued alongside financial resilience. Such entrepreneurs act as institutional entrepreneurs, navigating and reshaping the regulatory and cultural norms that define the organic agriculture sector. By aligning their missions with both transformative logics (focused on systemic change) and expansionary logics (driven by market survival), they demonstrate how socially embedded entrepreneurship can reconcile competing priorities within complex institutional environments (Haedicke, 2012; Allen & Kovach, 2000). By focusing on the financial stability and community-driven models of female entrepreneurs, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how social enterprises can promote both economic development and social impact in rural areas.

Female entrepreneurs bring unique strategies to organic agriculture, crossing traditional sector boundaries to blend environmental objectives with social missions. As Tillmar (2009) points out, women entrepreneurs generally bring various innovative approaches that are often overlooked in male-dominated sectors. This paper, therefore, discusses these gender-related strategies and undertakes a direct exercise of providing recommendations for supportive policies and initiatives that can enable female-led social enterprises to meet their respective sustainability goals.

2.0 Defining Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship refers to the process of identifying and pursuing opportunities to create social value through innovative and sustainable ventures. It involves the development of organizations that blend economic objectives with social and environmental missions (Haugh, 2005). Unlike traditional entrepreneurship, which typically prioritizes profit maximization, social entrepreneurship is distinguished by its commitment to addressing societal challenges such as inequality, environmental degradation, and lack of access to essential services.

In the agricultural context, social entrepreneurship plays a critical role in transforming local food systems and advancing sustainable development. As highlighted by Hudcová et al. (2018), social enterprises in agriculture often provide therapeutic, educational, and economic support, especially in underserved rural communities. These enterprises frequently take the form of community-based initiatives that foster empowerment and resilience. Female social entrepreneurs, in particular, have emerged as key actors in leading such initiatives, combining ecological awareness with strong community engagement (Alexander, 2020).

(Zahra et al., 2009) further frame social entrepreneurship as operating across multiple domains—including social bricoleurs, social constructionists, and social engineers—each reflecting a different scale and scope of systemic intervention. This typology is especially relevant in this study, as the female entrepreneurs examined adopt diverse strategies to navigate institutional gaps and market constraints. Moreover, (Powrel & Mishra, 2023) emphasize that social entrepreneurship in agriculture has the potential to empower smallholder farmers, improve economic viability, and strengthen sustainability through inclusive and localized approaches.

2.1 Contextualizing Social Entrepreneurship in Organic Agriculture:

Beyond organic agriculture, research on social entrepreneurship highlights a broader trend: many social entrepreneurs, even those not originally from farming backgrounds, are driven by social and environmental missions. Cohen and Winn (2007) define social entrepreneurship as business activities that address societal needs, with entrepreneurs often working collectively toward these missions rather than prioritizing profit. This approach has led to more sustainable and socially focused outcomes in sectors like agriculture, where entrepreneurship increasingly emphasizes community and environmental goals over traditional economic objectives.

Mbebeb (2012) examines the role of ecological entrepreneurship in promoting environmentally sustainable practices. His work is particularly relevant to female social entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector, as they frequently integrate ecological and social objectives to address gaps left by conventional market mechanisms and government initiatives. These women apply ecological entrepreneurship frameworks to drive systemic

change, emphasizing the interconnection between environmental stewardship and community development in their business models.

Kerlin (2010) expands on this by examining how social entrepreneurship has emerged as a response to the withdrawal of state support for social programs in regions like the U.S. and Europe. Her research is particularly pertinent to female social entrepreneurs, who often operate in institutional voids—contexts where formal market mechanisms and state support are insufficient or absent for advancing social and environmental goals. In such settings, these entrepreneurs must assume multiple roles as cultural intermediaries, institutional entrepreneurs, and community leaders, building informal networks, mobilizing local resources, and advocating for policy change to compensate for the lack of institutional infrastructure (Mair & Martí, 2009; Dacin et al., 2010). Their work exemplifies how social entrepreneurship can fill governance gaps by creating alternative forms of coordination and legitimacy in underserved environments. In these contexts, female entrepreneurs must balance social objectives with economic viability, leveraging community resources and local networks to fill institutional gaps. This aligns with the challenges observed in agriculture, where female social entrepreneurs must navigate market pressures while upholding their sustainability and community-driven goals.

Initiatives like "Green Care," identified by Johansen (2014), illustrate how female entrepreneurs transcend purely economic goals, creating sustainable farming models that address both community empowerment and environmental protection.

2.1.1 Understanding Institutional Voids and Entrepreneurial Response

The concept of institutional voids was first introduced by Khanna and Palepu (1997) to describe the absence or underdevelopment of institutions that support efficient market operations—such as credit information systems, contract enforcement, property rights, and effective regulatory frameworks—in emerging markets. In such environments, market actors often face uncertainty and transaction costs that hinder typical business functions. As a result, firms operating in these contexts cannot rely on the same assumptions about transparency, predictability, or legal recourse that underpin strategy formation in more developed economies.

Khanna, Palepu, and Sinha (2006) expanded on this framework by analyzing how companies could design context-appropriate strategies that align with the nature and degree of institutional underdevelopment. They argue that rather than applying generic business models imported from mature markets, firms in emerging economies must either compensate for these institutional deficiencies themselves or form partnerships with actors who can. This strategic orientation is particularly salient in countries with fragmented regulatory enforcement, weak civil institutions, and limited infrastructure—all of which characterize many agricultural regions, including those in the Global South and parts of rural North America.

Mair and Martí (2009) extended the institutional voids framework into the domain of social entrepreneurship, emphasizing how underserved communities often give rise to innovative forms of institutional work. Their research demonstrated that entrepreneurs operating in marginalized contexts engage in “bottom-up” institutional change by developing informal rules, norms, and practices that substitute for or challenge absent

or exclusionary formal institutions. This redefinition was crucial in shifting attention from large corporations to grassroots actors who create social value in contexts of institutional failure.

In the context of organic agriculture, especially in California's Central Coast, institutional voids manifest in the form of inconsistent regulatory support, high certification costs, and lack of targeted financing mechanisms for smallholders. Female social entrepreneurs interviewed in this study frequently described how they navigated these gaps—not by retreating from the market but by building alternative systems through community-supported agriculture, informal certification mechanisms, and grassroots advocacy. These actions mirror the “institutional bricolage” described by Mair and Marti (2009), wherein actors recombine available resources and informal institutions to create functioning systems of production and legitimacy.

Thus, by synthesizing Khanna and Palepu's (1997; 2006) work on market strategies in institutional voids with Mair and Marti's (2009) focus on social innovation and entrepreneurship, this research offers a theoretical lens through which to view the adaptive strategies of women in sustainable agriculture. These entrepreneurs not only compensate for weak institutional infrastructure but actively reshape it, illustrating the potential of localized, gender-responsive institutional work in building more inclusive and sustainable food systems.

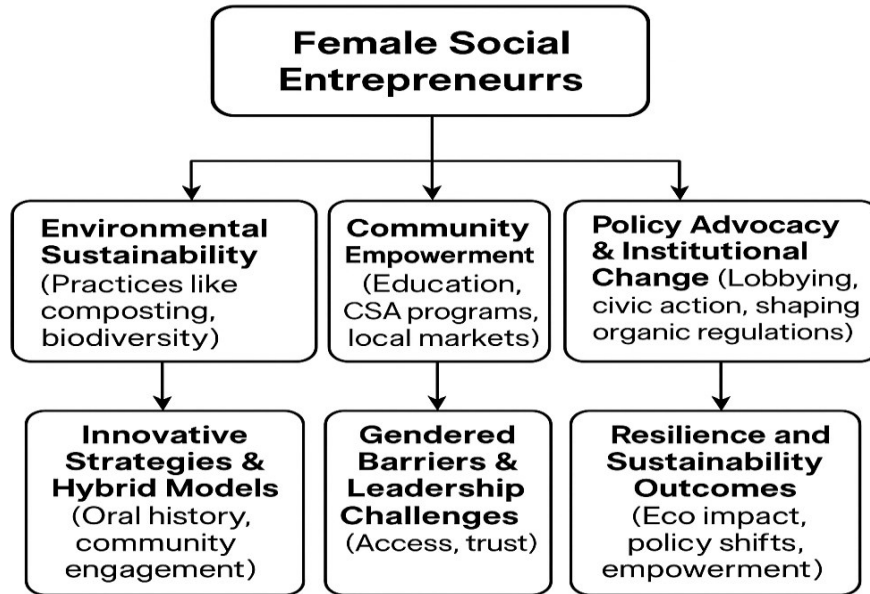


Figure 1: Conceptual framework illustrating the mechanisms through which female social entrepreneurs contribute to environmental sustainability, community empowerment, and policy advocacy in organic agriculture.

Building on the review of literature, this study conceptualizes the role of female social entrepreneurs through an integrated framework (Figure 1). The framework illustrates how entrepreneurial actions interact with environmental, social, and institutional domains. It highlights the challenges faced by these women, the hybrid strategies they employ, and the sustainability outcomes they generate. This framework guides both the analysis and interpretation of findings in subsequent chapters.

2.1.2 Social Entrepreneurship in Agriculture

Social entrepreneurship in agriculture plays a vital role in addressing environmental and social challenges by fostering sustainable practices that meet community needs. As Powrel and Mishra (2023) highlight, social enterprises in agriculture are uniquely positioned to integrate agroecological methods, support smallholder farmers, and establish market linkages. These roles form the foundation of female social entrepreneurs' strategies on California's Central Coast, where their initiatives exemplify

a balance between creating social value and ensuring financial sustainability. Female entrepreneurs in this region not only adopt sustainable agricultural practices but also advocate for favourable agricultural policies and bolster local economies. This dual focus aligns with the broader objectives of community empowerment and environmental sustainability.

2.1.3 Global Examples of Social Entrepreneurship in Agriculture

The global significance of social entrepreneurship in agriculture is further exemplified by studies such as Kiminami et al. (2020), who examined urban agriculture in Japan. Their findings highlight how social entrepreneurship, supported by strong social capital, fosters multifunctional agricultural practices. These practices yield economic, environmental, and social benefits, underscoring the importance of innovative and socially oriented business strategies. Similar to California's initiatives, the Japanese model emphasizes the necessity of policy support in nurturing and sustaining these innovations. Dagoudo et al. (2023) introduced an agroecological business model that integrates social, economic, and environmental objectives. This model is particularly relevant to female entrepreneurs in organic agriculture, who leverage participatory guarantee systems (PGS) to uphold organic production standards. PGS fosters trust and collaboration within communities, contributing to long-term sustainability and eco-efficiency while achieving broader goals such as biodiversity conservation and improved soil health.

2.1.4 Social Cooperatives and Rural Development

The transformative potential of women-led social cooperatives in rural areas is a significant aspect of agricultural entrepreneurship. (Bembenek et al., 2016) emphasized the dual role of these cooperatives in driving economic development and fostering social inclusion. Female entrepreneurs often lead these cooperatives, creating employment

opportunities and empowering marginalized groups. These initiatives not only address gaps in employment but also promote sustainable agricultural practices, fostering community resilience and economic stability.

2.1.5 Women's Role in Rural Entrepreneurship and Education in Organic Farming

Women's participation in rural entrepreneurship has significantly strengthened local services and economies. Social cooperatives initiated by women often integrate marginalized groups into the economy while advancing inclusive rural development. As noted by Bembenek et al. (2016), these cooperatives exemplify the transformative potential of women-led enterprises in fostering sustainable agricultural practices through collective action and community engagement. By providing opportunities for marginalized individuals, these cooperatives enhance social inclusion while addressing employment gaps in rural areas.

2.1.6. Educational Initiatives in Organic Farming

In addressing the multifaceted challenges of organic agriculture, innovative educational methodologies that combine community-based learning with design thinking principles are essential. These approaches enhance entrepreneurship competencies among organic farmers, equipping them with the skills and mindsets needed to thrive in a dynamic agricultural sector. As Meekaew and Chamaratana (2024) explain, such training not only imparts technical agricultural knowledge but also fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills—capabilities indispensable for farmers facing the rigorous demands of sustainable practices.

The impact of community-driven educational initiatives in organic farming is profound, as these programs harness local knowledge and emphasize real-world applications. Particularly in regions like Thailand, where organic farming faces barriers such as limited market access and high initial investments, these educational initiatives have proven crucial. By focusing on practical solutions and community collaboration, these programs ensure that learning is relevant and impactful (Meekaew & Chamaratana, 2024).

2.1.7 Sustainable Entrepreneurship in Organic Agriculture

The burgeoning field of sustainable entrepreneurship presents unique opportunities to address global and local environmental challenges through innovative business practices that integrate economic, social, and environmental goals. Female entrepreneurs have emerged as pivotal actors in this sector, particularly in organic agriculture, where they blend community-driven models with environmental sustainability practices to foster significant socio-economic benefits (Amutha et al., 2024). Despite challenges such as limited access to finance, sociocultural barriers, and the need to balance household responsibilities with business activities, women entrepreneurs exhibit remarkable resilience. Amutha et al. (2024) highlight their strengths, including a focus on community involvement, environmental stewardship, and innovative business practices tailored to local needs. These traits enable them to leverage community networks and creative approaches to overcome barriers, making substantial contributions to sustainable development.

Although initiatives like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) are promoted as sustainable and community-centred, their long-term effectiveness depends on the interplay between market demand, policy support, and consumer participation. The thesis later discusses CSA success in California, but it is also important to reflect critically on how such models may struggle in deregulated or low-demand contexts, potentially limiting their scalability (Mount, 2012).

2.1.8 Social Entrepreneurship in Alternative Food Networks

Migliore et al. (2015) explored the role of social entrepreneurship within alternative food networks (AFNs), emphasizing how these networks foster social and environmental value alongside economic returns. This study is particularly relevant to understanding the role of female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture. It highlights how these entrepreneurs prioritize environmental sustainability and community empowerment—goals closely aligned with broader social entrepreneurship objectives.

Using a behavioural framework, the researchers identified two types of entrepreneurial orientations among farmers participating in AFNs: those driven primarily by commercial interests and those deeply embedded in social entrepreneurial values. The latter group

engages in practices aimed not only at generating profit but also at achieving social and environmental improvements, reflecting a profound commitment to sustainable agriculture. These findings underscore the significant role of social values in shaping business practices within the organic agriculture sector. By incorporating community needs and environmental stewardship into their business models, farmers participating in AFNs exemplify how agricultural practices can foster community development and enhance local sustainability (Migliore et al., 2015).

2.1.9 Empowerment Through Organic Farming

Nath and Athinuwat (2021) examined the role of organic farming in empowering women in Chiang Mai, Thailand, highlighting how participation in sustainable practices can enhance socio-economic status. Key factors contributing to women's empowerment include education, agricultural knowledge, and involvement in market activities. These elements enable women to take part in decision-making processes within households and broader community contexts, giving them greater control over economic resources and improving their overall autonomy.

This study underscores the importance of supportive policies and structures in facilitating women's active involvement in agriculture. Nath and Athinuwat (2021) argue that empowerment in such settings extends beyond economic gains to include advancements in social status and autonomy. By linking organic farming with gender empowerment, this research demonstrates how agricultural practices intersect with social development goals to foster community resilience and gender equality.

2.1.10 Sustainability and Community Empowerment

Female social entrepreneurs have been instrumental in integrating sustainable practices into organic agriculture, significantly enhancing both community empowerment and environmental sustainability. Their work is characterized by a deep commitment to ecological health and community well-being, rooted in a gendered understanding of agricultural and environmental stewardship (Farnworth & Hutchings, 2009).

2.1.11 Advancing Sustainable Practices Through Social Entrepreneurship

Female social entrepreneurs have been pivotal in advancing sustainable practices in organic agriculture, leveraging organic farming as a platform for advocating robust agricultural policies. These policies ensure the sustainability of local economies while promoting biodiversity and soil health through environmentally conscious farming methods. As Alexander (2020) notes, these entrepreneurs address systemic challenges and advocate for supportive policies, significantly enhancing local economies through community-driven business models aligned with broader social entrepreneurship goals. This alignment contributes to improvements in regulatory frameworks and fosters community resilience.

Despite these significant contributions, female social entrepreneurs often face barriers such as limited access to resources and financial capital. Nevertheless, they exhibit remarkable resilience, adapting their strategies to navigate complex market and regulatory landscapes effectively (Alexander, 2020). Future research could expand to other geographic areas and incorporate quantitative measures to assess the economic impacts of social entrepreneurship in agriculture. Such studies would enhance understanding of these impacts and explore the scalability of successful models (Alexander, 2020).

2.1.12 Challenges in Organic Agriculture and Social Sustainability

Shreck et al. (2006) discuss the complexities and challenges inherent in organic agriculture, particularly concerning farm labour and social sustainability. While organic farming is often synonymous with environmental sustainability, its social and labour dimensions are frequently overlooked. The authors highlight a gap in the comprehensive

adoption of sustainability practices, focusing on the experiences of farm workers in California's organic agriculture sector. Their findings reveal that despite the sector's growth, the benefits are not uniformly felt by those at the production end, especially farm laborers.

This discussion is supported by survey and interview data showing mixed attitudes toward formalizing social sustainability within organic certification standards (Shreck et al., 2006). These findings emphasize the need for a more inclusive approach to sustainability that addresses labour conditions and equitable benefits for all stakeholders in organic agriculture.

A comparative review reveals that while California's entrepreneurs face fragmented regulatory frameworks, studies by Allen and Kovach (2000) and Haedicke (2012) show that other regions deal with more systemic exclusion or policy voids. Such differences in institutional support critically shape how barriers manifest and how entrepreneurs respond

2.1.13 The Role of Female Social Entrepreneurs in Sustainability

Social entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of sustainable development, particularly in organic agriculture. Female social entrepreneurs on California's Central Coast have harnessed this potential by developing innovative approaches that address market and regulatory challenges while emphasizing environmental sustainability and community empowerment (Rezky & Rasto, 2024). Their efforts integrate principles of social entrepreneurship with organic farming practices, enhancing biodiversity and promoting sustainable land use. This alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals underscores the importance of supportive policies that

enable these entrepreneurs to thrive and expand their impact (Rezky & Rasto, 2024). The literature further suggests that social entrepreneurship in organic agriculture can serve as a model for broader applications of sustainable practices. By focusing on community-driven initiatives and economic sustainability, female entrepreneurs on the Central Coast contribute significantly to the resilience and sustainability of their localities. Their work demonstrates the potential for social entrepreneurship to foster a more sustainable and inclusive economic system—one that is essential for the future of agriculture and rural communities (Rezky & Rasto, 20

2.1.14 Key Themes in Social Entrepreneurship

The growing field of social entrepreneurship emphasizes the integration of social, economic, and environmental objectives as a significant driver of sustainable development. According to Bansal et al. (2019), social entrepreneurs are pivotal in addressing systemic social and environmental challenges through innovative approaches and entrepreneurial models.

The reviewed literature highlights six key themes relevant to social entrepreneurship:

Innovation and technology adoption

Contributions to rural and community development

Socio-economic and environmental considerations

Financing mechanisms

Women entrepreneurs

Corporate social responsibility (Bansal et al., 2019)

These themes underscore the diverse ways in which social entrepreneurs tackle sustainability challenges, making their role indispensable in achieving holistic development. For example, rural cooperative models in Järna, Sweden—benefiting from policy cohesion and high-trust environments—contrast sharply with urban entrepreneurial efforts in California’s Central Coast, where fragmented regulation and limited support demand greater informal trust-building and advocacy (Larsson, 2012; Bembenek et al., 2016).

2.1.15 Strategic Integration of Sustainable Agriculture and Social Entrepreneurship

Sustainable agriculture is widely recognized as a critical strategy for addressing environmental degradation and promoting food security, particularly in the context of organic farming. Integrating social entrepreneurship within this sector provides innovative solutions to socio-environmental challenges. Social entrepreneurs foster sustainable agricultural practices by creating business models that align with environmental conservation and social equity goals. Their contributions extend beyond production processes to include value chain development, market access for smallholder farmers, and community resilience (Purnama, 2023).

The strategic integration of sustainable agriculture and social entrepreneurship requires robust planning and actionable initiatives. Strategic planning facilitates the alignment of objectives between sustainable agriculture practitioners and social entrepreneurs, leveraging their strengths to mitigate systemic weaknesses. This process is instrumental in creating sustainable agriculture value chains, identifying market opportunities, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders (Purnama, 2023).

By promoting participatory approaches and fostering innovation, social entrepreneurs create ecosystems that support both environmental sustainability and economic viability. Their work demonstrates the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship in achieving sustainable development, particularly within the agricultural sector. Action-oriented methodologies are equally essential in translating strategies into tangible

outcomes. Social entrepreneurs engage in capacity building, market development, and policy advocacy, ensuring the scalability and sustainability of their initiatives. By promoting participatory approaches and encouraging innovation, they help build ecosystems that advance both sustainability and economic resilience (Purnama, 2023).

2.1.16 The Role of Women in Advancing Organic Agriculture and Community Empowerment

The article *Transforming Farm Women into Organic Entrepreneurs and Natural Resource Managers* by Selvi et al. (2023) provides valuable insights into the transformative role of women in organic agriculture through social entrepreneurship. It highlights how empowering farm women as organic entrepreneurs enhances environmental sustainability and drives socio-economic progress in rural communities. Integrating traditional agricultural knowledge with modern organic practices enables women to become effective natural resource managers and contributors to sustainable farming systems.

Key findings from Selvi et al. (2023) closely align with the themes of this thesis, particularly the emphasis on women-led initiatives fostering community empowerment. The research demonstrates how organic entrepreneurship addresses critical challenges in rural economies, such as limited access to resources and market linkages. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of policy support and capacity-building programs in equipping women with the necessary skills and tools to manage sustainable agricultural enterprises.

Although Johansen (2014) and Bembenek et al. (2016) present strong examples of community empowerment, a comparative critique reveals that models like **Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)**—a system in which consumers directly support local farms through subscriptions or memberships—thrive in California partly due to high

consumer awareness and the presence of short food supply chains. However, such models may face scalability or trust issues in regions with lower levels of market participation or where civil infrastructure is weaker.

2.1.17 Women's Transformative Role in Agricultural Entrepreneurship

Women's participation in agricultural entrepreneurship has proven to be a transformative force, significantly contributing to sustainable practices and the empowerment of rural communities. According to Bryant et al. (2016), the rise of female agricultural entrepreneurs is reshaping the global agricultural sector. Women in leadership roles are advancing environmental sustainability and economic resilience, despite facing unique barriers such as limited access to resources and market opportunities. Overcoming these obstacles results in notable economic and social benefits for their communities.

Bryant et al. (2016) also emphasizes the critical role of women in fostering sustainable practices, such as reducing chemical use and enhancing biodiversity. These contributions align closely with environmental goals and often lead to the creation of employment opportunities, support for marginalized groups, and the strengthening of local economies.

2.1.18 Gender, Leadership, and Sustainability

The interplay between gender, leadership, and sustainability is an increasingly critical area of study. Women leaders in sectors like agriculture are breaking traditional barriers and introducing innovative practices that promote environmental sustainability and community empowerment. Lyons (2023) explores how female leaders navigate challenges in patriarchal societies to establish sustainable practices. The research highlights participatory leadership and inclusive decision-making processes that resonate with the needs of local communities.

Historically, societal norms and stereotypes have confined women to traditional roles, often excluding them from leadership positions in critical industries like agriculture and conservation. However, this narrative is shifting. Research by Lyons (2023) underscores how women leaders in sustainability often embody a participatory leadership style. This approach fosters collaboration and empowers local stakeholders, contrasting with traditional top-down methods. It aligns with the goals of organic agriculture and community-based development.

2.1.19 Case Study: Estrela Matilde in Príncipe, Central Africa

Lyons (2023) presents the case of Estrela Matilde, a conservation biologist leading sustainable initiatives in Príncipe, Central Africa. Matilde's work illustrates the profound impact of women leaders on their communities. By integrating local knowledge with sustainability goals, Matilde's participatory approach bridges gaps between environmental conservation and social development, ensuring long-term community resilience.

The methodology employed by Matilde resonates strongly with the practices of female social entrepreneurs in California's Central Coast. Both emphasize participatory leadership and the integration of local knowledge to advance sustainability initiatives. These women function as connectors between environmental sustainability and community empowerment, ensuring that their initiatives are inclusive and impactful.

2.1.20 Barriers and Strategies in Female Leadership

Women in leadership positions often face significant barriers, including cultural biases and limited access to resources. Lyons (2023) highlights how female leaders navigate these challenges by building strong networks and leveraging local traditions to foster

inclusive decision-making processes. These strategies are particularly relevant in regions like California's Central Coast, where female social entrepreneurs align their agricultural practices with broader sustainability and empowerment goals.

The insights from Lyons (2023) contribute to a deeper understanding of the unique role of female social entrepreneurs in advancing sustainability and community empowerment. These findings emphasize the importance of integrating gender perspectives into leadership studies, particularly within organic agriculture. By drawing parallels between case studies like Príncipe, Central Africa, and California, this thesis broadens the discourse on **sustainable leadership** by emphasizing the **transformative agency of women** in fostering systemic change within ecologically and socially embedded contexts. Drawing on theories of **transformational leadership** (Burns, 1978; Bass & Avolio, 1994) and **feminist leadership frameworks** (Eagly & Carli, 2007), the study highlights how women enact leadership not through hierarchical authority, but through collaboration, value-driven practices, and community engagement—key features that drive inclusive sustainability transitions and challenge traditional, male-centric models of leadership.

2.1.21 Empowering Women Through Community-Driven Initiatives

Female social entrepreneurs have significantly influenced organic farming, promoting environmental sustainability and community empowerment through innovative practices and collaborative efforts. Thorat (2018) underscores the pivotal role of women entrepreneurs in organic agriculture in Maharashtra, India. Through initiatives like Self-Help Groups (SHGs), women collectively engage in farming activities such as lentil processing and goat farming. These efforts not only enhance their income but also strengthen their entrepreneurial skills and confidence.

The transition to organic farming, spearheaded by women's groups, addresses critical issues like soil degradation caused by chemical fertilizers and the associated health risks. Thorat (2018) highlights how women have been trained to produce cost-effective organic pesticides and manure, reducing dependency on chemical inputs and fostering environmental health. These community-driven educational programs equip women with essential skills for sustainable agricultural practices, thereby enhancing their economic resilience and lowering farming costs.

Participatory decision-making in SHGs plays a crucial role in these initiatives. Women actively plan and implement mixed cropping and organic farming patterns, which contribute to the sustainability of agricultural practices while empowering them to lead community-based interventions. The findings by Thorat (2018) demonstrate the replicability of these models in other regions, aligning closely with the goals of female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture on California's Central Coast.

2.1.22 Women as Stewards of Sustainable Development

The growing acknowledgment of women's critical role in sustainable development is evident in studies like Shinbrot et al. (2019), which emphasize the unique perspectives women bring to environmental and social challenges. Women often function as stewards of natural resources, given their proximity to community and family needs. Their leadership fosters collaboration and long-term thinking in decision-making processes. Shinbrot et al. (2019) highlight how women integrate environmental conservation with social equity, positioning them as key contributors to holistic solutions for global challenges.

Despite these contributions, women in leadership roles encounter institutional and cultural barriers. Shinbrot et al. (2019) identify gendered organizational structures, entrenched patriarchal norms, and limited access to resources as significant obstacles. Societal expectations often prioritize family responsibilities over professional growth, resulting in the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Moreover, stereotypes associating leadership with traditionally masculine traits pose further challenges for women leaders.

Women social entrepreneurs have demonstrated the capacity to address these barriers through innovative leadership in organic agriculture. By prioritizing sustainability and community empowerment, they balance economic viability with environmental stewardship. Female entrepreneurs often utilize their networks and social capital to foster inclusive and sustainable practices that benefit marginalized groups and local economies. Their initiatives underscore the need for supportive policies that recognize and amplify women's leadership in the agriculture sector.

The intersection of social entrepreneurship and sustainable agriculture offers a promising pathway to address global challenges. Women leaders in this space bring a unique blend of empathy, collaborative decision-making, and ecological awareness. These attributes position them as key drivers of change in organic agriculture, where environmental sustainability and social justice are intertwined. Insights from Shinbrot et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of creating enabling environments that support women's participation and leadership in sustainable development initiatives.

2.1.23 The Role of Female Social Entrepreneurs in Organic Agriculture

The intersection of environmental sustainability and community empowerment through organic agriculture highlights the pivotal contributions of female social entrepreneurs. Women consistently drive innovation in sustainable agricultural practices, integrating ecological awareness with economic strategies to uplift rural communities. Holt-Giménez (2010) emphasizes grassroots movements like La Vía Campesina, which focus on food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture. These movements create pathways for marginalized farmers, particularly women, to assert their rights and establish resilient agricultural systems.

Women's involvement in grassroots movements has been instrumental in advancing agroecological practices and influencing policy advocacy. Holt-Giménez et al. (2010) underline the value of integrating local knowledge with sustainable technologies, such as integrated pest management and crop diversification. These strategies align with the objectives of female social entrepreneurs, who function as connectors between local communities and broader sustainability movements, fostering trust and collaboration.

2.1.24 Agroecological Business Model and Women's Entrepreneurship

The agroecological business model has emerged as a vital framework for fostering women's entrepreneurship in agriculture and promoting sustainable food systems. Dagoudo et al. (2023) highlight how this model facilitates access to productive resources such as land, finance, and credit while enhancing women's capacity to operate as entrepreneurs in organic agriculture. This approach aligns closely with agroecological principles, emphasizing the co-creation of knowledge, participatory guarantee systems

(PGSSs), and the development of eco-efficient agricultural practices. These components contribute to resilient organic markets and sustainable food systems.

A key feature of the model is its focus on PGSSs, which strengthen the integrity of organic agriculture by engaging multiple stakeholders—farmers, experts, and consumers—in creating and enforcing localized organic standards. This participatory approach fosters trust and collaboration within communities, ensuring compliance with organic production standards and contributing to the long-term sustainability of agroecological practices (Dagoudo et al., 2023).

2.1.25 Women’s Central Role in Food Systems

Women entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in advancing sustainability within food systems. Their contributions encompass activities such as managing crops, livestock, agribusinesses, and food retailing. They also ensure household food security and support broader community development. Despite these significant roles, challenges like limited access to resources and power asymmetries within food systems persist, necessitating targeted interventions to empower women in these capacities. Dagoudo, Baldé, and Baldé (2023). Through entrepreneurial initiatives, women address both social and environmental goals. They leverage agroecological practices to enhance biodiversity, improve soil health, and foster community resilience. These efforts align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to zero hunger and responsible consumption and production.

2.1.26 Human and Social Values in Agroecological Systems

The integration of human and social values into agroecological systems is a crucial aspect of the agroecological business model. Women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to

building sustainable food systems by co-creating knowledge and incorporating cultural traditions. Their ability to navigate the complexities of organic agriculture and market dynamics, while maintaining a commitment to sustainability, underscores their critical role in the sector. Furthermore, their leadership in co-learning processes enhances knowledge dissemination and innovation, reinforcing the sustainability of food systems Dagoudo, Baldé, and Baldé (2023)

2.1.27 Social Entrepreneurship and the SDGs

Social entrepreneurship is essential for addressing societal and environmental challenges through innovative approaches. (Candia, 2023) emphasizes the role of social entrepreneurs in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by integrating economic, environmental, and social dimensions into their ventures. This unique combination of entrepreneurial acumen and a strong commitment to social impact fosters inclusive and sustainable development.

Women's involvement in social entrepreneurship is particularly noteworthy due to their unique perspectives on sustainability and community development. According to (Candia, 2023) women entrepreneurs adopt strategies that empower marginalized groups and promote environmental stewardship. These efforts align with broader SDG goals, including reducing inequalities, achieving gender equity, and ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns. Their initiatives demonstrate the transformative potential of women in addressing complex global challenges through sustainable agricultural practices and social entrepreneurship.

2.1.28 The Dynamic Intersection of Organic Agriculture and Social Entrepreneurship

The intersection of organic agriculture and social entrepreneurship offers a powerful platform for achieving sustainability goals. Women-led social enterprises in agriculture frequently prioritize enhancing livelihoods through sustainable farming practices, fair trade initiatives, and community-driven programs. By integrating local knowledge and fostering community collaboration, these enterprises address environmental objectives while meeting the socio-economic needs of rural populations (Candia, 2023).

2.1.29 Zahra et al.'s Framework for Social Entrepreneurship

Candia (2023) draws on Zahra, Gedajlovic, Neubaum, and Shulman's (2009) framework, which categorizes social entrepreneurs into three types: social bricoleurs, social constructionists, and social engineers. Each category reflects a different scale and approach to addressing social challenges, from localized, small-scale interventions to systemic, large-scale solutions. Female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture often align with the social bricoleur model, utilizing their deep understanding of local needs to implement impactful initiatives.

2.1.30 Case Study: ACE Services Supply

The case study of ACE Services Supply, analyzed by Candia (2023), demonstrates the effectiveness of small-scale social enterprises in advancing sustainability. By supporting Amazonian communities, ACE highlights how integrating community knowledge with entrepreneurial strategies can address pressing global challenges while generating profound social and environmental impacts. This model underscores the importance of localized approaches in social entrepreneurship.

2.1.31 Applications for California's Central Coast

The insights from Candia's (2023) analysis resonate with the dynamics of organic agriculture on California's Central Coast, where female social entrepreneurs contribute significantly to sustainable farming and community empowerment. These women-led initiatives illustrate the potential for scalable models that combine environmental sustainability with social equity, fostering resilience and innovation within the agricultural sector.

2.1.32 Women's Contributions to Sustainable Agriculture

The transformative potential of female social entrepreneurs in addressing environmental and community challenges is well-documented. Women often redefine traditional entrepreneurial models by emphasizing community well-being and ecological health. Trauger et al. (2010) emphasize that women in agriculture adopt innovative practices such as direct consumer engagement, educational outreach, and value-added production to build resilient, locality-based food systems. Networks like the Pennsylvania Women's Agricultural Network (PA-WAgN) play a critical role in fostering collaboration and skill development among female farmers, further enhancing their contributions.

2.1.33 Civic Agriculture and Women's Entrepreneurial Strategies

Civic agriculture, characterized by its focus on local food systems and community engagement, provides a valuable lens for understanding women's entrepreneurial strategies in sustainable agriculture. According to Trauger et al. (2010), civic agriculture integrates economic and social imperatives to deliver public goods like improved public health, environmental stewardship, and stronger community ties. Women's participation

in this model often involves creating educational programs and community-centric farm initiatives that align closely with social entrepreneurship principles.

2.1.34 Overcoming Barriers and Driving Innovation

Despite their contributions, women in agriculture frequently encounter gender-specific barriers such as limited access to traditional financial resources and exclusion from male-dominated farming networks. Trauger et al. (2010) note that these obstacles often drive innovation as women develop alternative business models emphasizing collaboration, sustainability, and social impact. This redefinition of entrepreneurial success challenges conventional economic rationality and highlights the potential of gender-inclusive approaches in agriculture.

2.1.35 The Evolution of Organic Agriculture and Female Leadership

The historical evolution and ideological shifts in organic agriculture provide a critical framework for understanding the role of female social entrepreneurs in advancing environmental sustainability and community empowerment. Youngberg and DeMuth (2013) document the transformation of organic agriculture from a marginalized practice to a cornerstone of sustainable agricultural policies. This shift reflects broader societal demands for environmentally responsible and socially inclusive farming practices, aligning with the missions of female social entrepreneurs.

2.1.36 Principles of Organic Farming and Women's Impact

According to Youngberg and DeMuth (2013), organic farming principles—such as soil conservation, reduced chemical inputs, and biodiversity promotion—are inherently linked to sustainability and community development. Female social entrepreneurs leverage these principles to create enterprises that are economically viable and socially impactful. Their initiatives embody the dual goals of advancing environmental objectives and empowering small-scale farmers.

2.1.37 Advocacy and Policy in Organic Agriculture

The interplay of policy and ideology, as highlighted by Youngberg and DeMuth (2013), underscores the importance of advocacy within the organic movement. Female entrepreneurs often emerge as advocates, promoting supportive policies that align with the broader goals of the organic farming community. On California's Central Coast, women in organic agriculture exemplify this advocacy, taking on roles as both producers and community leaders, driving systemic change. Although many female entrepreneurs engage in policy advocacy, its impact varies widely. For instance, while advocacy efforts in California have yielded some success due to local alliances and organic movements (Larsson, 2012; Youngberg & DeMuth, 2013), the outcomes have been more limited in contexts where agricultural policymaking is less responsive or more centralized. The use of storytelling and local coalition-building as advocacy tools demonstrates feminist praxis in public policy, while also representing institutional agency in reshaping the regulatory landscape (Haedicke, 2012).

2.1.38 Addressing Challenges Through Innovation

The challenges and opportunities identified by Youngberg and DeMuth (2013) including market access, regulatory barriers, and the need for scientific validation of organic methods—closely mirror those faced by female social entrepreneurs today. Addressing these challenges requires innovative approaches that integrate traditional agricultural knowledge with modern entrepreneurial strategies. Female-led initiatives in organic agriculture exemplify this synthesis, driving advancements in both environmental sustainability and community resilience.

2.2 Gender Differences in Social Entrepreneurship and Sustainability

Empirical research increasingly demonstrates that gender plays a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial motivations and goals, particularly in the context of social and environmental missions. Hechavarria et al. (2017), using cross-national data, found that

women entrepreneurs are significantly more likely than men to pursue ventures with explicit social and environmental objectives. Their findings indicate that gendered values—such as care, community well-being, and ecological stewardship—often shape women’s decision-making processes when founding and operating businesses.

Similarly, Jennings and Brush (2013) argue that female entrepreneurs are more likely to adopt a relational or community-centered logic, which prioritizes long-term social value over short-term economic gain. This orientation aligns closely with the principles of sustainability, especially in sectors like organic agriculture, where ecological health and community empowerment are core concerns.

These gender-based differences are not merely anecdotal but are supported by systematic empirical studies across diverse contexts. For example, Muntean and Ozkazanc-Pan (2015) emphasize that women often operate within distinct institutional and cultural constraints, which shape their entrepreneurial behavior in unique ways. Their work illustrates how gender interacts with broader structural factors to influence how female entrepreneurs define success and impact.

In the context of this study, these findings are critical for understanding the motivations and strategies of female social entrepreneurs in California’s Central Coast. By positioning their enterprises within broader sustainability frameworks, these women reflect a global pattern in which gender influences not only who becomes an entrepreneur, but also the purpose and orientation of their ventures. This research builds on such evidence to investigate whether and how these trends are embodied in the lived experiences of women organic farmers and community leaders in the region.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model developed in this thesis offers a structured analytical framework that elucidates the dynamic interplay among female social entrepreneurship, organic agriculture, environmental sustainability, and community empowerment. The rationale for the model lies in its capacity to visualize and clarify the relationships among these interdependent elements within the socio-economic and regulatory context of California's Central Coast (Larsson, 2012; Reganold & Wachter, 2016).

At the model's core, **female social entrepreneurship** is positioned as a key driver, facilitating the adoption of **organic agricultural practices**—such as crop rotation, reduced chemical inputs, and biodiversity enhancement—which in turn influence outcomes in **environmental sustainability** and **community empowerment**.

The relationships between these core constructs are shaped by four critical **contextual moderators**:

Gender Dynamics: Socially constructed roles and challenges uniquely shaping women's entrepreneurial pathways and access to opportunities (Datta & Gailey, 2012).

Regulatory Environment: Supportive or restrictive institutional frameworks that influence both practice implementation and advocacy potential (Youngberg & DeMuth, 2013).

Market Forces and Economic Viability: Market demand, competition, and economic feasibility, which impact the scalability, profitability, and sustainability of entrepreneurial practices (Mount, 2012).

Access to Resources: The availability of financial, social, and human capital necessary to launch, sustain, and scale entrepreneurial ventures (Allen & Kovach, 2000).

This dynamic interplay yields several specific processes and outcomes:

Innovation in Sustainable Practices: Entrepreneurs actively innovate within agricultural practices, optimizing ecological and economic performance.

Policy Advocacy and Influence: Entrepreneurs proactively shape supportive regulatory environments by engaging in advocacy efforts.

Local Economic Development Initiatives: Community-driven ventures foster local economic resilience, providing employment opportunities and improving livelihoods.

Enhanced Environmental and Social Impacts: Tangible improvements in environmental quality, biodiversity, social inclusion, and community resilience.

This conceptual model not only delineates the interaction among key constructs but also offers a comprehensive lens through which to analyze the strategic behaviours of women operating within organic agricultural contexts. It emphasizes how contextual variables such as gendered expectations, institutional support structures, economic constraints, and disparities in access to resources influence both decision-making and impact.

Through its layered structure, the model makes visible the mechanisms by which female entrepreneurs integrate ecological practices with social purpose. It captures their dual roles as innovators and advocates—individuals who respond not only to market demands but also to community needs. In doing so, the model reinforces the thesis's interdisciplinary contributions, bridging theory and practice across feminist entrepreneurship, sustainable development, and agroecological economics.

During the narrative analysis, several recurring contextual conditions emerged across multiple interviews. These included participants' references to land access barriers, policy inconsistencies, and culturally gendered expectations. While not analyzed as statistical moderators, these elements were conceptualized as influencing the capacity and direction of the entrepreneurs' strategies and impacts. As such, they were incorporated

social entrepreneurship in organic agriculture, it is grounded exclusively in data derived from California's Central Coast. As a result, it does not offer a systematic comparison with models or practices from other regions—either within the United States or internationally—where differing regulatory frameworks, market dynamics, or socio-political environments may shape entrepreneurial strategies in distinct ways. This limitation reflects the nature of the selected dataset, which was based on the Cultivating a Movement oral history archive, a region-specific repository. Consequently, while the findings are robust in capturing local realities, they cannot fully address how the observed strategies or challenges align with or diverge from those experienced in other agricultural or socio-political contexts.

Future research should adopt a multi-regional or cross-national comparative approach to critically examine models of gendered entrepreneurship and sustainability, while testing the **transferability** of the conceptual framework developed in this thesis. Such studies would enable a deeper understanding of how **female social entrepreneurs** in organic agriculture operate across diverse socio-economic, cultural, and regulatory environments.

For instance, research from **Järna, Sweden**, where organic farming and cooperative structures are deeply institutionalized, could offer a useful contrast to the more fragmented regulatory and entrepreneurial landscapes observed in California's Central Coast (Larsson, 2012). Similarly, empirical work from **Thailand**—particularly on women's roles in sustainable farming—can illuminate how local norms, education systems, and market conditions shape female-led social entrepreneurship (Meekaew & Chamaratana, 2024). By integrating such comparative case studies, future research can broaden the

geographic and cultural scope of understanding, identify **context-specific enablers and barriers**, and enhance the analytical utility of the proposed framework. Moreover, examining how challenges related to **policy support, gender dynamics, and economic sustainability** are navigated in varied settings will contribute to developing more **globally adaptable models** of sustainable and inclusive agricultural entrepreneurship.

2.5 Summary: Literature Review

Chapter 2 reviews the scholarly foundations that inform this study, focusing on three interrelated domains: **feminist entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, and institutional theory**.

First, the chapter explores how feminist entrepreneurship challenges mainstream economic assumptions by emphasizing collaboration, inclusivity, and social mission. It underscores how women in agriculture often pursue non-traditional, community-oriented entrepreneurial paths shaped by gendered experiences and structural inequities.

Second, the literature on sustainable agriculture is reviewed, particularly emphasizing agroecological practices that promote biodiversity, climate resilience, and soil health. The review highlights the role of women as stewards of sustainability through small-scale and organic farming models that prioritize environmental integrity and social equity.

Third, institutional theory is applied to examine how female social entrepreneurs navigate and sometimes reshape the formal and informal rules, norms, and power structures in agriculture. This includes their role in policy advocacy, informal organizing, and resisting dominant market logics. The chapter identifies a significant gap in understanding how these three domains intersect in practice, especially in localized contexts such as

California's Central Coast. To address this, a conceptual framework is introduced that visually and theoretically links feminist entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, and institutional engagement—laying the groundwork for the study's research questions and methodology.

3. Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the qualitative research design, data sources, and analytical methods, emphasizing oral history and narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of female entrepreneurs.

Figure 3 illustrates the integrative framework of female social entrepreneurship in organic agriculture developed in this study. This framework highlights how gendered leadership, ecological innovation, and institutional navigation collectively shape sustainable farming practices and community empowerment

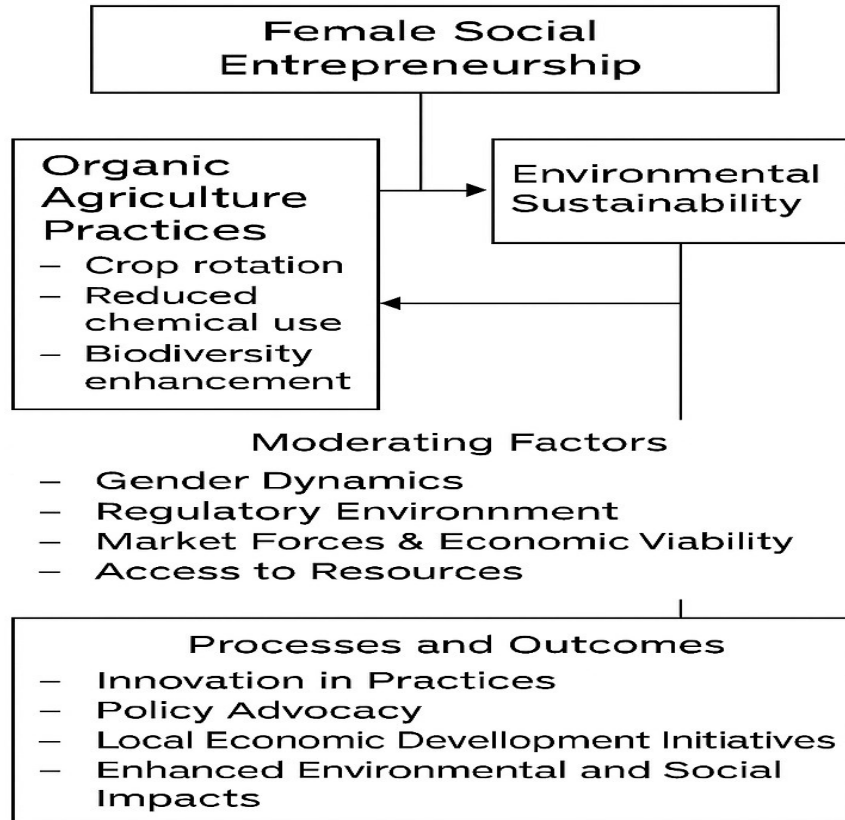


Figure 3: Integrative Framework of Female Social Entrepreneurship in Organic Agriculture

3.1 Descriptive Narrative

The proposed Conceptual Model illustrates the integrative dynamics underpinning female social entrepreneurship within the organic agriculture sector, emphasizing its role in advancing environmental sustainability and community empowerment.

At the model’s core, Female Social Entrepreneurship is depicted as a key driver, integrating the adoption of Organic Agriculture Practices (e.g., crop rotation, reduced chemical use, biodiversity enhancement) to directly influence outcomes in Environmental Sustainability and Community Empowerment.

The relationship between these core constructs is moderated by four critical contextual factors:

Gender Dynamics: Socially constructed roles and challenges uniquely influence women's entrepreneurial approaches and opportunities.

Regulatory Environment: Supportive or restrictive policies impacting practice implementation and advocacy.

Market Forces & Economic Viability: Economic pressures and opportunities shaping scalability, profitability, and the integrity of sustainability practices.

Access to Resources: Availability and accessibility of financial, human, and social capital influence the capacity to sustain and expand entrepreneurial initiatives.

This dynamic interplay yields several specific processes and outcomes:

Innovation in Sustainable Practices: Entrepreneurs actively innovate within agricultural practices, optimizing ecological and economic performance.

Policy Advocacy and Influence: Entrepreneurs proactively shape supportive regulatory environments by engaging in advocacy efforts.

Local Economic Development Initiatives: Community-driven ventures foster local economic resilience, providing employment opportunities and improving livelihoods.

Enhanced Environmental and Social Impacts: Tangible improvements in environmental quality, biodiversity, social inclusion, and community resilience.

This conceptual model not only delineates the interaction among key constructs but explicitly highlights the moderating influence of gender dynamics, regulation, market contexts, and resource access. By doing so, it underscores how female social entrepreneurs uniquely navigate and transform the organic agriculture landscape, driving outcomes essential to both ecological integrity and community well-being.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Introduction

This research adopts a **qualitative methodology** to investigate the role of female social entrepreneurs in the organic agriculture sector, focusing on California's Central Coast. The primary aim is to explore their contributions to **environmental sustainability**, **community empowerment**, and **economic development**, while also addressing the

gendered and structural challenges they encounter in this sector. A combination of **oral history interviews**, **narrative inquiry**, and **qualitative data analysis tools** forms the core of the research design, allowing for a nuanced, in-depth exploration of lived experiences and social change processes.

Qualitative approaches are particularly well-suited to research questions that involve **complex social phenomena**, embedded meanings, and **context-dependent narratives** (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike quantitative methods, which often prioritize generalizability and numerical trends, qualitative research offers the flexibility to explore **subjective interpretations**, motivations, and **contextual constraints** that influence women's agency in social entrepreneurship (Riessman, 2008). This makes it ideal for examining the relational and embedded nature of entrepreneurial strategies in organic farming.

At the heart of this research lies the **oral history interview**, a method chosen for its ability to elicit **rich, personal, and longitudinal narratives**. Oral histories not only reveal the biographical trajectories of the participants but also uncover the historical and institutional evolution of organic agriculture in California. This approach enables a **layered understanding** of how gender, sustainability, and community values intersect over time (Thompson, 2000; Yow, 2014).

The interviews are complemented by **thematic and narrative analysis**, using both manual coding and **qualitative data analysis (QDA) software**. While the software supports systematic organization and preliminary coding, the **interpretive depth** is achieved through narrative inquiry, allowing the researcher to draw out recurring patterns, metaphors, and emotional dimensions of the participants' accounts (Riessman, 2008).

The methodology is guided by ethical principles and a feminist epistemological stance, with a commitment to centering marginalized voices. This included deliberate reflexivity about the researcher's own distance from the field context and reliance on secondary oral histories sourced from the University of California's 'Cultivating a Movement' archive.

In summary, the use of **oral history and narrative methods** within a qualitative framework is highly appropriate for this study's objectives. It enables a **holistic exploration** of how female social entrepreneurs navigate environmental, economic, and gendered terrains, while also contributing to theoretical advancements in **feminist entrepreneurship** and **agroecological sustainability**

3.2.2 Participant

The study involved seventeen women meticulously selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. These participants, actively engaged in various sectors of organic agriculture in California, were chosen to represent a broad spectrum of experiences within the field. The selection criteria ensured a comprehensive understanding of the organic agriculture sector.

Three participants were between the ages of 18 and 30, eight were between the ages of 31 and 45, and six were between the ages of 46 and 60. All participants identified as female and worked in organic agriculture as managers, educators, farmers, or activists. Their histories varied widely regarding age, expertise, and positions held within the organic agriculture community.

The participants held various positions in educational programs, organic farms, community-supported agriculture, and organic certification organizations. Each member

possessed a master's degree in a relevant discipline, such as community development, environmental science, or agriculture, and had at least five years of experience in their respective jobs.

These criteria ensured that the study included knowledgeable and experienced individuals who could provide rich and varied insights into the organic agriculture sector. Participants were recruited through networks associated with the California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) and other related organizations. Their substantial involvement in promoting and practicing organic agriculture, combined with their personal and professional experiences, contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the organic agriculture landscape in California.

3.2.3 The Rationale for Oral History Interviews

Oral history interviews were selected as the **main source of secondary data** for this study due to their unique ability to capture firsthand, richly contextualized narratives over time. This approach is particularly well-suited to the research objective of understanding the lived experiences of female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture, as it enables the documentation of personal histories, motivations, challenges, and strategies that conventional surveys or structured interviews may overlook.

Oral history is grounded in the narrative tradition, offering space for participants to reflect on and construct meaning from their experiences in their own words (Thompson, 2000; Yow, 2014). This method not only documents events but also reveals emotional, social, and cultural layers of meaning. In the context of this research, oral histories allow participants to explain how they became involved in organic farming, how their practices evolved, and how they navigated institutional, gendered, and environmental challenges.

The longitudinal quality of oral history—its ability to trace changes over time—is particularly valuable in agricultural settings, where practices and policies evolve slowly and are deeply embedded in community memory and land-based knowledge (Portelli, 1997). This aligns with the study’s goal of uncovering how entrepreneurial and sustainability practices are shaped by long-term experiences and systemic conditions.

Another key advantage of oral history is its flexibility and openness, allowing analysts to follow the natural flow of conversation and probe into emerging themes or emotions that structured methodologies might miss (Perks & Thomson, 2015). This semi-structured, conversational style fosters interpretive depth and contextual understanding, particularly important when working with women whose experiences may have been marginalized or excluded from mainstream narratives (Gluck & Patai, 1991).

This approach also fits well within feminist research methodologies, which emphasize the importance of giving voice to participants, validating subjective experiences, and challenging hierarchical knowledge production. Oral history empowers participants to be co-creators of knowledge, not merely subjects of analysis (Narr & Messinger, 2018).

In summary, oral history interviews were chosen not only for their descriptive richness and temporal depth, but also for their alignment with the study’s epistemological and ethical commitments. **Though used here as secondary data**, they offer a powerful lens to explore how female social entrepreneurs make sense of their work, shape community practices, and respond to evolving environmental and market conditions in the organic agriculture sector.

3.2.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study to protect the rights and well-being of the participants. All participants provided informed consent before the interviews were conducted. They were thoroughly informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without any repercussions.

Precautions were taken to protect the participants' privacy. Transcripts were cleaned of any personally identifiable information, and data were safely stored with access only to the research team. The interviewees and the University of California Regents have a copyright agreement that covers all uses of these writings. Excerpts up to six hundred words from each interview may be quoted under "fair use" guidelines without obtaining permission from the Regional Oral History Project, if the sources are correctly cited. A sample citation would read: "Excerpted from Rebecca Thistlethwaite: TLC Ranch and the Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association, a transcribed interview conducted by Sarah Rabkin and included in *Cultivating a Movement: An Oral History Series on Organic Farming and Sustainable Agriculture*, published by the (University of California), Santa Cruz Library's Regional Oral History Project, 2010 Quotations of more than six hundred words require the written permission of the Head of Special Collections and Archives and a proper citation and may also require a fee. Under certain circumstances, not-for-profit users may be granted a fee waiver.

3.2.5. Source of Data

This study employed qualitative methods to explore the role of female social entrepreneurs in the organic agriculture sector in California, particularly focusing on Santa Cruz County. The Regional History Project at the University Library at UC Santa Cruz [2020], which has been documenting the history of the Central Coast of California since

1964, provided the archival oral histories used in this research. This project included fifty-eight interviews with farmers, activists, researchers, and educators involved in the sustainable agriculture and organic farming movement. For this study, we specifically selected seventeen interviews with female participants because our research aims to investigate the contributions and challenges of female social entrepreneurs in the organic agriculture sector. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling, focusing on those who have made significant contributions to the field.

Trained researchers who adhered to the Oral History Association's best practices performed the interviews. Every interviewer prepared their topic outlines and did background research before asking open-ended questions that encouraged in-depth answers. The interviews were performed in various locations, such as the homes, farms, and offices of the participants, and they were digitally recorded using high-quality equipment. While some interviews were shorter or longer, most lasted two to four hours. After that, the interviews were minimally edited for punctuation and paragraphing and transcribed. The transcripts were then sent back to the narrators for approval. The qualitative data collected from these interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns related to the participants' contributions and challenges in the organic agriculture sector. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the role and impact of female social entrepreneurs in this field.

All uses of these manuscripts comply with the copyright agreement between the interviewees and the Regents of the University of California. Under "fair use" standards, excerpts of up to six hundred words per interview may be quoted without the Regional Oral History Project's permission, provided they are properly cited. Longer quotations

require written permission and may incur a fee, although waivers may be granted for not-for-profit users. The data for this study were sourced from the "Cultivating a Movement: An Oral History Series on Sustainable Agriculture and Organic Farming on California's Central Coast" project, conducted by the Regional Oral History Project at the (University of California)Santa Cruz's University Library. This comprehensive documentary project includes fifty-eight interviews with a diverse group of individuals, including farmers, activists, researchers, and educators, who have significantly contributed to the sustainable agriculture and organic farming movement from the 1960s to the present.

The interviews encompass detailed personal narratives and professional insights, providing a rich qualitative data set. The full-text transcripts, audio clips, and photographs from these oral histories are in PDF format and can be accessed through the scholarship repository. The project documents individual experiences and maps the evolution and impact of the sustainable agriculture movement in California's Central Coast region. These oral histories were conducted with a rigorous methodological approach to ensure accuracy and depth. Interviewees provided informed consent, and the narrators transcribed, reviewed, and approved of their stories. This ensures the reliability and authenticity of the data, making it a valuable resource for research and analysis in sustainable agriculture. For further details and access to the data, please visit the Cultivating a Movement project home. The project's resources are available under a fair use policy, with specific guidelines for citation and permissions as outlined in the project's copyright and use policy.

3.2.6 Justification for Methodological Choice

While various methodological approaches were considered, oral history was ultimately chosen as the most suitable method for this study due to its capacity to capture the depth, nuance, and emotional resonance of lived experience. This approach is particularly effective for examining female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture, as it reveals personal motivations, intergenerational insights, and the complex socio-political contexts in which these women operate (Yow, 2015; Portelli, 1991). Oral history is especially adept at surfacing the gendered dimensions of sustainability work, as well as the informal and adaptive strategies women employ to navigate fragmented and often exclusionary agricultural institutions.

Quantitative methods, such as surveys, were initially considered but rejected because they tend to constrain responses within predefined categories, limiting the ability to explore subjective meaning, contextual complexity, and narrative richness—core elements of this study's research objectives. Likewise, although semi-structured interviews and focus groups offer more flexibility than surveys, they were deemed less appropriate for eliciting the reflective, emotionally layered, and historically grounded narratives central to understanding women's experiences in organic agriculture (Perks & Thomson, 2015). Mixed-methods designs were also explored but ultimately ruled out, as they would have broadened the research scope in ways inconsistent with the study's qualitative and interpretive orientation. The goal was not to statistically generalize findings, but to develop a deep, contextually embedded understanding of how women construct meaning, exercise agency, and mobilize entrepreneurship as a tool for sustainability and empowerment. Drawing on archived oral histories from the Cultivating a Movement collection aligned methodologically and ethically with the study's feminist, place-based research framework (Shopes, 2002).

3.3 Rationale for Rejecting Alternative Methodological Approaches

While qualitative oral history was selected as the most appropriate methodological approach for this study, this decision was made in full consideration of alternative

research methods, including quantitative surveys, structured interviews, focus groups, and mixed-methods designs. Each of these alternatives offers particular strengths but was found to be either insufficient or misaligned with the specific objectives and epistemological orientation of this research. The rationale for rejecting these alternatives is outlined below.

3.3.1 Quantitative Surveys

Quantitative methods, particularly survey-based designs, were considered for their capacity to collect data from a larger sample and enable statistical generalization. However, this approach was rejected for several key reasons:

Insufficient depth: Surveys are inherently limited in their ability to capture the complex, personal, and contextually rich narratives central to understanding female social entrepreneurs' motivations, strategies, and challenges.

Premature framing: The use of predetermined categories risks oversimplifying the nuanced and emergent experiences of women operating at the intersection of gender, sustainability, and entrepreneurship.

Incompatibility with research questions: The exploratory and interpretive nature of the central research questions, focused on meaning-making, lived experience, and dynamic processes, is best addressed through qualitative inquiry.

3.3.2. Structured or Semi-Structured Interviews

Structured interviews were considered a more conventional qualitative alternative. However, this approach was deemed suboptimal for several reasons:

Reduced narrative autonomy: Structured interviews often constrain participants' ability to shape the direction of the conversation, limiting the emergence of unanticipated but insightful themes.

Lack of historical depth: Oral history methods provide a richer temporal scope, enabling participants to reflect on long-term change and personal trajectories in a way that structured interviews do not prioritize.

Less effective in capturing voice and agency: Oral history centers the participant's voice as a form of expertise and self-representation, which is particularly valuable in studies aimed at amplifying underrepresented groups, such as female entrepreneurs in agriculture.

3.3.3 Focus Groups

Focus groups were also taken into consideration as a way to gather interactional data and investigate group viewpoints. However, they were excluded due to the following limitations:

Individual viewpoints may be suppressed by group dynamics: Some voices may be silenced in hierarchical or mixed-experience groups, especially when talking about delicate subjects like institutional exclusion, resource scarcity, or gender bias.

Limited capacity to investigate personal life histories: The goal of the study is to investigate identities, motivations, and highly personal trajectories that are more appropriate for one-on-one interaction.

Contextual limitations: It was difficult to plan fruitful group sessions due to the participants' dispersed locations and unique roles in organic agriculture.

3.3.4 Mixed-Methods Approaches

A mixed-methods design was briefly considered for its potential to combine narrative insight with quantifiable outcomes. However:

Lack of data standardization: Integrating standardized quantitative data would require a level of data availability and consistency across participants that is not feasible given the nature of oral histories.

Resource intensiveness: Implementing a rigorous mixed-methods design would have significantly extended the scope and duration of the research, diverting attention from the in-depth analysis needed for a master's thesis.

Dilution of qualitative richness: The depth, nuance, and reflexivity achieved through oral histories risk being overshadowed or de-emphasized in a mixed-methods framework not purpose-built for narrative inquiry.

Conclusion

In rejecting these alternative methodologies, the study affirms its commitment to a narrative, interpretivist orientation that privileges subjectivity, temporality, and contextual complexity. The oral history approach is thus not only appropriate but essential for capturing the lived realities, strategies, and contributions of female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture. It allows for a depth of understanding that aligns directly with the study's purpose: to amplify women's voices, foreground experience as knowledge, and contribute to more inclusive and contextually grounded frameworks of sustainability and entrepreneurship.

3.4 QDA Software Using Method

The research commenced with the setup of QDA Miner software to manage qualitative data, starting with the importation and formatting of transcripts from oral history interviews to ensure consistency for effective coding and analysis. A preliminary codebook was developed based on initial research questions and a literature review, outlining broad categories for systematic coding. This codebook was refined throughout the analysis as themes were further defined and clarified.

In the coding process, descriptive coding captured key data elements corresponding to predefined variables such as Entrepreneur Identification, Initiative Type, Motivation, and Influencing Factors.

However, the core of the analysis goes beyond these initial categorizations. The main work is done through a narrative research approach, focusing on extracting deeper, qualitative insights from the participants' stories. By concentrating on the rich personal narratives shared during the interviews, I uncovered complex relationships, motivations, and strategies that female social entrepreneurs employ in their work. This narrative approach allowed me to fully engage with the context and depth of each story, identifying nuanced connections between the challenges they face and the solutions they develop.

While QDA Miner supported early data categorization, deeper insights were derived through manual interpretative analysis grounded in narrative inquiry

The narrative research method also provided the flexibility to explore emergent themes as they developed during the analysis, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how female social entrepreneurs contribute to the sector's growth. In summary, while QDA software facilitated the initial categorization, the heart of the analysis lies in the narrative and interpretative work, ensuring that the qualitative richness of the data is fully explored and that the findings are grounded in the participants' lived experiences.

Table 1: Sample Coding Matrix from Oral History Narratives.

| Raw Data / Excerpt (Participant Quote) | Open Codes | Categories | Themes |
|---|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| "We couldn't afford to go for certification every year. The costs | Certification cost, Bureaucracy | Financial and Administrative Barriers | Market and Policy Challenges |

| Raw Data / Excerpt (Participant Quote) | Open Codes | Categories | Themes |
|--|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| kept rising and the paperwork was overwhelming.” | | | |
| “Our CSA program allowed us to reach low-income families and educate children about healthy food.” | CSA outreach, Education | Community Engagement | Community Empowerment |
| “Being a woman in this field, you often get overlooked, especially when seeking funding or land access.” | Gendered barriers, Access to land | Systemic Gender Disparities | Intersectional Barriers |
| “We started using compost and cover crops when we noticed the soil was degrading—it made a real difference in our yields and water retention.” | Composting, Soil regeneration | Sustainable Farming Practices | Environmental Sustainability |
| “Many of us are first-generation farmers. We learned by doing and supporting one another.” | Peer support, First-generation | Informal Learning Networks | Innovation and Adaptation |
| “I wish policymakers would understand that one-size-fits-all solutions don’t work for us small-scale farmers.” | Policy mismatch, Small-scale farms | Structural Constraints | Role of Policy Advocacy |

The thematic analysis followed a structured approach from open coding to theme identification, supporting transparency and analytical rigour (Nowell et al., 2017)."

3.5 Qualitative Data Analysis

This study employs **qualitative data analysis** tools and **narrative research methodology** to explore the role of female social entrepreneurs in the organic agriculture sector on California’s Central Coast. The use of **oral history interviews**—a method grounded in feminist epistemology and narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008; Harding, 1987)—enables the documentation of lived experiences, subjectivities, and agency often marginalized in traditional empirical research. Seventeen oral histories collected by the

Regional History Project at UC Santa Cruz were transcribed and systematically analyzed using thematic and narrative techniques. Through this process, **recurring contextual patterns**—such as regulatory barriers, community organizing, and environmental ethics—were identified, offering insight into how these entrepreneurs navigate institutional and cultural structures while advancing sustainability and empowerment goals.

3.6 Using QDA for Initial Categorization:

QDA Miner Lite enabled efficient identification of common codes such as sustainability and empowerment, which formed the basis for deeper thematic exploration." This initial categorization provided a structured overview of the data, making it easier to map out which key topics emerged most frequently and to organize the raw data for deeper analysis.

However, the use of QDA was only the first step. Its role was to help me track and group data systematically, ensuring that I did not overlook any emerging themes or patterns that could be relevant to the study.

3.6.1 Moving Beyond QDA: Narrative and Interpretative Analysis:

Following the initial coding, a more manual and reflective process was employed to delve deeper into the narratives of the female social entrepreneurs. The limitations of QDA software in capturing the full complexity of the participants' stories required an interpretative approach that could better account for the context, motivations, and experiences expressed in the interviews. This method aligns with (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) emphasis on narrative inquiry as a means of gaining deeper insights into human experience.

For example, while QDA identified references to "community empowerment," it was through narrative analysis that I uncovered the underlying reasons and strategies these women employed to prioritize community involvement. I engaged with the data beyond surface-level categorizations to develop a more coherent understanding of the participants' contributions to the sector.

3.7 Reliability and Validity

Reliability

To ensure a rigorous and consistent approach to data analysis, the study employed QDA Miner software, which facilitated the systematic organization and coding of the qualitative data. The following key steps guided this process:

3.7.1 Preliminary Codebook Development

A preliminary codebook was created based on the study's research questions, objectives, and a review of relevant literature. This codebook provided a foundational framework for identifying and categorizing themes and patterns within the data. Initial categories included key areas such as "Environmental Sustainability," "Community Empowerment," "Market Challenges," and "Policy Advocacy."

A) Iterative Refinement:

As the analysis progressed, the codebook was refined iteratively to incorporate emerging themes and subthemes identified in the data. This iterative process allowed the coding framework to evolve dynamically, ensuring that it captured the richness and complexity of participants' narratives. Regular updates to the codebook ensured alignment with the data while maintaining consistency across all transcripts.

B) Structured Coding Process:

Using QDA Miner software, each interview transcript was systematically coded according to the refined codebook. The software's functionality enabled efficient tagging of relevant text segments, helping to organize large volumes of data into manageable categories. This structured approach ensured that all relevant data were accounted for and categorized consistently.

D) Cross-Verification for Consistency:

To maintain reliability, the coding process was reviewed periodically to ensure consistency across transcripts. This included rechecking coded segments and comparing them with the codebook definitions to confirm accuracy and coherence in the application of codes.

3.7.2 Audit Trail

A) Brainstorming and Iterative Review:

Before and during the coding process, considerable time was dedicated to brainstorming and closely reading parts of the interviews. This iterative engagement with the data allowed for a deeper understanding of the content, enabling the identification of subtle themes and patterns beyond surface-level categorizations.

B) Coding Decisions:

While QDA Miner software was employed for the initial organization and coding of the data, the coding process also relied heavily on manual interpretative work. Detailed notes were kept for each coding decision, including insights gained through brainstorming and

reflective reading. This hybrid approach ensured that both systematic organization and rich interpretative insights informed the analysis.

C) Data Categorization:

The categorization process was documented in detail, including the criteria for grouping data and the evolution of categories as new insights emerged. Brainstorming sessions were particularly instrumental in refining these categories, allowing for the integration of complex and nuanced themes into the final framework.

D) Thematic Development:

Themes were developed through an iterative process, drawing on both the initial coding and the deeper interpretative insights gained from brainstorming and reading the interviews in parts. Annotated memos captured the connections between themes, the emergence of new patterns, and the rationale for any adjustments to the thematic structure.

E) Version Control and Storage:

All coding files, annotated notes, brainstorming outcomes, and thematic outlines were systematically version-controlled and securely stored. This organized system ensured that the analytical process could be revisited, validated, and reproduced by other researchers.

3.7.3 Validity

Throughout this study, I used ongoing reflexive techniques to identify and correct any potential biases that might have affected how the data were interpreted. As part of this process, I had to critically analyze my own presumptions and viewpoints and consider how they might have influenced how I interpreted the participant narratives. I tried to make sure the analysis stayed based on the participants' actual experiences rather than being swayed by assumptions by repeatedly challenging my interpretations and choices. I remained reflexive throughout the entire research process, from coding and thematic development to the ultimate interpretation of the results. By using this strategy, I was able to give the participants' voices more weight while making sure that their stories were not overshadowed by my own opinions.

3.8 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As with all qualitative research, it is crucial to acknowledge the positionality of the researcher and its influence on all stages of the research process—from the formulation of research questions to the interpretation of data. This study was conducted through an interpretivist lens, emphasizing the subjective nature of knowledge, the importance of lived experiences, and the social construction of meaning (Schwandt, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The use of oral histories reflects a deliberate methodological choice aimed at amplifying marginalized voices, particularly those of women in organic agriculture whose contributions often remain underrepresented in dominant agricultural, entrepreneurial, and environmental narratives.

The researcher's outsider status as an academic not embedded in the California organic farming community or directly involved in social enterprise inevitably shaped the analytical framing and interpretation of the data. While this distance allowed for analytical objectivity, interdisciplinary synthesis, and theoretical generalization, it also limited the researcher's access to emic (insider) perspectives. As a result, contextual

nuances—such as culturally embedded references, local farming practices, or place-based meanings—may not have been fully captured or interpreted with complete cultural accuracy (England, 1994).

Furthermore, the study relied on secondary data: archival oral histories sourced from the *Cultivating a Movement* project. While these sources offered rich, longitudinal narratives, the absence of direct interaction with participants restricted the researcher's ability to pose follow-up questions, clarify ambiguities, or pursue emergent themes during the data collection process. Consequently, the analysis required meticulous reading, critical contextualization, and thematic triangulation across interviews to identify patterns, tensions, and insights with integrity.

The researcher's normative orientation toward gender equity, social justice, and environmental sustainability also informed both the choice of topic and the interpretive lens used in the study. These values align with feminist epistemologies that prioritize standpoint theory, voice, and the dismantling of hierarchical knowledge systems (Harding, 2004; Haraway, 1988). At the same time, a conscious effort was made to balance empathic interpretation with analytical neutrality, acknowledging both empowering narratives and contradictions within the data. By explicitly acknowledging positionality, this section enhances the transparency and trustworthiness of the study (Pillow, 2003; Berger, 2015). It invites readers to critically consider how knowledge was produced, interpreted, and framed. Moreover, it highlights the importance of reflexive practice in qualitative research—continually questioning assumptions, power dynamics, and epistemological foundations. Future research would benefit from co-produced or participatory methodologies, allowing for greater dialogue with community members and enabling the integration of insider knowledge throughout the research process.

3.9 Limitation: Use of Secondary Oral Histories

A key methodological limitation of this research stems from its reliance on secondary oral histories rather than interviews conducted directly by the researcher. The oral history narratives were drawn from the *Cultivating a Movement: An Oral History Series on*

Sustainable Agriculture and Organic Farming on California's Central Coast, an archival project conducted by a separate team of interviewers. While this dataset is rich in first-person accounts and provides invaluable insight into the lives and practices of women farmers, it presents inherent constraints that limit the responsiveness and flexibility typically afforded by primary data collection.

First, because the researcher did not conduct the interviews, there was no opportunity to engage in responsive or iterative questioning based on emergent themes. This restricts the ability to probe deeper into specific issues, such as gendered leadership dynamics, policy advocacy, or intersectional challenges, when these themes were only lightly touched upon by the interviewees. The absence of a direct dialogic relationship between researcher and participant may also limit the interpretive richness and contextual sensitivity that characterizes in-depth qualitative research.

Second, the archival nature of the dataset introduces potential selection bias. The original selection of interviewees was shaped by the goals and priorities of the *Cultivating a Movement* project, which may have privileged certain types of narratives, particularly those aligning with the successes or normative ideals of organic farming. As a result, the voices of more marginalized, less resourced, or less publicly visible entrepreneurs may be underrepresented. Additionally, since the interviews span multiple decades, there is temporal variation in the policy environment and market conditions that may not be uniformly captured across all narratives. These limitations underscore the importance of interpreting the findings as reflective of a particular regional and institutional context, rather than as universally representative of all female social entrepreneurs in sustainable agriculture.

3.10 Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological foundation of the study, which employs a qualitative, interpretivist approach rooted in feminist research traditions. Central to the design is the use of oral history interviews—sourced from the *Cultivating a Movement* archive—to explore the lived experiences, strategies, and contributions of female social entrepreneurs in California's organic agriculture sector. The chapter justified the choice of oral history over alternative methods such as surveys, structured interviews, focus groups, and mixed-methods approaches, emphasizing its suitability for capturing rich, context-specific narratives.

The data analysis process combined QDA Miner software for initial categorization with in-depth manual narrative analysis to ensure interpretive depth and thematic coherence. Reliability and validity were supported through iterative coding, audit trails, and reflexive practices. The researcher's positionality and ethical considerations were critically examined to enhance transparency and trustworthiness. While the use of secondary data introduced some limitations—particularly regarding responsiveness and representativeness—the oral histories provided valuable longitudinal insights into gendered entrepreneurship and sustainability practices. Overall, the chosen methodology offers a robust foundation for understanding the intersection of gender, agriculture, and social innovation.

4. Chapter 4 Findings/Data Analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents the integrated theoretical model that combines feminist entrepreneurship, agroecological sustainability, and institutional theory to frame the study's analysis and interpretation.

4.1 Overview of Findings

The findings of this study highlight the significant contributions of female social entrepreneurs in advancing the organic agriculture sector in California's Central Coast. The data analysis reveals several key themes that align with the research objectives, offering insights into the role of these women in driving environmental sustainability, fostering community empowerment, and navigating market and policy challenges. These findings underscore the critical role of female social entrepreneurs as change agents in the organic agriculture movement.

4.1.1 Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability emerged as a key area of focus in the data, reflecting concepts drawn from the literature on agroecology and sustainable development. Rather than being entirely inductively derived, the data were coded and analyzed through a conceptual lens informed by prior research on ecological entrepreneurship and organic farming. Within this framework, participants' narratives consistently reinforced and extended theoretical understandings of sustainable agricultural practice. Participants reported a deliberate integration of practices such as crop rotation, organic pest control, and composting—strategies that align with established principles of biodiversity conservation and soil health enhancement. For instance, several women described using heirloom seeds and practicing cover cropping as a way to regenerate the land and reduce dependency on synthetic inputs. These practices were not only

environmentally motivated but also strategically deployed to reduce long-term production costs and promote resilience to climate variability.

In addition, the data reveal that participants engaged in advocacy and education around ecological stewardship. Some collaborated with local schools to promote farm-based environmental education, while others offered workshops on composting and permaculture to their surrounding communities. These practices are consistent with literature on the social dimensions of sustainability, positioning female entrepreneurs as both practitioners and educators within their agroecological systems.

Overall, the participants' experiences affirm and build upon existing theoretical models by illustrating how environmental sustainability is enacted not as an isolated goal, but as an embedded and evolving practice grounded in both values and local context.

4.1.2 Community Empowerment

A recurring theme across the interviews is the role of female social entrepreneurs in fostering community empowerment. These entrepreneurs have strengthened community ties and promoted inclusivity through initiatives such as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, educational workshops, and local food networks. Many participants highlighted their efforts to create opportunities for marginalized groups, including women, minorities, and low-income families, thereby contributing to local economic resilience. The findings reveal that these women serve as connectors between rural communities and broader markets, ensuring that the benefits of organic agriculture extend beyond individual farms.

Although Johansen (2014) and Bembenek et al. (2016) present strong examples of community empowerment, a comparative critique reveals that models like Community

Supported Agriculture (CSA) flourish in California in part due to high consumer awareness and efficient, localized food supply chains. In contrast, these models may encounter significant scalability or trust-related challenges in regions where market participation is limited or where civil infrastructure is underdeveloped, reducing their effectiveness and potential for replication.

The leadership women demonstrate in these contexts—through mentorship, collective action, and participatory education—reflects feminist theories of relational leadership and care ethics Tillmar (2009). Moreover, their efforts to build alternative governance structures in response to institutional voids align with the principles of institutional entrepreneurship, showcasing how female social entrepreneurs actively shape systems to bridge policy gaps and promote inclusive, sustainable development.

4.1.3 Market and Policy Challenges

Participants also identified significant challenges related to market access, financial barriers, and regulatory frameworks. Limited access to resources and competitive market dynamics often hinder organic agriculture initiatives' scalability. Additionally, participants highlighted the need for supportive policies to facilitate organic certification, reduce operational costs, and promote sustainable practices. Despite these hurdles, the entrepreneurs demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, employing innovative strategies to overcome obstacles and sustain their ventures.

These challenges underscore the presence of institutional voids in agricultural policy, as described by (North, 1990), wherein formal structures fail to support emerging entrepreneurial logics.

4.1.4 Innovation and Adaptation

The findings emphasize the entrepreneurial spirit of the participants, who consistently employed innovative solutions to enhance their operations. Examples include using bicycles for CSA deliveries to minimize carbon footprints, adopting mobile applications for efficient resource management, and engaging in policy advocacy to address systemic barriers. These adaptive strategies underscore the dynamic nature of female social entrepreneurship in organic agriculture.

The entrepreneurs' ability to innovate in response to regulatory voids reflects (Mair & Marti, 2009) conception of institutional entrepreneurship, where actors reshape rules and norms through informal structures

4.1.5 Alignment with Research Objectives

The themes identified in this study—environmental sustainability, community empowerment, market challenges, and innovation—directly align with the research questions and objectives. By exploring the experiences and strategies of female social entrepreneurs, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of their contributions to the organic agriculture sector. The findings offer valuable insights into how these women navigate complex social, environmental, and economic landscapes to drive systemic change, reinforcing their role as leaders in sustainable agriculture.

Table 2 summarizes the alignment between the research questions, the key themes identified in the study, and the main findings. This overview clarifies how each thematic domain addresses the study's overarching research objectives and contributes to the analysis.

| Research Question | Key Themes | Findings Summary |
|--|---|---|
| How do female social entrepreneurs contribute to environmental sustainability? | Environmental Practices, Innovation | Use of composting, biodiversity protection, organic certification, and eco-innovation. |
| How do they empower communities through organic agriculture? | Community Engagement, CSA, Education | Developed local markets, ran workshops, promoted food justice, built trust-based systems. |
| What challenges do they face, and how do they navigate them? | Market Barriers, Policy Conflict, Gender Bias | Overcame lack of access to finance, navigated conflicting regulations, and built leadership despite bias. |
| What role do they play in shaping agricultural policy and advocacy? | Advocacy, Institutional Change | Engaged in lobbying, helped shape local food policies, and promoted sustainable standards. |

Table 2 Summary of Research Questions, Key Themes, and Findings

4.1.6 Theoretical Contributions

This study offers several important theoretical contributions across feminist entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, and institutional theory. While these domains have each been developed, few studies have synthesized insights from all three to understand the role of women-led social enterprises in reshaping local food systems. By centring the lived experiences of female social entrepreneurs operating in California’s organic agriculture sector, this research provides an integrated theoretical lens to analyze grassroots innovation, gendered leadership, and institutional engagement.

4.1.7 Gendered Leadership and Entrepreneurial Strategies

Participants' emphasis on non-hierarchical leadership, emotional labour, and community-centred management reflects feminist critiques of traditional entrepreneurial models, aligning with Braidotti's (2011) posthuman feminist framework.

Contribution to Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory

This study extends feminist entrepreneurship theory by illustrating how women in organic agriculture adopt relational and community-centred leadership models that challenge traditional, masculinized understandings of entrepreneurial success. The findings highlight how these women leverage informal networks, emotional labour, and collective decision-making to sustain their ventures and empower others. This supports and expands previous feminist critiques that argue entrepreneurship is a socially embedded and gendered process (Calás et al., 2009; Ahl & Marlow, 2012), particularly within under-resourced and institutionally fragmented sectors like small-scale farming.

Contribution to Sustainable Agriculture Theory

Within the domain of sustainable agriculture, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how social and ecological sustainability are co-produced at the community level. Rather than conceptualizing sustainability solely through technological or economic frameworks, the study emphasizes the significance of values-based decision-making and place-based ecological knowledge. Female social entrepreneurs in this context engage in practices such as biodiversity preservation, composting, local seed use, and community education, all of which reflect a holistic, agroecological approach to sustainability. These findings build upon and extend the work of scholars such as Reganold and Wachter (2016) by demonstrating how sustainability is enacted as an everyday practice of resistance, care, and stewardship.

Contribution to Institutional Theory

Finally, this study contributes to **institutional theory** by illustrating how **marginalized actors**—specifically women farmers and activists—engage in **bottom-up institutional change** within fragmented and exclusionary agricultural governance systems. These female social entrepreneurs challenge and reshape prevailing norms, rules, and expectations through **advocacy**, **alternative certification processes**, and **local policy involvement**. Rather than aligning with dominant regulatory frameworks, they mobilize **informal networks** and **community coalitions** to assert **new legitimacy** for organic and justice-oriented agricultural practices. This aligns with and extends the work of **Mair and Martí (2009)** on **institutional work by grassroots actors**, contributing to a deeper understanding of how **social enterprises navigate and transform institutional voids**.

4.2 Themes

Theme 1: Community Empowerment through Collaborative Models

Description:

This theme highlights the role of female social entrepreneurs in fostering local economic resilience, inclusivity, and empowerment of marginalized groups. These entrepreneurs leverage collaborative initiatives such as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs and educational outreach to build stronger community ties while promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

Examples/Excerpts from Analysis:

One participant stated: "Our CSA initiative not only ensures that local consumers have access to fresh organic produce, but it also educates them about sustainable farming practices and helps us connect more meaningfully with the community."

Another entrepreneur highlighted their collaboration with local women's groups to provide training in organic farming techniques, stating: "Empowering women in the community has ripple effects on household incomes and overall economic resilience."

Connection to Existing Literature:

This aligns with findings from (Johansen, 2014), which emphasizes the significance of community-driven models in strengthening rural development and fostering local engagement. The participatory leadership style these entrepreneurs adopt mirrors existing frameworks in social entrepreneurship literature that advocate for inclusivity and shared responsibility.

Theme 2: Environmental Sustainability through Innovative Practices

Description:

Female social entrepreneurs integrate sustainable agricultural methods, such as crop rotation, organic pest management, and reduced carbon footprint strategies, to enhance soil health and biodiversity. A commitment to environmental stewardship and long-term ecological resilience drives these practices.

Examples/Excerpts from Analysis:

A participant shared: "We adopted crop rotation and organic pest control not only to improve yields but also to restore soil health for future generations."

Another emphasized their commitment to reducing carbon footprints by using bicycles for CSA deliveries: "We wanted our logistics to reflect our values, which is why we decided to go for eco-friendly deliveries."

Connection to Existing Literature:

These findings resonate with research by Larsson and Granstedt (2010), who emphasize the importance of biodiversity and ecosystem preservation in sustainable agriculture. The innovative practices employed by female social entrepreneurs contribute meaningfully to global goals of sustainable food production, reinforcing the ecological dimension of their work within organic farming systems.

Theme 3: Market and Policy Challenges

Description:

Participants frequently reported barriers such as limited market access, lack of financial resources, and inadequate policy support as significant obstacles to scaling their operations. Despite these challenges, they exhibited resilience by adopting creative solutions.

Examples/Excerpts from Analysis:

One entrepreneur noted: "Navigating the financial and regulatory aspects of organic certification is a constant struggle. We need more supportive policies to make this journey sustainable."

Another highlighted market challenge: "Expanding to a broader market while staying true to organic principles has been a balancing act."

Connection to Existing Literature:

These challenges echo Haedicke's (2012) findings on the tension between adhering to organic values and maintaining profitability in competitive markets. The need for supportive frameworks aligns with broader policy recommendations in the field of sustainable agriculture, emphasizing the importance of institutional backing to uphold ecological and social goals amid economic pressures.

Theme 4: Motivations Driving Female Entrepreneurs

Description:

Participants' motivations stemmed from a blend of environmental concerns, community empowerment, and health benefits. These motivations are rooted in both personal experiences and a commitment to improving the well-being of their communities.

Examples/Excerpts from Analysis:

A participant explained: "I started this journey because I wanted to provide healthier food options for my family and community."

Another stated: "Seeing the positive impact on community health motivates me to continue pushing through the challenges."

Connection to Existing Literature:

(Tillmar, 2009) highlights intrinsic motivations, such as community welfare and environmental responsibility, in driving social entrepreneurship. This theme underscores how personal and community-centred goals intersect in the entrepreneurial efforts of these women.

Theme 5: Influencing Factors for Success

Description:

External factors such as policy support, access to resources, and community backing significantly influence the success of female social entrepreneurs. These factors either enable or hinder the scalability and sustainability of their initiatives.

Examples/Excerpts from Analysis:

One participant stressed: "Community support has been instrumental in sustaining our initiatives. Without their trust and participation, it would have been much harder."

Another pointed out the role of policies: "We need policies that not only support organic farming but also make it financially viable for small-scale farmers."

Connection to Existing Literature:

Hassink and Van Dijk (2006) underline the importance of favourable policies and strong community frameworks in the success of agricultural social enterprises. This emphasis highlights the systemic enablers and barriers that female entrepreneurs encounter in the organic agriculture sector, reinforcing the need for supportive institutional and social infrastructures to ensure their sustainability and impact.

Theme 6: Innovation in Sustainable Practices

Description:

Innovation forms a cornerstone in the contributions of female social entrepreneurs to the organic agriculture sector. The participants implemented unique and creative solutions to address environmental challenges, optimize operational efficiency, and enhance

community engagement. Their innovative approaches encompass eco-friendly farming techniques, community-oriented outreach, and technology integration.

Participant Narratives:

Eco-Friendly Agricultural Techniques: Many participants emphasized the importance of eco-friendly methods such as crop rotation, organic pest control, and reduced reliance on synthetic chemicals. For instance, one participant mentioned, "We rotate crops to maintain soil health, preventing overexploitation, and use organic fertilizers to keep our practices sustainable."

Carbon Reduction Initiatives: Entrepreneurs like Amy Courtney stood out by introducing bicycle delivery systems for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares, significantly lowering carbon emissions. As she stated, "We're minimizing our environmental impact while fostering deeper connections with our local consumers."

Community-Centric Programs: Some participants innovatively incorporated local needs into their projects. One narrative highlighted collaborating with schools to introduce sustainable farming education, fostering future generations' awareness of organic agriculture.

Technology Integration: Those with related educational backgrounds utilized technological solutions to enhance efficiency. Examples include deploying data-driven irrigation techniques to conserve water and adopting mobile platforms for streamlining supply chains.

Connections to Broader Trends in Organic Agriculture:

These findings resonate strongly with global trends in sustainable agriculture. The innovative techniques observed align with studies by Larsson and Granstedt (2010), which emphasize the role of innovation in reducing the environmental footprint of agriculture while enhancing biodiversity. Similarly, the participants' carbon-reduction initiatives mirror the work of Haedicke (2012), underscoring the growing importance of environmentally conscious practices in organic farming.

Moreover, the community-driven models adopted by the participants reflect the broader movement toward integrating local engagement in agriculture. These initiatives support the findings of Johansen (2014), who emphasizes community-based approaches as crucial to achieving both environmental and social sustainability. By marrying innovation with inclusivity, these female entrepreneurs embody a broader shift toward participatory agricultural systems. While Larsson and Granstedt (2010) highlight the ecological benefits of practices such as crop rotation, a critical perspective must also consider scalability challenges. Reganold and Wachter (2016) note that without supportive markets or subsidies, organic practices may become financially unviable for smallholders operating within competitive or under-regulated environments.

4.2.3 Alignment with Previous Studies

Environmental Sustainability

The emphasis on innovative practices, such as crop rotation and chemical-free pest management, aligns with findings by Larsson and Granstedt (2010), who highlighted the environmental benefits of organic farming. Similar to their research, participants in this study described how sustainable practices contribute to soil health and biodiversity

conservation.

The participants' focus on reducing environmental footprints also resonates with studies by Reganold and Wachter (2016), which underscore the ecological advantages of organic farming systems.

Community Empowerment

Findings related to community-driven initiatives, such as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, mirror (Johansen, 2014) work emphasized local networks' role in fostering social cohesion and economic resilience.

The empowerment of marginalized groups through outreach programs aligns with studies by (Bembenek et al., 2016), which discusses the dual role of social entrepreneurship in driving economic development and promoting inclusivity.

Market Challenges

The challenges of limited market access and resource constraints echo the findings of (Haedicke, 2012), who identified the tension between market growth and the holistic principles of organic farming. The interviews confirm that female entrepreneurs face similar struggles in maintaining profitability while adhering to sustainability goals.

4.2.1 Novel Contributions

Integration of Local Knowledge with Innovation

Unlike previous studies, this research highlights the unique role of female social entrepreneurs in blending traditional agricultural practices with modern techniques. Participants frequently mentioned how they adapted local knowledge to address specific

environmental and community needs, a nuance less explored in the literature. Using technology for sustainable practices, such as data-driven irrigation and digital platforms for market access, represents a forward-looking approach that builds on but extends beyond existing studies.

Policy Advocacy

This study sheds light on the active role of female entrepreneurs in advocating for regulatory frameworks that support organic agriculture. This finding goes beyond (Larsson, 2012) focus on community networks by emphasizing the participants' efforts to influence policy as a means of overcoming systemic barriers.

Motivational Drivers

While previous research has highlighted the motivations of organic farmers, this study provides a deeper understanding of the interplay between environmental, social, and personal motivations among female social entrepreneurs. The dual emphasis on community well-being and financial sustainability presents a more nuanced perspective than earlier studies.

4.2.2 Divergences from Existing Literature

Scope of Impact

Unlike studies focusing solely on environmental or community benefits, this research underscores the interconnectedness of environmental sustainability, community empowerment, and policy advocacy. The findings suggest a more holistic impact of female entrepreneurs, which is less prominent in earlier works.

Gender-Specific Strategies

The strategies employed by female entrepreneurs, such as leveraging social capital and building inclusive networks, diverge from the more commercially driven approaches often discussed in male-dominated entrepreneurial studies. This research adds to the literature by emphasizing the gendered dimensions of entrepreneurship in organic agriculture.

4.3 Results

A total of 786 non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements were identified and extracted from the transcripts. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in five themes of contributions and challenges environmental sustainability, community empowerment, economic challenges and opportunities, health and well-being, and policy and advocacy and six themes of coping strategies networking and collaboration, innovation and adaptation, education and outreach, resilience and perseverance, personal well-being practices, and mentorship and support systems Three themes emerged about the intermediary process between experiencing challenges and employing coping strategies: perceptions, reactions, consequences, and impact of the challenges experienced. It is an organizational framework to illustrate the connection between the challenges faced, intermediary processes, and coping strategies.

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of variables across the dataset, providing a visual representation of the key thematic areas and participant characteristics. This visualization helps highlight the diversity and relative frequency of the themes explored.

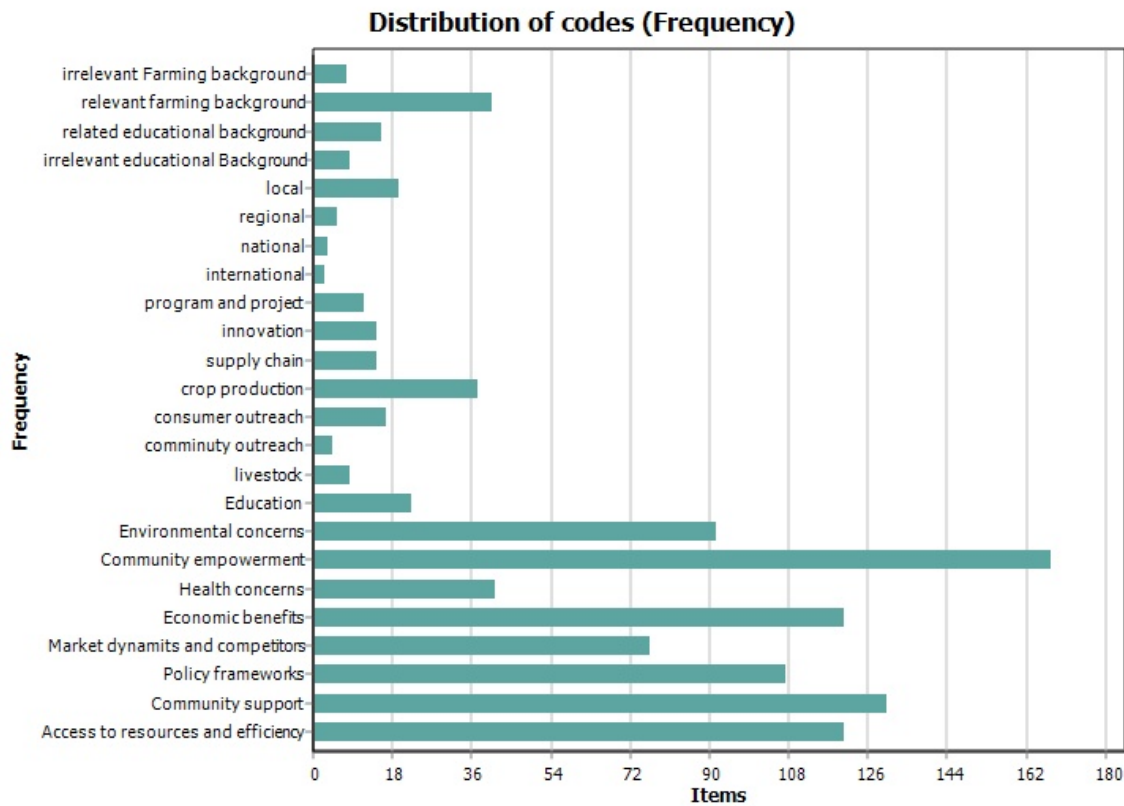


Figure 4: Distribution of Codes

Table 3 presents the distribution of variables within the dataset, offering a quantitative snapshot of the key characteristics and patterns identified through the qualitative analysis. This table highlights how these variables interconnect to support the study's overall findings

| Themes | Subthemes | Interpretive Description |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Entrepreneur Identification | Relevant Farming Background | Participants with prior farming experience directly influencing their current ventures. |

| Themes | Subthemes | Interpretive Description |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| | Irrelevant Farming Background | Participants whose previous farming experience was unrelated to their present activities. |
| | Related Educational Background | Participants with formal education relevant to agriculture or entrepreneurship. |
| | Irrelevant Educational Background | Participants with unrelated educational backgrounds, showing diverse entry points. |
| Initiative Type – Scope | Local | Ventures focused on serving nearby communities or local markets. |
| | Regional | Initiatives extending to neighboring or provincial areas. |
| | National | Few initiatives aiming for broader national presence. |
| | International | Rare cases with global or cross-border engagement. |
| Initiative Type – Sector | Program and Project | Efforts structured as time-bound programs or development projects. |
| | Innovation | Emphasis on new methods, tools, or ideas in agricultural practice. |
| | Supply Chain | Focus on improving distribution, logistics, or local food systems. |

| Themes | Subthemes | Interpretive Description |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| | Crop Production | Primary attention to cultivation and sustainable crop management. |
| | Consumer Outreach | Strategies to educate or engage directly with consumers. |
| | Community Outreach | Broader engagement beyond customers, including public education and awareness. |
| | Livestock | Involvement in ethical and sustainable animal husbandry. |
| | Education | Knowledge-sharing through training, mentoring, or formal programs. |
| Motivations | Environmental Concerns | Actions driven by commitment to sustainability and ecological protection. |
| | Community Empowerment | Desire to uplift and engage local communities through entrepreneurship. |
| | Health Concerns | Motivations related to safe, healthy food systems and public well-being. |
| | Economic Benefits | Intentions to create livelihoods and demonstrate the viability of purpose-driven ventures. |
| Influencing Factors | Market Dynamics and Competitors | Strategies shaped by competitive conditions and shifting demand. |

| Themes | Subthemes | Interpretive Description |
|--------|------------------------------------|--|
| | Policy Frameworks | Regulatory environments affecting decisions and growth potential. |
| | Community Support | Influence of local networks, trust, and social capital. |
| | Access to Resources and Efficiency | Availability of tools, land, labor, and systems enabling or constraining operations. |

Table 3: Qualitative Data Analysis Results

4.3.1 Empowerment Through Entrepreneurial Action

The theme of empowerment emerged strongly in the narratives of female social entrepreneurs, particularly in how they used their work to build autonomy, confidence, and community agency. These women often framed their entrepreneurship not merely as an economic activity but as a vehicle for social transformation. Empowerment, in this context, was both individual and collective, shaped by intentional actions that challenged structural inequalities and cultivated new possibilities for themselves and others.

A notable example is the CSA bicycle delivery model initiated by Collazo-Reyes, which not only addressed environmental sustainability but also improved access to fresh produce in underserved neighborhoods. By using bicycles, she reduced carbon emissions and engaged local youth in meaningful work, demonstrating how small-scale logistics innovations can create social and environmental value simultaneously .

In another case, Nancy Meyer, a long-time organic farmer and educator, established a mentorship program for young women interested in sustainable agriculture. Her farm served as a learning site where interns gained practical knowledge and leadership

skills, empowering them to start their own farming initiatives or take on community roles in food education.

Kimes-Ward similarly transformed a vacant lot into a neighborhood farm, fostering food security and engaging community members through workshops and events. Her approach went beyond food production; it was a deliberate act of reclaiming space for community resilience and education. By organizing “harvest festivals” and garden training for single mothers, she directly supported women’s empowerment and social inclusion.

These examples reveal how empowerment is not merely an outcome but an ongoing process embedded in the daily work and creative problem-solving of female social entrepreneurs. Their initiatives aligned economic activity with care work, ecological responsibility, and community-building, reinforcing feminist perspectives on entrepreneurship that emphasize relational and values-driven practices.

By showcasing these tangible, grounded actions, this study extends existing theories of social entrepreneurship and highlights how empowerment is experienced and enacted through practice, particularly by women working at the intersection of environmental and social justice.

4.4 Qualitative Data Analysis Results

Our thematic analysis of the interviews identified several key themes and subthemes that are instrumental in understanding the landscape of social entrepreneurship in the organic agriculture sector. Here is a detailed breakdown:

4.4.1 Environmental Sustainability

Nancy Gammons reflects on her organic farming journey, inspired by early environmental literature: "I became a hippie in the sixties, I found the Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening by Robert Rodale and fell in love with it." Gammons. Dee Harley emphasizes resilience and realism in agricultural practices: "It’s what it is. Things like this

happen all the time, and it's pointless sheltering people" (Harley). These accounts highlight a foundational commitment to environmental sustainability, seamlessly leading into community empowerment efforts.

Transition to Community Empowerment: The individual ecological commitments of Gammons and Harley extend naturally to their community-oriented initiatives, illustrating how personal sustainability practices underpin broader community involvement and education.

the environmental sustainability practices identified in this study strongly align with agroecological theory, which emphasizes managing farming systems through ecological principles such as biodiversity conservation, soil health, and minimal chemical inputs (Dagoudo et al., 2023). Female entrepreneurs in California's Central Coast exemplify institutional entrepreneurship by innovating within and adapting to fragmented regulatory systems to promote sustainable farming practices (Mair & Marti, 2009). Their efforts demonstrate how local actors operationalize agroecological principles to foster resilience in organic agriculture, even amid policy and market constraints.

4.4.2 Community Empowerment

Amy Courtney champions community empowerment through innovative farming, stating, "Freewheeling Farm is at the forefront of the growing movement towards community renewal, addressing issues of environment, health, and social equity simply and deliciously." Courtney Vance Lawson's work with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) models enhances community connectivity and awareness: "We wanted to bridge the gap between consumers and their food sources" (Lawson Vail CSA 1). **Transition to Economic Challenges:** The integration of farming with community-driven initiatives like

CSA models highlights the economic challenges inherent in maintaining sustainable operations.

The findings on community empowerment resonate with feminist entrepreneurship theory, particularly its focus on relational leadership, social justice, and participatory decision-making (Alexander, 2020; Lyons, 2023). Women's emphasis on education, inclusion, and local economic development reflects how gendered approaches cultivate social capital and community cohesion, supporting institutional theory's view of embedded social networks as critical enablers of entrepreneurial success (Hudcová et al., 2018). This intersection of gender and institutional embeddedness underscores the transformative potential of female-led social enterprises in fostering community resilience.

4.4.3 Economic Challenges

Dee Harley discusses the economic balancing act required to maintain a farm and manage visitor expectations: "It keeps the farm alive. It's our income that is keeping the farm alive" (Harley) Amy Courtney also addresses the financial challenges of expanding her CSA operation: "The financial planning required to sustain growth is significant" (Courtney) Transition to Policy Advocacy: The economic challenges encountered by these community-centric initiatives naturally lead to engagements in policy advocacy as farmers seek to influence policies that impact their livelihoods and sustainability.

Female entrepreneurs' active engagement in policy advocacy highlights their role as institutional entrepreneurs, challenging and reshaping existing regulatory frameworks to support organic agriculture (Mair & Marti, 2009). This reflects feminist critiques of institutional exclusion and the need for gender-sensitive policy design (Shinbrot et al., 2019). By navigating complex institutional landscapes, these women enact systemic

change that facilitates more equitable and sustainable agricultural practices, showcasing the power of gendered leadership in institutional transformation.

4.4.4 Policy Advocacy

Dee Harley's discussions about the realities of farm life advocate for policies that support realistic and sustainable farming practices: "We need policies that reflect the true challenges of farming" (Harley) these efforts are crucial for creating a supportive framework that enables sustainable farms to thrive and adapt to changing economic and environmental conditions.

Transition to Innovation and Adaptation: The necessity for policy changes and ongoing economic sustainability challenges underscores the need for continuous innovation and adaptation in agricultural practices.

The adaptive strategies and innovations employed by female social entrepreneurs correspond to agroecological theory's focus on local knowledge and ecological adaptation (Haedicke, 2012), as well as feminist perspectives emphasizing resilience and creativity amid structural constraints (Tillmar, 2009). Their ability to integrate ecological sustainability with social missions illustrates the intersectionality of environmental, economic, and gendered concerns within social entrepreneurship, advancing a nuanced understanding of innovation in sustainable agriculture.

4.4.5 Innovation and Adaptation

Innovation is evident in Amy Courtney's approach to minimizing environmental impacts by using bicycles for CSA deliveries: "We're reducing our carbon footprint by delivering CSA shares via bicycle" (Courtney). Dee Harley adapts farm operations to accommodate growing visitor numbers, illustrating how innovations help manage both public interactions

and operational demands: "Adapting to increased public interest has been key to maintaining our operational efficiency" (Harley).

4.5 Entrepreneurial Identification: Professional and Educational

4.5.1 Backgrounds

This theme explores how the personal and educational experiences of women social entrepreneurs have influenced their engagement in organic agriculture. The findings show that participants entered the field from a wide range of life paths and professional trajectories, suggesting the richness and diversity of experiences that inform their entrepreneurial efforts.

Some participants described having farming backgrounds that were not directly aligned with organic agriculture. These experiences, while not always directly applicable to their current practices, provided familiarity with rural life, food systems, or land stewardship, which helped shape their values and motivation. Others came from families or communities where farming knowledge—especially around sustainability—was deeply embedded and later transferred into their entrepreneurial initiatives. These women often spoke of building upon traditional knowledge while integrating modern ecological practices.

In terms of education, several participants had formal training or academic qualifications in areas such as environmental science, sustainable agriculture, or business management. These backgrounds helped them navigate the technical, operational, or policy dimensions of their enterprises. Conversely, others entered the field with educational experiences unrelated to agriculture, but they leveraged skills such as marketing, education, or social work to build contextually grounded and socially impactful ventures. This mix of relevant and non-traditional pathways reflects the multidimensional nature of social entrepreneurship in organic agriculture.

4.5.2 Entrepreneurial Identification: Scope and Sectoral Focus Analysis

This theme outlines how the participants conceptualized and structured their initiatives, both in terms of geographic scope and sectoral orientation. The diversity observed highlights the adaptive and responsive nature of these enterprises.

Scope of Initiatives

Many of the ventures operate at a local scale, rooted in community-based food systems and tailored to specific regional needs. These local initiatives prioritize trust-building, sustainability, and direct relationships with consumers. Some participants described efforts to scale regionally, often through partnerships, farmer networks, or cooperative models. A few noted aspirations or existing operations at national or international levels, though such ventures were typically resource-intensive and less common. These cases illustrate both the potential and limitations of scaling in organic social entrepreneurship.

Sectoral Orientation

The entrepreneurial initiatives reflect a wide spectrum of sectoral emphases. Crop production was the most frequently discussed, often involving organic market gardening, CSA (community-supported agriculture) systems, or small-scale polyculture farming. Some participants described innovative approaches—such as closed-loop systems, regenerative practices, or biodiversity-enhancing techniques—as central to their identity as social entrepreneurs.

Others focused on the development of tailored programs and projects that addressed local community needs, including food access, youth education, and women's empowerment. Innovations in product development, business models, or agricultural technologies were also highlighted, demonstrating the role of creative problem-solving in overcoming structural barriers.

Supply chain improvements emerged as a significant area of concern and innovation. Several entrepreneurs described how they restructured logistics and distribution to prioritize environmental sustainability and community resilience. Direct consumer outreach was also emphasized, especially among those seeking to educate buyers on the social and ecological value of their products.

Educational activities were an integral part of many ventures, ranging from informal knowledge-sharing to structured workshops and training programs. Some participants also engaged in sustainable livestock practices, often as part of integrated farm systems. Though less common, broader community outreach efforts and advocacy were part of the work of some entrepreneurs, reflecting their commitment to systemic change.

4.6 Comparative Reflections

While the experiences of female social entrepreneurs in California's Central Coast are shaped by region-specific socio-political and regulatory dynamics, they echo broader global patterns observed in organic agricultural entrepreneurship. Comparative insights from Sweden and India reveal both shared values and contextual divergences in how women-led initiatives navigate sustainability and institutional engagement.

For example, Larsson (2012) studied organic entrepreneurs in Järna, Sweden, and found that women entrepreneurs similarly employed community-based models to promote sustainable agriculture and social values. Their efforts were well-supported by Sweden's cohesive institutional frameworks, including public funding, robust organic certification systems, and a national policy commitment to ecological sustainability. In contrast, California's female entrepreneurs faced a fragmented regulatory landscape, requiring them to fill institutional voids through grassroots advocacy, informal networks, and adaptive leadership. While both groups engaged in participatory practices and emphasized environmental ethics, the institutional environment in Sweden provided more consistent external reinforcement. A similar contrast can be seen in the case of India. Datta and Gailey (2012) examined a women's agricultural cooperative that promoted organic practices and rural empowerment through social entrepreneurship. Like their

Californian counterparts, these women addressed both ecological and social goals under conditions of limited access to capital and formal policy support. However, the Indian model relied heavily on collectivist structures and self-help networks, shaped by different socio-economic constraints and a deeper reliance on informal economies. The Californian women, operating in a more market-driven context, had greater exposure to entrepreneurial independence but also faced isolation in policy influence and market integration.

These comparative insights affirm that while gendered sustainability strategies may converge across geographies through community empowerment, agroecological practices, and relational leadership, the effectiveness of such strategies is deeply influenced by local policy, institutional coherence, and cultural norms. Recognizing these variations is essential for designing context-responsive support systems for female social entrepreneurs globally.

Table 3 provides a comparative overview of female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture across California, Sweden, and India. This comparative lens helps contextualize the findings and reveals cross-regional patterns and differences in strategies and challenges.

| Theme | This Study (California) | Comparative Case (Author/Region) | Key Similarities and Differences |
|--------------------------|--|---|---|
| Community Engagement | Strong local involvement via CSA and education | Larsson (2012), Sweden | Both value trust-based networks; Sweden has stronger policy support |
| Sustainability Practices | Crop rotation, composting, biodiversity, and innovation driven by need | Larsson & Granstedt (2010), Reganold & Wachter (2016) | Similar to California, the state is driven more by necessity |

| Theme | This Study (California) | Comparative Case (Author/Region) | Key Similarities and Differences |
|-----------------------------|--|--|---|
| Policy Navigation | High advocacy due to fragmented regulations | Youngberg & DeMuth (2013), Haedicke (2012) | California has more local engagement; national studies are less detailed |
| Entrepreneurial Model | Mostly individual or small partnerships | Johansen (2014), Bembenek (2016) | Others focus on cooperatives; California highlights solo/hybrid entrepreneurs |
| Empowerment through Farming | Informal leadership, mentorship, and economic agency | Nath & Athinuwat (2021), Thorat (2018) | Similar outcomes, different funding/support models |
| Market Access & Viability | Niche marketing, premium pricing | Bassi et al. (2016), Migliore (2015) | Both face market pressures; California relies on branding and direct sales |
| Institutional Support | Limited formal support; community-driven advocacy | Kerlin (2010), Mair & Marti (2009) | California in institutional voids; others with stronger public support |

Table 4: *Comparative Overview of Female Social Entrepreneurs in Organic Agriculture across California, Sweden, and India*

Synthesis and Theoretical Contribution

This comparative analysis reinforces the broader applicability of the conceptual model developed in this thesis, while also highlighting its flexibility across different contexts. It confirms that female social entrepreneurs frequently function as institutional entrepreneurs filling governance gaps, adapting agroecological knowledge, and mobilizing community resources but how they do so varies significantly depending on the socio-political and economic environment. California's case contributes to the literature by highlighting an individualized, advocacy-driven model of socially embedded entrepreneurship within a high-value, market-regulated agricultural system. These comparative insights underscore the importance of contextual nuance in designing policy and support mechanisms for sustainable female entrepreneurship

4.7 Motivations

Understanding the driving forces behind the participants' entrepreneurial initiatives provides important insights into their values, goals, and priorities.

A central motivational force expressed by many participants was **environmental concern**. These women articulated a deep commitment to ecological stewardship, often citing environmental degradation and climate change as catalysts for adopting organic and regenerative farming practices. Their ventures were frequently framed as both a response to and a remedy for ecological crises.

Equally prominent was the motivation of **community empowerment**. Many participants emphasized a desire to strengthen local food systems, support marginalized populations, and build community resilience. Their work was not solely about producing food—it was about fostering agency, dignity, and collective well-being within their communities.

Health-related motivations were also significant. Participants described how concerns over food safety, nutrition, and the health impacts of chemical agriculture influenced their decision to pursue organic farming. In some cases, personal or family health experiences played a role in shaping their entrepreneurial paths.

Lastly, participants frequently acknowledged **economic motivations**, particularly the importance of creating sustainable livelihoods for themselves and others. While profit was not the primary driver, many women saw their ventures as a means of achieving financial independence, supporting local economies, and proving that ethical, eco-conscious enterprises can also be economically viable.

4.8 Influencing Factors

Several key factors were found to shape the strategic and operational decisions of the women social entrepreneurs in this study.

Market dynamics and competition played an important role in shaping business strategies. Participants spoke of navigating competitive pressures, price sensitivity, and

consumer expectations—especially within mainstream agricultural systems dominated by large-scale producers and distributors. These challenges often inspired innovation and differentiation through values-based branding, direct-to-consumer models, or niche markets.

Policy frameworks emerged as a critical influence. Participants discussed the impact of local and national regulations, access to subsidies or land, and the bureaucracy associated with organic certification. While some found ways to work within or around policy constraints, others viewed policy environments as either enabling or obstructive, depending on how well they aligned with small-scale, sustainable agriculture.

Community support was identified as a foundational pillar of success. Entrepreneurs emphasized the importance of trust, relationships, and shared values within their local networks. This support often came in the form of volunteer labor, informal mentorship, or grassroots promotion, reinforcing the embeddedness of their ventures in local social fabrics.

Access to resources and operational efficiency was another significant theme. Participants highlighted issues such as land access, funding, equipment availability, and logistical infrastructure. These practical concerns shaped decisions about what, where, and how to grow—and often determined whether a venture could be sustained or scaled. Many entrepreneurs expressed a need to be resourceful and adaptive in the face of systemic limitations.

4.9 Interpretative Insights

4.9.1 Personal Motivations: Driving Forces Behind Action

Participants consistently articulated a strong commitment to environmental sustainability, community well-being, and economic resilience as their primary motivations. For many, these motivations were rooted in deeply personal experiences and values. For instance, Nancy Gammons described her initial inspiration as stemming from her connection to

nature and her discovery of early environmental literature. Similarly, Amy Courtney emphasized her desire to reduce her environmental footprint through innovative practices like delivering CSA shares by bicycle, stating, "Every choice we make reflects our commitment to the environment."

These personal motivations align with broader themes in the literature, such as (Larsson & Granstedt, 2010), who identified environmental stewardship as a core driver for social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture. Participants' intrinsic dedication to ecological and social values underscores the transformative potential of personal passion in shaping sustainable business practices.

4.9.2 Navigating Systemic Challenges: Resilience and Adaptation

The participants faced a range of systemic challenges, including limited access to markets, resource constraints, and unsupportive policy frameworks. These challenges often tested their resilience and required innovative problem-solving. For example, Market Access: Dee Harley described the difficulties of balancing profitability with adherence to organic principles, stating, "It's our income that is keeping the farm alive." Policy Barriers: Participants frequently highlighted the need for more supportive regulatory frameworks, with one noting, "We need policies that reflect the real challenges of sustainable farming."

To address these challenges, participants employed adaptive strategies such as forming cooperative networks, engaging in policy advocacy, and leveraging community support. Their ability to persist and innovate in the face of these obstacles reflects the resilience emphasized in studies like (Haedicke, 2012), which explores the intersection of market demands and organic ideals.

4.9.3 Strategies for Sustainability: Innovation and Community Engagement

Innovation emerged as a cornerstone of the participants' strategies for achieving sustainability. From technological solutions like data-driven irrigation to grassroots initiatives such as community-supported agriculture, participants demonstrated a capacity to adapt and innovate. Amy Courtney's CSA delivery system, which utilizes bicycles, exemplifies the integration of sustainability into operational practices. Community engagement also played a pivotal role in the participants' strategies. Initiatives like Vance Lawson's CSA program bridged the gap between consumers and food producers, fostering a sense of connection and trust. These approaches highlight the importance of collaboration and participatory leadership in achieving both economic and environmental goals.

4.9.4 Broader Implications for Organic Agriculture

The participants' narratives offer valuable insights into the broader organic agriculture sector. Their stories reveal the importance of integrating environmental, social, and economic considerations into agricultural practices. By combining innovative techniques with a commitment to community empowerment, these women have created models of sustainable agriculture that are both scalable and impactful. The participants' experiences also underscored the need for systemic support, including: Policy Advocacy: Creating regulatory frameworks that address the unique challenges of sustainable farming.

Resource Accessibility: Ensuring social entrepreneurs have access to the financial and logistical resources necessary to scale their initiatives.

Education and Outreach: Expanding training programs to equip entrepreneurs with the skills needed to navigate complex agricultural landscapes.

4.9.5 Contributions to Narrative Inquiry

This study highlights the rich interplay between personal values, systemic challenges, and strategic innovation in the organic agriculture sector by focusing on the participants' stories. These narratives provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of female social entrepreneurs and offer actionable insights for fostering sustainability and resilience in the industry. In conclusion, the interpretative insights reveal the transformative potential of female social entrepreneurs as change agents in organic agriculture. Their dedication to ecological restoration, community empowerment, and innovative problem-solving is an inspiring model for advancing sustainability in this vital sector.

Table 5 aligns each research objective with the themes that emerged in the oral history analysis, showing clear correspondence between the study's aims and participant narratives

| Research Question / Objective | Key Themes Identified in Findings | Summary of Findings |
|--|--|---|
| RQ1: How do female social entrepreneurs contribute to environmental sustainability within organic agriculture? | Environmental Sustainability, Innovation, Agroecological Knowledge | Used crop rotation, composting, reduced chemicals; innovation driven by limited resources |
| RQ2: How do they empower communities through their entrepreneurial activities? | Community Empowerment, Local Economy, Education, Leadership | Ran CSA programs, workshops, local jobs, and mentoring to boost resilience |
| RQ3: What challenges do female social entrepreneurs face in organic agriculture? | Market & Policy Barriers, Economic Pressure, Resource Limits | Faced financing issues, complex regulations, competition, lack of support |

| Research Question / Objective | Key Themes Identified in Findings | Summary of Findings |
|---|---|--|
| RQ4: What gender-specific strategies do they use to navigate market and regulatory constraints? | Gendered Leadership, Informal Networks, Resilience, Community Focus | Used collaboration, flexible leadership, and community partnerships |
| RQ5: How do female entrepreneurs advocate for agricultural policy and sustainability? | Policy Advocacy, Civic Engagement, Organizational Roles | Participated in boards, coalitions, and storytelling to influence policies |

Table 5: Alignment of Research Questions with Thematic Findings and Empirical Insights

This mapping reinforces the internal validity of the study and supports the structure of the discussion in Chapter 5.

The alignment presented in the table confirms that the study’s findings robustly address all five research questions, offering both theoretical and practical contributions. The themes identified—ranging from environmental sustainability practices and community empowerment strategies to policy advocacy and gender-responsive innovation—provide nuanced, context-rich answers to the study’s core objectives. Furthermore, the alignment highlights the interconnected nature of the findings, suggesting that female social entrepreneurs do not merely operate within isolated domains (e.g., environment or economy), but rather serve as integrative actors shaping multi-dimensional change. This synthesis reinforces the value of the oral history approach in capturing complexity and affirms the broader relevance of the study’s conceptual model for future research and policy development in gendered, sustainable entrepreneurship. The findings presented in this study align closely with the research objectives and collectively advance the overarching aim of the thesis: to examine the multifaceted contributions of female social entrepreneurs to environmental sustainability and community empowerment within

California's organic agriculture sector. Through thematic analysis of oral histories, the study demonstrates that these women implement agroecological practices, engage in community-based initiatives, and act as change agents in regulatory and policy spaces. Their use of gender-responsive strategies—such as participatory leadership, informal support networks, and adaptive innovation—enables them to overcome entrenched structural barriers and promote sustainability at both ecological and social levels.

However, despite these achievements, several critical gaps remain that warrant further investigation. The current study is geographically bound to California's Central Coast and is based on retrospective oral histories, which, while rich in narrative depth, may not capture emerging trends or evolving policy landscapes in real time. Additionally, the absence of a longitudinal or mixed-methods component limits the ability to quantify long-term economic impacts or compare outcomes across different demographic or geographic groups. Future research could extend this work by employing comparative case studies across multiple regions, integrating quantitative measures of impact (e.g., yield data, economic returns, or policy outcomes), and exploring intersectional dimensions of identity, including race, immigration status, and educational background, that shape entrepreneurial experiences and influence sustainability outcomes.

4.10 Summary

This chapter presented the key findings of the study, offering a comprehensive understanding of the contributions, challenges, and strategies of female social entrepreneurs in California's organic agriculture sector. Through a narrative analysis of seventeen oral histories, six major themes emerged: environmental sustainability,

community empowerment, market and policy challenges, innovation and adaptation, gendered leadership strategies, and influencing factors for success.

Participants demonstrated a deep commitment to **environmental sustainability**, integrating agroecological practices such as composting, biodiversity preservation, and carbon-conscious logistics into their farming operations. Simultaneously, their efforts toward **community empowerment**—including CSA programs, mentorship, education, and inclusive hiring—highlight their relational leadership and values-driven entrepreneurial approaches.

The study also revealed persistent **challenges**, including limited market access, regulatory burdens, and resource constraints. Despite these, participants employed **innovative and adaptive strategies**, such as informal networks, collaborative models, and policy advocacy, to navigate institutional voids. These practices exemplify the characteristics of **institutional entrepreneurship**, where women reshape local norms and systems from the grassroots level.

The chapter offered **theoretical contributions** to feminist entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, and institutional theory by synthesizing insights across these domains. It illustrated how gendered experiences shape entrepreneurial strategies and how personal motivations (e.g., environmental concern, community welfare, and health) drive transformative action.

A cross-case comparison with Sweden and India revealed contextual variations in institutional support, but also affirmed global commonalities in women-led agroecological initiatives. The findings support the conceptual model proposed in Chapter 3 and align closely with the study's five research questions, demonstrating that female social

entrepreneurs are not only producers and educators but also **systemic change agents** who integrate ecological, economic, and social missions.

5. Chapter 5: Discussion/Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter details the key findings from the oral history data, highlighting themes such as environmental innovation, community empowerment, market barriers, and policy advocacy.

5.1 Environmental Impact

Participants consistently implemented sustainable farming practices such as composting, cover cropping, and biodiversity conservation. For example, one participant noted, “We started using compost and cover crops when we noticed the soil was degrading—it made a real difference in our yields and water retention.” These practices

not only enhanced soil quality and crop resilience but also reduced reliance on synthetic inputs.

This evidence shows how participants contribute to ecological sustainability, directly answering Research Question 1 regarding their environmental influence. Their choices reflect a commitment to long-term environmental stewardship rooted in practical experience and ecological awareness.

5.2 Community Empowerment

Many participants emphasized their role in improving food access and supporting local education. One noted, “Our CSA program allowed us to reach low-income families and educate children about healthy food.” Through initiatives like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and farm-based learning programs, female entrepreneurs fostered food justice, local knowledge sharing, and inclusive community development.

These findings demonstrate how female entrepreneurs foster community empowerment, particularly by linking organic farming with food education and access. This directly addresses the second dimension of Research Question 1.

5.3 Navigating Barriers

A dominant theme in the narratives was the persistence of structural and gender-based barriers. Participants described difficulties accessing land, receiving funding, and being taken seriously in agricultural spaces. As one participant explained, “Being a woman in this field, you often get overlooked, especially when seeking funding or land access.”

However, these women also described strategies for overcoming such challenges. Peer networks, informal knowledge exchange, and community organizing played significant roles in enabling their success. This is especially evident in quotes like, “We learned by doing and supporting one another.”

These narratives illustrate the adaptive strategies employed by women in response to systemic and institutional barriers, directly answering Research Question 2.

5.4 Role of Policy Advocacy

Several participants highlighted their engagement with policy systems, expressing frustration with top-down regulations that did not accommodate small-scale or organic farmers. One participant remarked, “I wish policymakers would understand that one-size-fits-all solutions don’t work for us small-scale farmers.” Others engaged in local food policy councils or advocacy coalitions.

This reinforces the notion that these women are not only passive actors but active participants in shaping the institutional landscape—further deepening the response to Research Question 2.

5.5 Addressing the Research Questions

This chapter presented evidence aligned with the study’s core research questions. Female social entrepreneurs influenced sustainable agriculture through environmentally conscious practices such as soil regeneration and biodiversity protection. They also empowered their communities by building local food systems and fostering education. Structural barriers—including gender bias, regulatory hurdles, and economic constraints—were met with adaptive strategies and collective advocacy. Together, these findings offer a comprehensive answer to how these women navigate and shape the organic agriculture sector on California’s Central Coast.

5.6 Restate the Problem and Objectives

This thesis examines the role of female social entrepreneurs in advancing environmental sustainability and community empowerment within the organic agriculture sector in California's Central Coast. The need for sustainable agricultural practices has become increasingly important as global challenges like food security and climate change intensify (Reganold & Wachter, 2016). Organic agriculture, with its focus on environmental stewardship, offers a viable solution to these challenges, but its implementation is often hindered by market dynamics, regulatory barriers, and the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (Haedicke, 2012; Bassi et al., 2016).

5.7 Research Problem

Despite their crucial contributions, female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture face significant challenges, including limited access to resources, market pressures, and gendered barriers within the agricultural industry. As noted by Allen and Kovach (2000), while organic agriculture has grown significantly—especially in California’s Central Coast—the contributions of female entrepreneurs remain underexplored. This research addresses the gap in understanding the specific role of women in driving sustainable agricultural practices and empowering local communities, which has not been adequately documented in previous studies (Haedicke, 2012; Reganold & Wachter, 2016).

5.8 Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

To explore the contributions of female social entrepreneurs to the organic agriculture sector, focusing on their role in integrating sustainable farming practices with community-driven economic and environmental development (Bassi et al., 2016).

To identify and analyze the challenges these entrepreneurs face, particularly related to gender-specific barriers and the structural limitations within the organic agriculture sector (Haedicke, 2012; Tillmar, 2009).

To assess the impact of these entrepreneurs’ initiatives on environmental sustainability and community empowerment, as well as their influence on policy advocacy for organic farming (Reganold & Wachter, 2016).

To propose actionable recommendations for supporting female entrepreneurs in organic agriculture, including policy frameworks that address the unique barriers they encounter and encourage broader participation (Bassi et al., 2016).

By revisiting these research objectives and examining the challenges faced by female social entrepreneurs, this chapter synthesizes the findings with broader debates on gender, social entrepreneurship, and sustainable development—contributing to a more

comprehensive understanding of the role of women in shaping the future of organic agriculture.

5.9 Summarize Key Findings

This research has yielded several key insights regarding the role of female social entrepreneurs in shaping the organic agriculture sector on California's Central Coast, particularly in their contributions to sustainability, community empowerment, and innovation. The study reveals that these entrepreneurs are pivotal change agents, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in the face of significant systemic challenges.

- A. **Environmental Sustainability:** A major finding of the study is the strong commitment of female social entrepreneurs to promoting environmental sustainability. Many participants integrated sustainable farming practices such as crop rotation, organic pest management, and composting. Their efforts to reduce chemical dependency, enhance soil health, and promote biodiversity align with broader sustainability goals in the agricultural sector (Allen & Kovach, 2000; Bassi et al., 2016).
- B. **Community Empowerment:** The findings highlight the role of female social entrepreneurs in fostering community empowerment through initiatives like Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, educational workshops, and local food networks. These initiatives have created opportunities for marginalized groups, including women, minorities, and low-income families (Farnworth & Hutchings, 2009)
- C. **Market and Policy Challenges:** The research also emphasizes the market access challenges, regulatory barriers, and financial constraints faced by these women.

Limited access to resources and competitive market dynamics were identified as significant hurdles. Participants stressed the need for more supportive policies to enable sustainable farming practices, improve operational efficiencies, and reduce certification costs (Bassi et al., 2016).

D. Innovation and Adaptation: Female social entrepreneurs in this study demonstrated a strong capacity for innovation, adopting eco-friendly farming techniques and engaging in creative problem-solving. Examples included using bicycles for CSA deliveries and integrating technology like data-driven irrigation systems to optimize resource use. These innovations not only reduced environmental impact but also fostered deeper community connections (Allen & Kovach, 2000).

5.10 Discussion of Findings

This study sheds light on the role of female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture, specifically on California's Central Coast. The findings underscore the importance of environmental sustainability, community empowerment, market challenges, and innovation as significant aspects of their entrepreneurial endeavors.

The strong commitment to environmental sustainability found among participants aligns with previous studies that emphasize the ecological advantages of organic farming practices. These women utilized innovative agricultural methods, such as crop rotation, organic pest management, and composting, to improve soil health and biodiversity (Larsson & Granstedt, 2010; Reganold & Wachter, 2016). Their approach is consistent with the broader literature advocating for practices that minimize environmental degradation while promoting biodiversity. The participants' efforts demonstrate a tangible

commitment to ecological preservation and highlight their role in addressing global environmental challenges.

In terms of community empowerment, the participants in this study demonstrated the significant influence of women-led initiatives in fostering local economic resilience. These women actively engaged in initiatives such as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, workshops, and local food networks, echoing Johansen's (2014) assertion that local networks are essential for fostering social cohesion. By providing resources and opportunities to marginalized groups, they not only empowered their communities but also ensured that the benefits of organic farming reached a wider segment of the population. This finding resonates with Bembenek et al. (2016), who emphasized the dual role of social entrepreneurship in promoting economic development while also fostering inclusivity.

However, as highlighted by Haedicke (2012), the study also revealed significant barriers related to market access and regulatory frameworks. The entrepreneurs faced challenges in scaling their operations due to the competitive dynamics within the market and the complex regulatory environment. These obstacles hindered their growth, a finding consistent with existing literature on the tensions between organic farming ideals and the economic pressures of market expansion. Despite these challenges, the entrepreneurs displayed remarkable resilience and adaptability, often employing innovative strategies to overcome these barriers, such as the use of technology to manage resources and advocate for more supportive policies.

One of the most noteworthy contributions of this study is its exploration of the intersection of innovation and community engagement. Participants adopted forward-thinking

approaches, such as using bicycles for CSA deliveries to reduce their carbon footprint and leveraging mobile applications for resource management. These innovative solutions are crucial in creating more sustainable agricultural models, reflecting a broader trend in the industry toward digital and environmentally conscious practices (Reganold & Wachter, 2016).

Additionally, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting the specific challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in a traditionally male-dominated field. The gender-specific strategies employed by the women in this study—such as leveraging social capital and fostering inclusive networks—underscore the importance of considering gender when studying entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector. These findings build on Aquino et al. (2018), who emphasize that such strategies deviate from the commercially driven approaches typically discussed in male-dominated entrepreneurial studies, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of how gender influences entrepreneurial practices in organic agriculture.

This study contributes to three theoretical domains: feminist entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, and institutional theory. These contributions are visually synthesized in Figure 5, which illustrates how feminist entrepreneurship, agroecological sustainability, and institutional theory intersect within the context of female social entrepreneurship in organic agriculture. This visualization underscores the study's integrative and multi-dimensional theoretical framework..

Theoretical Contributions of This Study to Feminist Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Agriculture, and Institutional Theory

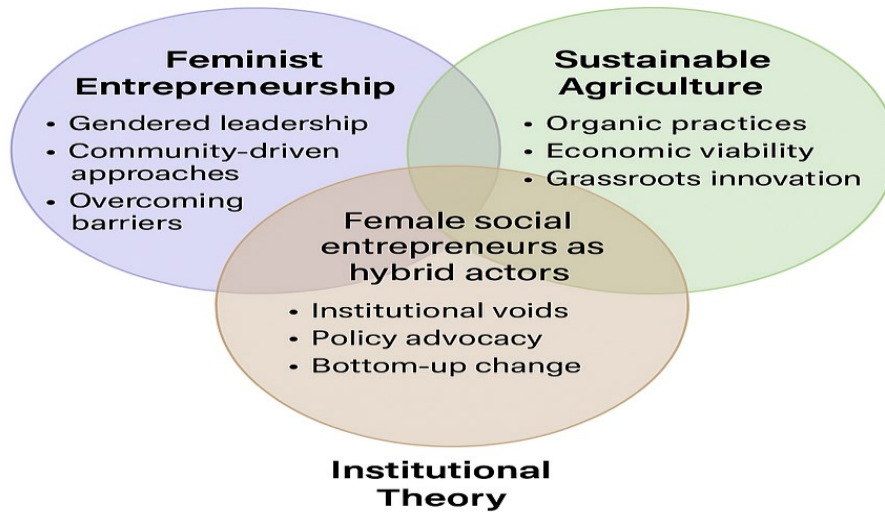


Figure 5: Theoretical Contributions of This Study to Feminist Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Agriculture, and Institutional Theory

Implications for Theoretical Frameworks and Practical Applications

The findings from this study hold significant implications for both theoretical frameworks and practical applications. From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the literature on social entrepreneurship by illustrating how female entrepreneurs integrate environmental, social, and economic goals within their business models. It also extends the work of scholars like (Larsson, 2012) by showing that female entrepreneurs in organic agriculture not only face unique challenges but also utilize innovative strategies that blend traditional agricultural knowledge with modern technologies.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers seeking to create more supportive environments for female entrepreneurs. The need for more inclusive regulatory frameworks and resource access is crucial in enabling these entrepreneurs to scale their ventures and overcome systemic barriers. Additionally, the

study emphasizes the importance of community engagement and collaboration in fostering sustainability, offering practical recommendations for how these entrepreneurs can continue to drive positive changes in their communities.

In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of the transformative potential of female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture, particularly in fostering sustainability and community empowerment. The innovative strategies and resilience demonstrated by these women not only serve as a model for other entrepreneurs but also provide actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners working to create more inclusive and sustainable agricultural systems.

5.10.1 Intersectionality in Sustainable Female Entrepreneurship

While gender remains the primary analytical lens in this study, a comprehensive understanding of female social entrepreneurship in organic agriculture necessitates an intersectional approach that considers the overlapping influences of race, class, immigration status, and other social identities. Intersectionality, a framework developed by Crenshaw (1989), posits that systems of power and oppression do not operate independently but intersect to produce unique and compounded experiences of privilege and marginalization. Applying this framework helps avoid homogenizing women's experiences and sheds light on the diverse realities faced by female entrepreneurs in sustainable agriculture.

Several oral histories in this study reveal intersectional dimensions of participants' identities, particularly regarding immigrant status, ethno-racial background, and economic marginalization. Some women described themselves as first-generation farmers, often lacking inherited land or established agricultural lineage. Others emphasized how cultural

background and language barriers limited their access to financial capital, land tenure, and institutional legitimacy. These experiences demonstrate how race and class compound structural challenges, intensifying obstacles related to certification, market entry, and policy advocacy.

Existing research supports these insights. Sachs et al. (2016) and White (2017) document the exclusion of women of color and immigrant women from mainstream leadership narratives in sustainable agriculture, despite their critical roles in labor and community organizing. Similarly, Harrison (2022) discusses the “double invisibility” experienced by Latina farmworkers and entrepreneurs in California, who are marginalized both as women and as non-white producers within sustainability discourse and market branding. Such intersectional dynamics remain underexplored in the broader literature, which often centers on white, middle-class entrepreneurial experiences.

Despite the constraints of secondary data, this study highlights the significant yet under-articulated role of intersectionality in shaping female social entrepreneurs’ strategies and resilience. This gap calls for future research to apply intersectional methodologies, including primary data collection with more diverse participants and culturally responsive analytical frameworks. Incorporating such approaches is vital for designing inclusive policies that fully recognize and support the leadership of all women in organic farming systems.

5.11 Address the Research Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the role of female social entrepreneurs in advancing environmental sustainability and community empowerment in organic

agriculture, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that could impact the validity and generalizability of the findings.

5.11.1 Sample Size and Scope

The study focused on a relatively small sample of seventeen female social entrepreneurs in California's Central Coast. While these participants were carefully selected to provide in-depth insights into the organic agriculture sector, the findings may not fully represent the broader population of female social entrepreneurs across other regions or agricultural contexts. The small sample size, along with the focus on a specific geographic area, limits the generalizability of the results. Future research could address this limitation by expanding the sample to include a more diverse range of regions and sectors, thereby enhancing the representativeness of the findings.

5.11.2 Regional Focus

This study is geographically confined to California's Central Coast, a region known for its progressive agricultural policies and rich biodiversity, which may not reflect the challenges or opportunities faced by female entrepreneurs in other areas, particularly those with different environmental, economic, or cultural conditions. The findings may therefore be context-specific, and caution should be exercised when applying these results to other regions with distinct agricultural or socioeconomic characteristics. Future studies could include comparisons between different regions to examine how varying environmental and policy landscapes influence female entrepreneurs' strategies and success in the organic agriculture sector.

5.11.4 Self-Reported Data

As with many qualitative studies, the data collected through oral history interviews are self-reported, meaning that the participants' accounts may be influenced by their personal perceptions, memories, and biases. This could potentially lead to overstatements or understatements of certain aspects of their entrepreneurial experiences. While efforts were made to ensure the accuracy of the data by reviewing and confirming the transcriptions with participants, the subjective nature of self-reported data remains a limitation. Future studies could incorporate observational methods or external data sources to complement the self-reported narratives and reduce reliance on individual perceptions alone.

5.11.5 Lack of Longitudinal Perspective

The study captures a snapshot of the current experiences and challenges of female social entrepreneurs, but it lacks a longitudinal perspective that would allow for an understanding of how these entrepreneurs' strategies and impacts evolve over time. A longitudinal study could provide a more dynamic view of their entrepreneurial trajectories, including how they adapt to changing market conditions, policy shifts, or new challenges. Future research could benefit from a longitudinal design that tracks the progress of these entrepreneurs over several years to assess long-term sustainability and impact.

5.11.6 Gender-Specific Focus

While the focus on female entrepreneurs provides valuable insights into gendered strategies and challenges in the organic agriculture sector, it may overlook the experiences of male entrepreneurs in similar contexts. This study does not compare female entrepreneurs to their male counterparts, which could provide a fuller understanding of the unique aspects of women-led businesses in organic agriculture.

Future research could explore gender comparisons to identify whether and how the strategies, challenges, and impacts differ between male and female entrepreneurs in this field.

5.11.7 Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Despite these limitations, this study provides a rich, nuanced exploration of the contributions and challenges faced by female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture. However, to enhance the generalizability and depth of understanding, future research should aim to include a larger, more diverse sample of participants across different regions, sectors, and demographic groups. Incorporating mixed methods and longitudinal perspectives could also improve the robustness of findings and provide more comprehensive insights into the evolving role of female entrepreneurs in sustainable agriculture. Additionally, comparative studies between male and female entrepreneurs could further illuminate the gendered dimensions of entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector.

5.11.8 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides meaningful insights into the role of female social entrepreneurs in advancing sustainable organic agriculture, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations do not undermine the value of the findings but rather contextualize their scope and point toward fruitful avenues for future research.

Methodological Limitations

This study is based on qualitative oral histories drawn from the Cultivating a Movement archive. While oral history offers rich, contextual, and often emotionally layered narratives that illuminate the lived experiences of entrepreneurial women, it inherently limits

generalizability. The findings presented here are deeply rooted in the specific cultural, geographic, and policy landscape of California's Central Coast and may not reflect broader patterns across different regions or demographic groups.

Moreover, the archival nature of the data meant that participant selection, question framing, and temporal framing were not under the direct control of the researcher, which may have introduced variability in how topics were explored. Additionally, retrospective narratives are susceptible to memory biases and selective storytelling, which, while meaningful, should be interpreted with a reflexive understanding of their narrative construction.

Contextual and Theoretical Limitations

The study's focus on a single geographic context limits its ability to make direct cross-regional or international generalizations. While comparative reflections were introduced in Chapter 5 to bridge this gap, the research design does not include primary data from other countries, which would enable more robust comparative conclusions.

Theoretically, while this study contributes to feminist entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, and institutional theory, the intersectional dimensions—such as race, class, or indigeneity—were not the central focus and thus remain underexplored.

Directions for Future Research

To enhance the transferability and robustness of the findings, future research should consider adopting a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data. Surveys or participatory mapping could complement oral histories by

capturing broader patterns of resource access, market integration, and policy engagement across diverse communities.

Further research could also extend the geographical scope to include comparative case studies from other regions or countries, particularly those with different institutional environments or cultural norms regarding gender and agriculture. In doing so, scholars could deepen our understanding of how context mediates the strategies and outcomes of female-led sustainability ventures.

5.7 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several practical actions and policies can be recommended for stakeholders within the organic agriculture sector, particularly to enhance the role of female social entrepreneurs.

Table 6 outlines policy recommendations targeting specific actors and institutions to advance gender equity, sustainability, and market access in organic agriculture. These recommendations provide actionable pathways for supporting female social entrepreneurs and fostering more inclusive agricultural systems.

| Policy Issue / Goal | Specific Recommendations | Primary Actors / Institutions |
|---|---|--|
| Streamline and Localize Organic Certification | - USDA NOP to authorize Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS). - CDFR to provide certification fee waivers and simplified schemes. - County agricultural offices to host targeted outreach workshops. | USDA National Organic Program, CDFR, County Agricultural Commissioners |
| Expand Targeted Financing and Microgrants | - USDA FSA to extend WFRDP and microloan forgiveness. - GO-Biz to create a Sustainable Women Farmers Fund. - Local economic development offices to offer matched sustainability grants. | USDA Farm Service Agency, GO-Biz, Municipal Economic Development Offices |

| Policy Issue / Goal | Specific Recommendations | Primary Actors / Institutions |
|--|---|--|
| Gender Equity in Extension Services | - UCCE to embed gender-responsive training. - USDA NIFA to fund pilot extension programs co-led by women-led NGOs. - County extension offices to host mentorship and peer workshops. | UCCE, USDA NIFA, County Extension Offices |
| Improve Market Access through Public Procurement | - CA Education and Corrections Departments to prioritize women-led vendors. - Municipalities to support inclusive markets and distribution hubs. - FPPC to reduce vendor access barriers. | CA Dept. of Education, Dept. of Corrections, Municipal Governments, FPPC |
| Support Advocacy and Civic Engagement | - State legislature to establish Women in Sustainable Agriculture Advisory Council. - Food Policy Councils to run advocacy incubators. - USDA OPPE to fund policy fellowships for women agri-entrepreneurs. | State Legislatures, Food Policy Councils, USDA OPPE |
| Enhance Equity-Focused Data and Evaluation | - USDA ERS to collect disaggregated gender/race data. - CA State Auditor to evaluate equity outcomes of programs. - Academic institutions to report qualitative impacts in grants. | USDA ERS, California State Auditor, Universities |

Table 6: Policy recommendations targeting specific actors and institutions to advance gender equity, sustainability, and market access in organic agriculture.

5.7.1 Policy Recommendations

Building on the findings of this study, several actionable policy recommendations are proposed to support and scale the efforts of female social entrepreneurs in organic agriculture. These recommendations target multiple stakeholder groups—local governments, agricultural policy bodies, and civil society organizations—each of which plays a distinct role in shaping the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

1. For Local Governments (Municipal and Regional Authorities)

Improve institutional coordination and support infrastructure: Local governments should streamline and clarify land-use regulations, zoning codes, and organic farming compliance requirements to reduce bureaucratic fragmentation. Establishing “green zones” for urban and peri-urban farming and creating

dedicated municipal liaisons for small-scale agricultural entrepreneurs can improve access and responsiveness.

Facilitate access to community land and spaces: Develop leasing or land-trust programs to enable women-led cooperatives and small-scale farmers to access public land for sustainable agriculture.

Support local procurement and distribution:

Create incentives for public schools, hospitals, and local institutions to purchase food directly from local women-led organic farms through farm-to-institution programs.

2. For Agricultural Policy Bodies

Implement gender-targeted funding programs:

Develop and scale financial tools such as low-interest loans, microgrants, and startup capital earmarked for women in sustainable agriculture. These programs should include simplified application processes and technical assistance support.

Recognize and integrate informal certification systems:

Incorporate Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) into state-level organic certification frameworks to reduce barriers for small-scale producers who cannot afford third-party certification.

Institutionalize support for advocacy and policy participation:

Establish consultative councils or task forces that include female social entrepreneurs, ensuring their voices are embedded in policymaking processes around agriculture, food systems, and sustainability.

3. For Non-Profits, Philanthropic Organizations, and Academic Institutions

Provide tailored training and mentorship:

Fund and deliver gender-sensitive programs on agroecology, leadership, grant writing, and business planning. These should be delivered in accessible formats and languages, particularly for underserved groups.

Support knowledge-sharing platforms:

Develop online and community-based platforms where women entrepreneurs can share experiences, best practices, and collective strategies to strengthen peer networks and institutional visibility.

Fund community-led research and data collection:

Encourage participatory research that centers women's experiences and sustainability practices. This includes funding collaborative projects between academic institutions and women-led initiatives that generate locally relevant data.

5.7.2 Supportive Regulatory Frameworks

It is evident that policy advocacy plays a crucial role in enabling the success of female social entrepreneurs in the organic agriculture sector. As participants frequently noted, there is a need for policies that not only support organic farming but also reduce financial and operational barriers, such as the costs associated with organic certification. Policymakers should focus on creating regulatory frameworks that encourage small-scale farmers to adopt sustainable practices, such as crop rotation and organic pest control, without compromising their economic viability (Bembenek et al., 2016; Shreck et al.,

2006).compromising their economic viability (Shreck et al., 2006); (Bembenek et al., 2016).

5.7.3 Access to Resources and Financial Support

One significant challenge that emerged was the limited access to financial resources for female social entrepreneurs. It is recommended that financial institutions and government bodies establish targeted funding programs, grants, and loans specifically for women entrepreneurs in the agriculture sector. Such initiatives would help reduce the resource gap and support the scaling of sustainable farming practices (Amutha et al., 2024). Additionally, fostering partnerships between social enterprises and larger agricultural organizations could provide the necessary infrastructure to facilitate growth and long-term sustainability (Rezky & Rasto, 2024).

5.7.4 Capacity Building and Training Programs

Educational initiatives that equip female entrepreneurs with the necessary skills to navigate both technical and business aspects of organic farming are vital. Local governments, NGOs, and agricultural extension services should provide specialized training in sustainable farming techniques, business management, and policy navigation to empower women and enhance their entrepreneurial capacity (Farnworth & Hutchings, 2009). This approach could promote long-term sustainability and resilience in organic agriculture.

5.7.5 Community Engagement and Empowerment

As evidenced by the participants, community involvement is pivotal to the success of organic farming initiatives. Female entrepreneurs are encouraged to continue leveraging community-based models, such as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), to foster deeper local connections and promote economic resilience. Expanding these initiatives through broader community outreach programs and educational

collaborations with schools can help raise awareness and cultivate a sustainable consumer base (Amutha et al., 2024).

5.7.6 Future Research Directions

Further research should focus on evaluating the economic impact of social entrepreneurship in organic agriculture, particularly across diverse geographical regions. Quantitative studies assessing the scalability and financial outcomes of female-led social enterprises could yield valuable data to inform policy development and guide resource allocation (Migliore et al., 2015). Additionally, examining gender-specific challenges faced by entrepreneurs in various contexts could offer deeper insights into the broader applicability of these findings.

5.8 Concluding Remarks

This study explored the pivotal role of female social entrepreneurs in advancing organic agriculture, particularly within California's Central Coast, by addressing key research questions related to sustainability, community empowerment, and the challenges associated with market dynamics and policy frameworks. The findings underscore the significant contributions made by these entrepreneurs, especially through innovative agricultural practices and community-oriented initiatives such as Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA). These entrepreneurs not only foster environmental sustainability but also deepen social engagement by connecting consumers directly with producers, thereby enhancing food security and promoting social cohesion (Haedicke, 2012; Johansen, 2014).

The study confirms that women in this sector act as critical change agents. They promote environmental sustainability by implementing organic pest management, crop rotation,

and water conservation—practices that align with the principles of regenerative agriculture and the need to balance ecological health with economic productivity. Simultaneously, these women create inclusive platforms that empower marginalized groups—including women, minorities, and economically disadvantaged communities—through access to organic food and agricultural training. This focus on inclusivity supports the claims of Bassi et al. (2016), who argue that social entrepreneurship is a powerful tool for addressing both environmental and societal challenges.

Despite their substantial contributions, female social entrepreneurs face persistent structural barriers. This study identifies limited access to capital, high organic certification costs, and intense market competition as key obstacles that hinder the scalability and sustainability of women-led ventures. These barriers are consistent with earlier findings by Haedicke (2012), who noted the ways in which financial constraints and institutional inequalities impede women’s participation in the organic agriculture sector. Moreover, the findings underscore the pressing need for supportive policies and institutional mechanisms that can help scale women-led organic initiatives. Regulatory reforms aimed at reducing certification burdens, increasing access to financial support, and providing technical training could significantly enhance the capacity of female entrepreneurs in this field (Larsson & Granstedt, 2010).

The research also highlights the transformative potential of female social entrepreneurs in fostering systemic change within sustainable agriculture. These women not only serve as role models for future generations of agricultural leaders but also provide tangible examples of how entrepreneurship can serve ecological stewardship and economic resilience. Their initiatives align with global development objectives—particularly the

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—in areas such as food security (SDG 2), gender equality (SDG 5), and responsible production and consumption (SDG 12) (United Nations, 2015). By integrating environmental and social dimensions into their business models, these entrepreneurs position themselves as vital actors in global sustainability transitions.

In conclusion, this study offers important insights into the intersection of gender, entrepreneurship, and environmental sustainability. It positions female social entrepreneurs not merely as business owners but as catalysts of community transformation. The findings call upon practitioners and policymakers to cultivate supportive environments that eliminate structural barriers and enable these entrepreneurs to thrive. By fostering inclusive policy frameworks and increasing access to the necessary financial and institutional resources, we can unlock the full potential of female social entrepreneurship in building resilient and sustainable agricultural systems.

5.9 Reflective Insights

Reflecting on the process of this research, I have gained a much deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics between environmental sustainability, community empowerment, and the entrepreneurial drive that fuels female social entrepreneurs. One of the most profound insights from this journey has been observing the resilience of these entrepreneurs. They not only champion sustainable agricultural practices but also take on a dual responsibility—leading the charge in environmental stewardship while simultaneously uplifting their communities. This aligns with the findings of Johansen (2014), who emphasizes the pivotal role of women in integrating social and environmental goals into entrepreneurial activities. The women in this study exemplify this through the creation of educational programs, the development of community networks, and advocacy for policies that support sustainable agriculture and social equity. Despite facing substantial challenges, such as limited access to resources,

regulatory hurdles, and market pressures, they demonstrate remarkable adaptability and leadership, echoing the observations of Bassi et al. (2016), who highlighted the resilience of social entrepreneurs in overcoming systemic barriers.

This research process has also been a pivotal moment in refining my own critical thinking and research methodologies. Throughout this journey, I was challenged to approach the data with a consistently reflexive lens. I found myself questioning my assumptions and examining my biases, which enriched the findings and grounded the conclusions more firmly in the lived experiences of the participants. This iterative process mirrors the methodological approach described by Tillmar (2009), who emphasizes the importance of ongoing reflection in qualitative research to ensure that findings authentically reflect participants' experiences. By taking the time to understand the complexities of their stories, I learned the importance of balancing theoretical insights with real-world application, ensuring that the research was not merely academic but a meaningful representation of authentic experiences in the field.

Analyzing the narratives of these entrepreneurs has also enhanced my understanding of the deeply interconnected nature of community, environment, and entrepreneurship—particularly in the context of organic agriculture. This resonates with Larsson and Granstedt (2010), who argue that sustainable farming practices cannot thrive in isolation; they require robust community support, policy advocacy, and a collective commitment to environmental values. My findings underscore this perspective, showing that female social entrepreneurs not only implement sustainable practices but also actively cultivate the social and policy frameworks that allow such practices to flourish. This has made me more aware of the systemic barriers these entrepreneurs face, and the potential strategies to overcome them—such as collaborative partnerships, improved resource access, and stronger policy support (Haedicke, 2012).

Additionally, this research has illuminated the broader societal role of social entrepreneurs. It has deepened my passion for exploring the intersection of social entrepreneurship and sustainable development. Moving forward, I am particularly interested in further investigating how policy can more effectively support the scaling of

women-led initiatives. Numerous opportunities exist for policy interventions to address funding gaps, educational needs, and market access—challenges that many female social entrepreneurs in agriculture confront. This reflects the insights of Aquino et al. (2018), who emphasize the need for supportive policy environments to enable women in male-dominated sectors to grow and sustain their enterprises. Future research could offer significant contributions by exploring mechanisms to integrate social entrepreneurship more directly into the policy-making process, ensuring that these changemakers are both recognized and supported in driving sustainable transformation.

Finally, as I reflect on the personal growth catalyzed by this research, I recognize that my journey as a researcher has been just as transformative as the stories I have documented. The skills I have developed—critical analysis, empathy for diverse perspectives, and the ability to synthesize complex issues into actionable insights—have shaped me academically and personally. I am now more committed than ever to pursuing future research in social entrepreneurship and sustainability, aiming to contribute to solutions that bridge innovation, environmental conservation, and social justice. This research has solidified my belief that female social entrepreneurs are pivotal to shaping a more sustainable and inclusive future—an insight that aligns with the perspective of Reganold and Wachter (2016), who highlight the transformative potential of women in sustainable agriculture

5.10 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to three interrelated theoretical domains by illuminating the multifaceted role of female social entrepreneurs in advancing sustainable organic agriculture on California's Central Coast. First, from a feminist entrepreneurship perspective, the research highlights how women's leadership, characterized by relationality, inclusivity, and community focus, advances environmental sustainability and social empowerment within a traditionally male-dominated agricultural sector. This

enriches feminist theories of entrepreneurship by foregrounding gendered approaches to innovation and institutional navigation.

Second, the findings substantiate and extend agroecological theory by demonstrating how female entrepreneurs operationalize ecological principles such as biodiversity conservation, soil health, and sustainable resource management. Their practices underscore the potential for agroecological models to be integrated with social entrepreneurship, thereby fostering resilient, locally adapted food systems.

Third, this research advances institutional theory by revealing how female social entrepreneurs act as institutional entrepreneurs who navigate, challenge, and transform fragmented regulatory and market environments. Their advocacy and strategic adaptations contribute to reshaping institutional frameworks, fostering more supportive conditions for sustainable agricultural practices. These insights deepen understanding of institutional change processes in contexts marked by gendered power dynamics and policy voids.

Together, these theoretical integrations provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the intersection of gender, sustainability, and institutional contexts in organic agriculture. This study thereby offers novel empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives that can inform future research, policy design, and practical interventions aimed at promoting sustainable and inclusive agricultural development.

5.10.1 Advancing Feminist Perspectives on Social Entrepreneurship

.This research extends feminist entrepreneurship theory by demonstrating how female social entrepreneurs employ relational, community-based, and values-driven strategies

that diverge from traditional, market-oriented entrepreneurial norms. While much of the social entrepreneurship literature emphasizes hybrid business models (Zahra et al., 2009; Kerlin, 2010), this thesis highlights how gendered strategies—such as collaborative leadership, emotional labour, and informal mentoring—are foundational to sustaining these models in practice.

By focusing on the lived experiences of women in organic agriculture, the study deepens theoretical understanding of how gender shapes entrepreneurial identity, opportunity recognition, and approaches to risk. The findings confirm that women’s leadership often emerges through non-hierarchical, participatory structures, reinforcing feminist critiques of patriarchal models of innovation and enterprise (Tillmar, 2009; Lyons, 2023).

Moreover, the feedback loop illustrated in Figure 3 helps explain how participants’ community-based practices generated trust, enabling both policy advocacy and deeper ecological engagement. This iterative process underscores the dynamic, co-constituted nature of social and environmental outcomes.

Theoretical Contribution: Expands feminist entrepreneurship theory by empirically documenting how gender-specific strategies function not just as adaptive tools but as drivers of innovation and sustainability in socially embedded enterprises.

5.10.2 Enriching Theories of Sustainable Agriculture and Agroecological Innovation

The study contributes to sustainability scholarship by linking organic agricultural practices to broader social and environmental systems change. Whereas much of the sustainability literature emphasizes technical transitions or policy frameworks, this thesis foregrounds

the role of entrepreneurial agency in shaping agroecological practices that are locally grounded yet systemically impactful.

The integration of environmental stewardship, food sovereignty, and grassroots education within entrepreneurial efforts aligns with recent scholarship that views sustainable agriculture as a socio-technical process rather than a purely ecological or economic one (Allen & Kovach, 2000; Reganold & Wachter, 2016). The findings reinforce and extend agroecological theory by demonstrating how localized entrepreneurial initiatives can function as both ecological interventions and tools for community empowerment.

Theoretical Contribution: Advances agroecological theory by emphasizing the role of women entrepreneurs as hybrid actors simultaneously engaging in food production, social innovation, and environmental governance.

5.10.3 Contributing to Institutional Theory in Contexts of Policy and Resource Gaps

Building on the concept of institutional voids (Mair & Marti, 2009), this research demonstrates how female entrepreneurs operate as institutional entrepreneurs who compensate for weak or fragmented state support by developing alternative governance mechanisms, such as participatory certification, community-supported agriculture (CSA), and informal advocacy coalitions.

The findings show that in the absence of cohesive regulatory frameworks, women entrepreneurs do not simply adapt—they actively reshape institutional arrangements through policy engagement, narrative influence, and grassroots organizing. This

perspective extends institutional theory by focusing not just on the presence of voids but on the gendered practices through which such voids are navigated, contested, and reconstructed.

Theoretical Contribution: Enriches institutional entrepreneurship literature by foregrounding gendered agency in contexts of state retreat, emphasizing how social values, not just market incentives, motivate institutional innovation.

5.10.4 Integrative Theoretical Synthesis

The conceptual model developed in this thesis serves as a novel framework for integrating these theoretical domains. By placing female social entrepreneurship at the center of an interrelated system of environmental, economic, and community outcomes—moderated by market forces, regulatory environments, and gender dynamics—the model offers a transferable lens for analyzing complex social-ecological change in other sectors or regions.

Conclusion

Taken together, these theoretical contributions challenge reductive interpretations of entrepreneurship as purely economic and sustainability as purely technical. They demonstrate the value of integrative, gender-aware frameworks that center relational practice, local knowledge, and collective agency. In doing so, this thesis contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship committed to more inclusive, contextually grounded, and socially just understandings of entrepreneurship and environmental change.

5.11 Summary

Chapter 5 synthesized the major findings of this study and connected them to the broader theoretical, practical, and policy landscapes surrounding female social entrepreneurship in organic agriculture. The chapter began by revisiting the study's research questions and objectives, highlighting how female entrepreneurs on California's Central Coast contribute to **environmental sustainability** through practices like composting, biodiversity preservation, and organic pest management. It further underscored their role in **community empowerment** by establishing CSA programs, educational initiatives, and inclusive food systems that benefit marginalized populations.

Despite their impact, participants encountered **systemic challenges**, including gender-based barriers, regulatory complexity, and limited access to financial and land resources. Nonetheless, they navigated these obstacles through **adaptive strategies**—such as peer support networks, grassroots advocacy, and innovative approaches to sustainability. Their active involvement in **policy advocacy** further positions them as institutional entrepreneurs working to reshape agricultural governance in response to structural voids. The discussion contextualized these findings within three interrelated theoretical domains:

Feminist entrepreneurship theory, by illustrating how relational, community-based leadership challenges traditional masculine models of enterprise.

Agroecological theory, through the integration of environmental practices with social goals at the community level.

Institutional theory, by demonstrating how these women fill governance gaps through informal structures and advocacy.

The chapter also emphasized the importance of **intersectionality**, recognizing that overlapping identities—such as race, immigration status, and class—compound the challenges faced by many women in this field, a dimension often underexplored in prior literature.

Key **limitations** of the study included its regional scope, reliance on archival oral histories, lack of longitudinal data, and gender-specific focus without direct comparison to male counterparts. These limitations informed **future research directions**, such as employing mixed-methods designs, expanding geographic diversity, and integrating more intersectional and comparative analyses.

A series of **practical policy recommendations** were proposed to support and scale women-led sustainable agricultural initiatives. These included streamlining organic certification processes, improving access to finance, strengthening extension services, fostering community engagement, and enhancing policy inclusion.

The chapter concluded by affirming that female social entrepreneurs are pivotal change agents at the intersection of sustainability, equity, and innovation. Their efforts not only support global sustainability goals but also model a holistic approach to agricultural transformation that integrates ecological integrity, community well-being, and social justice. The findings advocate for more inclusive and gender-responsive policies to unlock the full potential of female entrepreneurship in building resilient food systems.

6. Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter reflects on the study's contributions, acknowledges limitations, and suggests future research directions, affirming the transformative potential of women-led social enterprises in organic agriculture.

6.1 Summary and Theoretical Contributions

This study examined the role of female social entrepreneurs in advancing sustainable organic agriculture on California's Central Coast. Using oral history interviews and a qualitative research design rooted in feminist and ecological frameworks, the research revealed how these women actively engage in environmental stewardship, community empowerment, and institutional navigation. The findings illustrate the hybrid and multifaceted nature of their work—combining ecological innovation with education, advocacy, and localized resilience-building.

Participants implemented practices like composting, crop rotation, and biodiversity conservation not only to protect the environment but also to build inclusive local food systems. In doing so, they confronted systemic obstacles such as gender bias, market exclusion, and fragmented policy environments. Their strategies—ranging from CSA programs and policy engagement to using bicycles for deliveries—reflect resilience, creativity, and a values-based leadership approach.

Theoretically, this study contributes to three interrelated domains: feminist entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, and institutional theory. It deepens feminist entrepreneurship discourse by highlighting gender-specific strategies, such as the use of social capital and inclusive networks, that diverge from mainstream commercial models. It expands sustainable agriculture theory by connecting ecological practice to grassroots

organizing and collective learning. It also engages institutional theory by showing how marginalized actors enact bottom-up change within exclusionary systems. These contributions are visually synthesized in Figure 5, which illustrates the intersection of these three domains in shaping the entrepreneurial ecosystem..

| Limitation | Implications for Findings | Recommendation for Future Research |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Geographic Focus (California) | Findings may not apply to other regions | Conduct comparative studies in various national and global areas |
| Qualitative Oral History Method | Rich insights, but not statistically generalizable | Use mixed methods with surveys and longitudinal tracking |
| Small Sample Size (n=17) | May miss diverse or marginalized perspectives | Include more participants using snowball sampling |
| Gender-Specific Focus | Excludes male/non-binary perspectives, limiting depth | Add intersectional and gender comparative analyses |
| Lack of Longitudinal Data | Cannot assess long-term impact or policy influence | Perform longitudinal studies to track outcomes over time |
| Reliance on Secondary Interviews | Limits the ability to adapt to new themes | Combine archival with new primary interviews |

Table 7: Implications of Key Study Limitations

Table 7 synthesizes key similarities and divergences between the Central Coast case and other international examples, highlighting California’s unique regulatory complexity and reliance on entrepreneurial agency rather than cooperative governance.

6.2 Concluding Reflection

By explicitly connecting the study’s limitations to their implications and outlining targeted recommendations for future work, this chapter strengthens the scholarly integrity of the research. The findings reaffirm that female-led social enterprises play a pivotal yet under-

recognized role in shaping inclusive and sustainable food systems. Their work—grounded in care, innovation, and community—offers compelling lessons for both theory and practice.

Ultimately, this study serves as a foundation for more expansive inquiry into gendered sustainability practices in agriculture and beyond. Its conceptual framework invites future research to deepen empirical engagement and sharpen theoretical tools, ensuring that diverse voices and grassroots strategies are not only studied but meaningfully supported in efforts toward environmental justice and social equity.

6.3 Summary

Chapter 6 concluded the study by synthesizing its key insights, theoretical contributions, and methodological limitations. The research explored how female social entrepreneurs on California's Central Coast advance sustainable organic agriculture through a combination of environmental stewardship, community empowerment, and institutional engagement. Drawing on oral history interviews, the study illuminated how participants implement practices such as composting, crop rotation, and biodiversity conservation while simultaneously addressing systemic challenges like gender bias, market exclusion, and policy fragmentation.

Theoretically, the study contributes to **feminist entrepreneurship** by highlighting gender-specific strategies rooted in collaboration, social capital, and inclusivity; to **sustainable agriculture theory** by linking ecological practices to grassroots innovation and local knowledge; and to **institutional theory** by demonstrating how marginalized actors drive

bottom-up transformation within exclusionary systems. These insights are integrated in the conceptual model presented earlier in the thesis.

The chapter also critically reflected on the study's limitations—such as its regional scope, small sample size, reliance on archival oral histories, and lack of longitudinal data—and offered clear directions for future research, including comparative case studies, mixed-methods approaches, and intersectional analyses.

In closing, the study reaffirms the vital yet under-recognized role of female social entrepreneurs in fostering resilient, inclusive, and ecologically sound food systems. It calls for continued scholarly and policy attention to their work, advocating for more inclusive frameworks that support gendered innovation, local agency, and long-term sustainability in agriculture and beyond.

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