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Resilience in Ganglands: Strategies and Coping Mechanisms of Female Entrepreneurs in Westbury, Johannesburg, South Africa

BY

Ilene Abrams
Student Number: 2775835

Supervisor:
Dr. Robert Venter

Ethics Protocol Number: H24/08/01

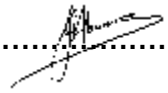
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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in Fulfilment of the requirements for the for the degree of Master of Commerce by research in the field of management.

Johannesburg
South Africa
April 2025

DECLARATION

I, Ilene Abrams, declare that this research is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in full fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Commerce at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.

Name: Ilene Abrams…….. **Signature:** …………

Signed at: Johannesburg……

ABSTRACT

This study examines the resilience of female entrepreneurs (FEs) operating small, medium, and micro enterprises in Westbury, Johannesburg, one of South Africa's most gang-affected communities. Although female entrepreneurship is widely recognised as a driver of socio-economic development, little is known about their experiences in ganglands. These settings, shaped by chronic violence and systemic exclusion, create uniquely hostile conditions that distinguish them from broader township contexts.

Grounded in an integrated theoretical framework of Intersectional Feminist Entrepreneurship, Resilience, and Individual Entrepreneurial Orientation theories, the study engaged 10 FEs in Westbury through semi-structured interviews and participant observations over eight weeks, examining how they absorb shocks, adapt to volatility, and exercise agency in their businesses. Key informant interviews with community leaders provided contextual insights and facilitated participant access, while document analysis and photographs supported triangulation. Data were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, with inductive coding and theme development in ATLAS.ti aligned with the research questions.

Findings reveal that despite intersecting structural barriers, including mobility restrictions, emotional trauma, and limited access to formal support, FEs demonstrate resilience through relational networks, strategic business adaptations, and emotional endurance rooted in purpose, identity, and community embeddedness. The study contributes to existing research by conceptualising ganglands as distinct entrepreneurial ecosystems and applying a gendered lens to resilience in high-risk environments.

These insights also equip policymakers and development actors to design targeted support programmes for women in high-risk areas, improve access to finance, strengthen community business networks, and foster partnerships to enhance security and reduce operational risks. They further provide FEs with recognition and practical guidance for navigating similarly violent and exclusionary contexts.

Key words:
Female entrepreneurs; gang-affected communities; township economy; resilience; Westbury; South Africa; gendered exclusion; informal networks; strategic adaptation; community embeddedness.

DEDICATION

To the women of Westbury.
Your strength, courage, and determination inspired every word of this work. This is for you.

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"How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time."
The words that carried me through this process, and I thank God for His grace throughout.

None of this would have been possible without my tribe.

I am deeply grateful to my incredible family. To my husband, my daughter, and my ultimate hype girl, my sister, thank you for walking this journey with me. The nights and days that often blurred into one meant time away from you, but your constant encouragement reassured me that it was all worth it.

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Studying at Wits has been a dream come true, and it would not have been possible without Ms. Irma Watson coming to my rescue when my registration was in shambles. I am beyond grateful to you, Irma. Thank you.

To Dr. Rob, your unwavering support, kindness, and belief in my work made this journey lighter. I could not have asked for a better supervisor, and I am deeply grateful for your guidance.

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Above all, my deepest appreciation goes to the women of Westbury. Your participation in this research showed me what true strength looks like. Witnessing what you achieve daily, despite the hardships you face, inspired me to keep moving forward. Your courage pushed me to the finish line. This work is, ultimately, because of you and for you.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBD – Central Business District

COJ – City of Johannesburg

FEs – Female Entrepreneurs

GEM – Global Entrepreneurship Monitor

GBV – Gender-based Violence

IEOT – Individual Entrepreneurial Orientation Theory

IFET – Intersectional Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory

EO – Entrepreneurial Orientation

PRQ – Primary Research Question

PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

REA – Rapid Ethnographic Assessment

RQ – Research Question

RT – Resilience Theory

SA – South Africa

STATS SA – Statistics South Africa

SMME – Small Medium and Micro Enterprises

SRQ – Secondary Research Questions

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview

> I'm a Small Business owner most of my customers has [sic] never been to Westbury and they [sic] Terrified of this place. I find myself convincing them they [sic] safe, when I myself don't feel safe anymore. As a single woman with two kids doing the job of a man by protecting my Daughter's [sic]… if I go to the police station for protection they leave me more hopeless… I found myself doing the unthinkable with tears in my eyes while I bought it, because never in a million years did I ever think I would had [sic] to go get a gun license and buy a Gun just to feel safe. I'm even crying right now cause [sic] I don't like the fact that I had to go this way just to protect my family... Westbury will change you (Wepener, 2023)

These words, by Wepener (2023), a female entrepreneur from Westbury, capture the emotional weight, complexity, and everyday danger of doing business in a community scarred by gang violence. Her story is not unique; it reflects the lived experiences of many women who continue to build and sustain enterprises in townships defined by chronic gang violence, pervasive fear, and systemic neglect.

This study emerged from a deep concern for these realities. It investigates the resilience of FEs operating small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMEs) in gang-affected townships, focusing on how they navigate adversity, adapt to instability, and remain committed to their communities.

Grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that draws from Intersectional Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory (IFET), Resilience Theory (RT), and Individual Entrepreneurial Orientation Theory (IEOT), the research explores how these women not only survive, but persist, adapt, and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Using a Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (REA) approach, the study combines document analysis, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and visual documentation. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods to access rich, context-specific insights from those directly affected.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the knowledge base by challenging oversimplified and often homogenised views of township entrepreneurship. It offers practical, evidence-based

insights into how FEs navigate and resist violent conditions, providing valuable guidance for policymakers and others supporting women in high-risk, under-resourced environments. Beyond serving as a tool for support and advocacy, these findings also offer recognition, resonance, and solidarity for FEs themselves and others navigating similar realities.

1.2. Background of the Study

The significance of female entrepreneurship to the development and sustainability of global and local economies is well-documented (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor [GEM], 2021; International Finance Corporation [IFC], 2021; Mudara & Mafini, 2022; Sajjad et al., 2020). Women are widely recognised as the fastest-growing segment of entrepreneurs in the world (Brush & Cooper, 2012; Patil & Deshpande, 2018; Sajjad et al., 2020), contributing not only to economic growth but also to social transformation by challenging traditional gender norms, promoting empowerment and fostering inclusivity (Bhakuni et al., 2023).

However, despite their economic significance, FEs often remain more vulnerable to social and economic stressors, including limited education and business skills (Mustapha & Punitha, 2016), intersectional prejudices, the triple burden of roles, and restricted access to essential resources, all of which disproportionately hinder their growth and increase the risk of business failure (Mudara & Mafini, 2022).

Orser et al. (2011) highlighted that even with the growing number of women entering entrepreneurship, gender bias persists as the field is still largely dominated by masculine norms. Ahl and Marlow (2012) concurred, noting that women are often sidelined in entrepreneurship unless they conform to traditionally masculine traits, placing them at a disadvantage because even if they do conform, they cannot fully escape their feminine identity. The authors further stressed that this bias not only undermines social justice but also creates a barrier to women's full inclusion in the entrepreneurial world, relegating them to a position of deficit associated with femininity (Ahl & Marlow, 2012).

The environment in which FEs operate further compounds the challenges they face. In township environments, they contend with even greater difficulties, as these areas are often plagued by social ills such as unemployment, poverty, and high levels of crime. Furthermore, the experience of operating in townships is also far from homogenous. In some townships, FEs face the added difficulty of operating in environments that are likened to warzones due to persistent deadly gang violence (Bhengu, 2023; Halim, 2022; The Daily Vox, 2019; Willemse, 2018). Phelps (2023) highlighted the gendered nature of these conflicts, noting that women

and girls are disproportionately impacted, bearing the brunt of the violence and its long-term consequences.

In South Africa (SA), ganglands such as Westbury, Johannesburg (JHB), represent some of the most extreme examples of these environments. Westbury is notorious as one of the top three gang-ridden communities in the country (Irish-Qhobosheane et al., 2019; Malesele, 2023; Morris, 2019; Polity, 2023), with a steady stream of recent news headlines revealing a grim and unrelenting pattern of gang-related shootings and violence. These include incidents where more than a dozen people were gunned down in just 24 hours (Steyn, 2023), the assassination of a notorious gang leader that triggered a wave of retaliatory violence (Patel, 2023), and the targeted killings of business owners, which have not only heightened fear but also sparked outrage within the community over a relentless crisis that shows little sign of resolution (Buhr, 2024; Pijoos, 2024).

Operating in such a hostile environment presents significant challenges for entrepreneurs, particularly for FEs who must navigate both the general dangers of ganglands and the specific risks associated with their gender. Beyond the constant fear of being caught in crossfire during gang shootouts, entrepreneurs in these areas are frequently subjected to extortion, exploitation, and targeted intimidation. In Nelson Mandela Bay, which is also among the top three gang-ridden regions in the country, gangs have been known to coerce businesses into acting as fronts for obtaining local government tenders, with those refusing to comply facing the risk of targeted killings (Thomas et al., 2020). Similarly, in the Western Cape, another area on the top three list, many small businesses operate under the constant threat of violence from gangs demanding protection fees (Phaliso, 2023), with refusal often leading to fatal consequences (Geldenhuys, 2022).

The situation in Westbury is equally dire, as highlighted by Wepener (2023), whose decision to arm herself for protection illustrates the extent to which women business owners are forced to adapt to extreme conditions in gang-affected environments. Her story exemplifies how sustained exposure to violence, inadequate policing, and the constant need to manage both the fears of others and their own shapes not only business practices but also personal identity and emotional resilience. This is not an isolated incident but rather emblematic of the broader realities faced by FEs operating in gang-controlled settings.

Despite the deep-rooted and intersecting socio-economic challenges they face, FEs, including those operating in township environments, consistently demonstrate their resilience. Global studies have highlighted how many female-owned businesses survived and adapted during

extreme disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Choi-Allum, 2022; GEM, 2021; Henri et al., 2023; Manolova et al., 2020; Sahi et al., 2023). Yet, little research explores how FEs demonstrate resilience in township settings where chronic gang violence presents a persistent threat. This study addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of FEs in Westbury, one of SA's most dangerous gang-affected communities (Morris, 2019), focusing on the challenges they face, the coping mechanisms they adopt and the strategies they use to sustain their businesses amid systemic exclusion, chronic violence and fear.

1.3. Research Context

This study was conducted in Westbury (A), a township on the western outskirts of the City of Johannesburg, located approximately 6 km from the city's Central Business District (CBD) (B). As illustrated in Figure 1, Westbury is bordered by Coronationville (C), Sophiatown (D), and Westdene (E), neighbouring communities that share a legacy of forced removals during apartheid and enduring socio-economic challenges. These areas (C−E) form part of a closely connected urban zone, where shared histories and overlapping spatial dynamics continue to shape the social and economic conditions of Westbury today.

Figure 1: Map of Westbury, Johannesburg, South Africa



Note: Map of Westbury Sub Place by Adrian Firth, 2011 (https://census2011.adrianfrith.com/place/798015095/map)

Established in 1918 as part of the Western Native Township, Westbury was one of the first municipal townships designated for Black South Africans under apartheid urban planning (Klug, 2016). Following the Group Areas Act of 1950, it was reclassified for Coloured residents and renamed the Western Coloured Township, before becoming known as Westbury in the 1960s (Halim, 2018). Today, Westbury remains a predominantly Coloured community, with 88% of residents identifying as Coloured (Frith, 2011). It is densely populated, with approximately 13,461 residents living within 1.03 km², and Afrikaans as the most spoken language, followed by English (City of Johannesburg [COJ], 2008). The gender distribution in Westbury is nearly balanced, with 51% female and 49% male (Frith, 2011).

Notably, Westbury lies along the Empire-Perth Development Corridor, a transit-oriented initiative under the COJ's Corridors of Freedom strategy, aimed at redressing apartheid-era spatial inequalities through improved mobility, accessibility, and economic opportunities (Klug, 2016). The corridor connects Westbury to key economic hubs such as Auckland Park and the COJ's CBD. As part of this initiative, the Rea Vaya Bus Rapid Transit system was introduced to improve public transport access, support small business development, and promote higher-density, mixed-use urban development (COJ, 2008; Klug, 2016).

Despite these interventions, Westbury remains economically marginalised. High levels of unemployment continue to force many residents into informal employment, small-scale entrepreneurship, or reliance on social grants (Klug, 2016). The township also grapples with entrenched gang violence, a defining feature of the area since the 1930s (Irish-Qhobosheane et al., 2019). Although the intensity of gang activity has fluctuated over the years, the 1990s marked a turning point, with the proliferation of drug trafficking and access to firearms enabling dominant gangs such as the Fast Guns and Varados to tighten their grip on the community (Irish-Qhobosheane et al., 2019). Today, Westbury is regarded as one of SA's most gang-ridden communities, trapped in cycles of violence, drug-related crime, and severe social exclusion (Irish-Qhobosheane et al., 2019; Malesele, 2023; Morris, 2019; Polity, 2023).

At the same time, Westbury offers a compelling case study of resilience, particularly among FEs operating within these high-risk conditions. The township provides a microcosm through which to understand how small businesses navigate persistent adversity, sustain themselves, and contribute to local stability. This study examines not only the survival strategies employed by FEs, but also their broader socio-economic role in fostering resilience within a setting marked by historical marginalisation, structural inequality, and persistent violence.

1.4. Research Problem

Entrepreneurship in South Africa's townships plays a vital role in job creation, poverty alleviation, and economic development. With national unemployment at 31.9%, and even higher among women (33.9%) and youth (44.6%) (Statistics South Africa [STATS SA], 2025), the informal and small business sectors are essential to sustaining local economies and enabling economic participation among marginalised groups (Brush & Cooper, 2012; Chirwa, 2008; Maphalla, 2009; Nmadu, 2011; Rabbani & Chowdhury, 2013).

Within this sector, FEs make significant contributions. Their businesses generate multiplier effects that support household livelihoods (Henri et al., 2023; Maharaj, 2022), strengthen social networks and contribute to community resilience (Lepeley et al., 2020). Despite their contributions, FEs face disproportionate and intersectional barriers, including limited access to finance, exclusion from business networks, and heightened vulnerability to crime and economic shocks (Ojong et al., 2021; Nambiar et al., 2020).

Although township entrepreneurship, including that of FEs, has received considerable scholarly attention, research often treats townships as homogenous, overlooking the extreme risks posed by gang-controlled environments shaped by chronic deadly violence. This study addresses that gap by focusing on FEs operating in gang-affected settings, an underexplored group whose experiences and strategies remain poorly understood in both policy and academic discourse.

While crime and insecurity are frequently mentioned among the broader challenges facing FEs in township settings (GEM, 2021; Henri et al., 2023; Maharaj, 2022; Nambiar et al., 2020; Ojong et al., 2021), gang violence is rarely examined as a distinct barrier influencing entrepreneurial decisions, mobility, and daily operations. In contrast, studies on female entrepreneurship in conflict zones pays more explicit attention to how violence impacts business sustainability through extortion, intimidation, disrupted supply chains (Brück et al., 2013), and psychological strains (Haar,2022).

Research on conflict-affected settings also highlights how entrepreneurs adapt to such conditions through informal security arrangements, covert operations, and reliance on community-based networks (Brück et al., 2013; Meagher, 2018; Matti & Ross, 2016; Salvi et al., 2025; Joseph et al., 2022). However, these adaptive strategies are seldom examined through a gendered lens, leaving limited understanding of how FEs in violent or exclusionary

contexts navigate risk, leverage networks, and maintain business continuity (Joseph et al., 2022).

Gang-controlled areas represent a unique entrepreneurial context. Unlike war zones where violence is often shaped by ideological, religious, or political instability (Khan, 2024; Rhoades et al., 2023), ganglands are characterised by persistent, hyper-localised criminal violence embedded in daily life (Applebaum & Mawby, 2018; Sergi & Storti, 2021). In these settings, entrepreneurs must navigate territorial disputes, coercion by gangs, and corruption among law enforcement (Phelps, 2023), as gangs exert significant influence over local economies, security conditions, and social relations, often operating in collaboration or tension with law enforcement (Cruz et al., 2021; Messina, 2024).

Some scholars describe this phenomenon as a form of “criminal governance,” a system in which organised crime groups exert de facto control over communities, operating alongside or in place of formal state institutions (Arias, 2017; Barnes, 2017; Feldmann & Luna, 2022; Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009). These dual governance systems, in which formal institutions coexist with informal but powerful criminal structures, creating unique challenges for entrepreneurs navigating these spaces.

While intersectional feminist literature acknowledges the role of social embeddedness and resilience among FEs in marginalised economies (Brush et al., 2009; Orser & Elliott, 2015), these frameworks remain underexplored in gang-controlled contexts. Moreover, the long-term viability of businesses in such settings is also unclear, with limited research on how FEs navigate gang-dominated power structures, mobilise networks, or develop adaptive strategies in response to persistent insecurity.

These gaps have real-world implications. In the absence of such nuanced insights, policy responses and support mechanisms remain misaligned with the lived realities of FEs in ganglands. This study responds by examining the experiences of FEs in Westbury, a community marked by entrenched gang activity, economic exclusion, and institutional neglect. It seeks to deepen understanding of how FEs sustain economic activity, exercise agency, and foster resilience in contexts shaped not by conventional war, but by chronic, criminalised violence.

1.5. Research Questions (RQs)

This study responds to the identified gap in the literature by asking: How do FEs sustain livelihoods in gang-controlled townships? Rooted in this inquiry, the following research questions and objectives were developed to guide a deeper exploration.

1.5.1. Primary Research Question (PRQ)

Given the complex and volatile nature of ganglands, what specific factors (i.e., social, economic and psychological) contribute to the resilience of FEs who continue their entrepreneurial pursuits despite operating in environments plagued by persistent violent conflict?

1.5.2. Secondary Research Questions (SRQ)

1. What are the challenges (i.e., economic, social, and psychological) that FEs operating in gang-controlled townships face?

2. How do FEs navigate and respond to these challenges in their day-to-day operations (i.e., through immediate, short-term coping mechanisms and reactive behaviours)?

3. What strategies and resilience mechanisms do FEs employ to sustain and grow their businesses, and to contribute to their communities (i.e., through long-term strategies and resilience mechanisms)?

1.6. Research Objectives

These research questions translate into the following objectives, which collectively aim to unpack both the immediate and long-term ways in which FEs survive and persist in contexts marked by violence and exclusion.

1.6.1. Primary Research Objective

To discover the drivers (i.e., economic, social, and psychological) that contribute to the resilience of FEs operating in townships characterised by widespread gang violence, focusing on the mechanisms underpinning their persistence in such conditions.

1.6.2. Secondary Research Objectives

1. To investigate the challenges (i.e., economic, social, and psychological) faced by FEs in gang-infested townships.

2. To examine how FEs navigate and overcome these challenges in their day-to-day business operations (i.e., through immediate, short-term coping mechanisms and reactive behaviours).

3. To explore the strategies and resilience mechanisms that FEs employ to sustain and grow their businesses, and to contribute to their communities (i.e., through long-term strategies and resilience mechanisms).

1.7. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, drawing on a REA framework to explore the lived experiences of FEs in gang-controlled townships. This approach enabled in-depth, contextual engagement with participants over an eight-week period while maintaining methodological rigour.

1.7.1. Data collection methods:

- Semi-structured interviews with FEs in Westbury.

- Participant observation to examine how FEs manage their businesses in practice.

- Key informant engagement with community leaders who provided broader insights, facilitated access to participants, and supported navigation of the research setting.

- Document analysis to support and contextualise the findings and inform triangulation.

- Photography, providing visual data that supported analysis and triangulation.

Given the high-risk nature of the study, ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and security precautions, were strictly observed.

1.7.2. Sampling Strategy:

A non-probability sampling approach was used, combining purposive and snowball sampling to ensure a diverse representation of FEs operating SMMEs in Westbury. Of the 30 potential participants approached, 10 were ultimately interviewed, meeting the study's minimum target.

1.7.3. Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, was used to identify and interpret key patterns across the data. Coding was conducted inductively using ATLAS.ti, based on interview transcripts and fieldnotes. Codes were grouped into themes aligned with the study's research questions.

1.7.4. Ethical Considerations:

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical), ethics clearance number H23/03/45. All participants provided informed consent, were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage and were anonymised in reporting. Interviews took place in secure, participant-chosen settings, and all data was securely stored on encrypted devices. The study followed Saunders et al.'s (2019) ten ethical principles for social research.

1.7.2. Envisaged Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

This study will contribute to research on female entrepreneurial resilience in gang-controlled urban contexts by:

- Deepening understanding of how women-owned enterprises in gang-affected township economies navigate persistent violence, social exclusion, and criminal governance.

- Conceptualising ganglands as distinct entrepreneurial ecosystems shaped by chronic violence and embedded informal power structures.

- Introducing an intersectional, gendered perspective on entrepreneurial resilience, grounded in the lived experiences and adaptive strategies of FEs in Westbury.

- Providing evidence-based recommendations for government and other stakeholders to more effectively support women-owned businesses in gang-controlled settings.

1.8. Chapter Outline

This dissertation is structured into six chapters:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction**
  Introduces the study by outlining the background, research context, problem statement, research questions, and objectives. It also frames the focus on FEs operating in gang-affected townships.

- **Chapter 2: Literature Review**
  Reviews the literature on female entrepreneurship, drawing from both SA township studies and international research in conflict-affected settings. It also outlines the integrated theoretical framework guiding the study.

- **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**
  Explains the qualitative research design, including the interpretivist paradigm and the use of REA. It describes the data collection methods, sampling strategies, and incorporates a discussion of ethical considerations.

- **Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings**
  Presents the key findings from the fieldwork, organised into five major themes. Each theme corresponds to one or more of the study's secondary research questions and examines a distinct dimension of female entrepreneurial resilience in Westbury.

- **Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings**
  Interprets the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework and in relation to the reviewed literature. The discussion is structured around the three secondary research questions and concludes by showing how the insights collectively respond to the primary research question.

- **Chapter 6: Conclusion**
  Summarises the key insights of the study and reflects on their implications for policy, practice, theory, and future research. It also outlines the study limitations.

1.9 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter introduced the study by grounding it in the lived realities of FEs navigating gang-affected townships, particularly Westbury. It outlined the background, research context, and significance of the inquiry. Through a clear problem statement, research questions, and methodological overview, the chapter established the urgent need for a deeper understanding of how these women sustain and grow their businesses despite persistent adversity. In doing so, it establishes the basis for the next chapter, which engages critically with the literature and theoretical frameworks used to interpret these entrepreneurial experiences.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the intersecting challenges, strategies, and contributions of FEs operating SMMEs in gang-affected townships. The review is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that draws on IFET, RT, and IEOT, allowing for a nuanced analysis of both structural constraints and entrepreneurial agency.

The review begins with a brief overview of the state of entrepreneurship in South Africa before examining female entrepreneurship within township economies, where women-owned enterprises play a critical yet undervalued role in sustaining livelihoods and community wellbeing under conditions of systemic exclusion. It then narrows in on the specific dynamics of gang-controlled environments, often referred to as “ganglands,” to examine how oppression intensifies the risks faced by FEs.

Subsequent sections explore the resilience mechanisms these entrepreneurs deploy in the face of persistent insecurity. Given the limited research specifically focused on FEs in gang-affected environments, the review draws on global and local studies of entrepreneurship in conflict- and violence-prone settings to offer comparative insights. Finally, it reflects on the broader value of FEs in these high-risk contexts, revealing their often-overlooked contributions and identifying key gaps in the literature that this study seeks to address.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

To analyse the resilience of FEs in ganglands, this study draws on three interconnected theoretical frameworks: IFET, RT, and IEOT. This integrated framework offers a multi-dimensional lens to explore how systemic inequalities, individual agency, and strategic adaptability interact. It enables a deeper understanding of the forces that hinder and support entrepreneurial persistence in volatile environments.

2.1.1. Intersectional Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory

IFET integrates the theoretical principles of intersectionality and feminist entrepreneurship to critically examine how social identities, such as gender, race, and class, interact to shape the entrepreneurial experiences of women. Originating from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) foundational work, intersectionality highlights that systems of oppression are not experienced in isolation but are interconnected, compounding the challenges women face in navigating socio-economic structures (Crenshaw, 1989; Walker-Mohamed et al., 2024).

In her seminal study, Mirchandani (1999) highlighted that entrepreneurship is inherently gendered and that factors such as class, sexuality, race, and age intersect with gender to shape the experiences of FEs. Even today, Mirchandani's intersectional insights remain a critical foundation for understanding gendered entrepreneurial dynamics, particularly within marginalised and high-risk contexts.

Building on this, feminist entrepreneurship theory seeks to combat inequality and address persistent gender-specific barriers in business, such as disparities in access to resources, social capital, and market opportunities (Orser, 2022; Orser & Elliott, 2015). It also challenges the structural and cultural obstacles faced by FEs, pushing back against dominant male-centric narratives and behaviours that often marginalise or overlook their contributions (Mirchandani, 1999).

One such obstacle is the unequal access to support structures, both formal and informal, which are critical for entrepreneurial success. Morokvasic (1991) demonstrated that gendered dynamics in entrepreneurship extended beyond business operations to include informal networks, noting that women often depended on familial and community ties to start and grow their businesses. Mirchandani (1999) similarly pointed to the structural exclusions FEs face in accessing broader resource networks, underscoring how support systems themselves are shaped by gendered power relations.

This framework is particularly relevant in gang-affected townships, where FEs face compounded marginalisation due to their intersecting identities. They encounter not only gender-related prejudice but also added layers of racial and socio-economic exclusion (Tomodi, 2024). IFET foregrounds the lived experiences of these women, accounting for how they navigate intersecting forms of oppression while also highlighting the often-overlooked value of relational support networks, which serve as key enablers of entrepreneurial resilience (Mirchandani, 1999).

2.1.2. Resilience Theory

RT offers a conceptual framework for examining how individuals and communities endure, adapt, and persist in the face of ongoing disruption and adversity (Masten & Barnes, 2018). Originally rooted in ecological and psychological disciplines (Briske et al., 2017; Masten & Barnes, 2018), RT has evolved to include social, organisational, and entrepreneurial applications. In these contexts, resilience is seen not as a fixed trait but as a dynamic, multi-layered process (Briske et al., 2017; Duchek, 2020). This study draws on RT to understand

how FEs operating in gang-controlled environments sustain their businesses while navigating chronic threat, systemic neglect, and emotional strain.

Resilience is typically understood through three interrelated capacities:

1. **Absorptive capacity** refers to the ability to employ coping strategies to withstand shocks by using existing resources and practices (Béné et al., 2014; Cutter et al., 2008).

2. **Adaptive capacity** involves adjusting behaviour, routines, and meanings to maintain functioning under pressure (Limnios et al., 2014).

3. **Transformative capacity** reflects deeper systemic or structural change (Béné et al., 2014). It refers to the ability to create something fundamentally new when "ecological, economic, or social conditions render the existing structures untenable" (Walker et al., 2004, p. 5).

In conflict-affected and economically precarious environments, resilience becomes essential for everyday survival. For FEs, it is not merely about "bouncing back" from crisis, but navigating a dynamic process of learning, improvisation, and adaptation. Scholars have identified key capacities that enable this process, including psychological strength, resourcefulness, strong social networks, and an entrepreneurial mindset, which together support entrepreneurs in managing unforeseen disruptions, recovering from shocks, and identifying new opportunities for continuity and growth (Duchek, 2020; Hoegl & Hartmann, 2021).

Applied to this study, RT supports an understanding of how FEs absorb shocks, adapt their practices, and persist psychologically and socially in violent, under-resourced environments. These responses are often immediate and improvisational, shaped by necessity and deeply embedded in everyday life.

2.1.3. Individual Entrepreneurial Orientation Theory

IEOT provides a framework for analysing the personal traits and decision-making behaviours of FEs operating in high-risk contexts. It stems from the broader Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) literature, originally conceptualised by Miller (1983) and later developed by Covin and

Slevin (1989, 1991) as well as Lumpkin and Dess (1996). IEOT focuses on five key dimensions of entrepreneurial disposition:

1. **Innovativeness** – the ability to develop and implement new ideas, products, or services in response to external pressures (Miller, 1983).

2. **Proactiveness** – the tendency to anticipate and act on opportunities rather than simply reacting to environmental changes (Miller, 1983).

3. **Risk-taking** – the willingness to commit resources to opportunities despite uncertainty (Miller, 1983).

4. **Autonomy** – the capacity to make independent decisions and take initiative without excessive external constraints (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996).

5. **Competitive Aggressiveness** – the propensity to challenge competitors vigorously to secure a stronger market position (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996).

While most EO and IEOT studies centre on formal business settings and corporate actors, applying an IEOT framework within gang-affected townships sheds light on how FEs exercise entrepreneurial agency under extreme threat. In such contexts, which are characterised by systemic violence, pervasive crime, economic instability, and institutional failure (Du Toit, 2014; Irish-Qhobosheane et al., 2019; Sampaio, 2021), IEO is particularly useful for identifying how strategic adaptations are not just reactive survival tactics but reflect intentional entrepreneurial orientation.

Where IFET foregrounds intersecting structural barriers, and RT explores social and psychological coping mechanisms, IEOT focuses on the entrepreneurial choices and actions that FEs undertake to adapt, sustain, and in some cases, grow their businesses. Prior research shows that entrepreneurs in high-risk settings often lean on informal networks, community ties, and adaptable strategies to mitigate threats (Wiklund & Shepherd, 2003). Gendered entrepreneurship literature further suggests that FEs exhibit distinctive expressions of risk-taking, proactiveness, and innovation, shaped by both structural constraints and societal expectations (Fitzsimmons & Douglas, 2011; Mueller & Dato-on, 2013).

However, these dynamics remain underexplored in ganglands. By applying IEOT in this context, the study interrogates how its five dimensions materialise in practice, without

presuming their uniform relevance, allowing the data to inform which aspects are most salient for understanding entrepreneurial resilience in violent, high-risk environments.

2.1.4. Theoretical Integration and Complementarity

The integration of these three theories provides a multidimensional framework for understanding female entrepreneurship in gang-affected environments. Rather than operating in isolation, these theories are interconnected, offering complementary perspectives on how FEs navigate persistent violence, structural exclusion, and unstable economic conditions. Their interrelationship is illustrated in Figure 2, which visually depicts how they collectively inform the central focus of this study: the resilience of FEs in ganglands (A).

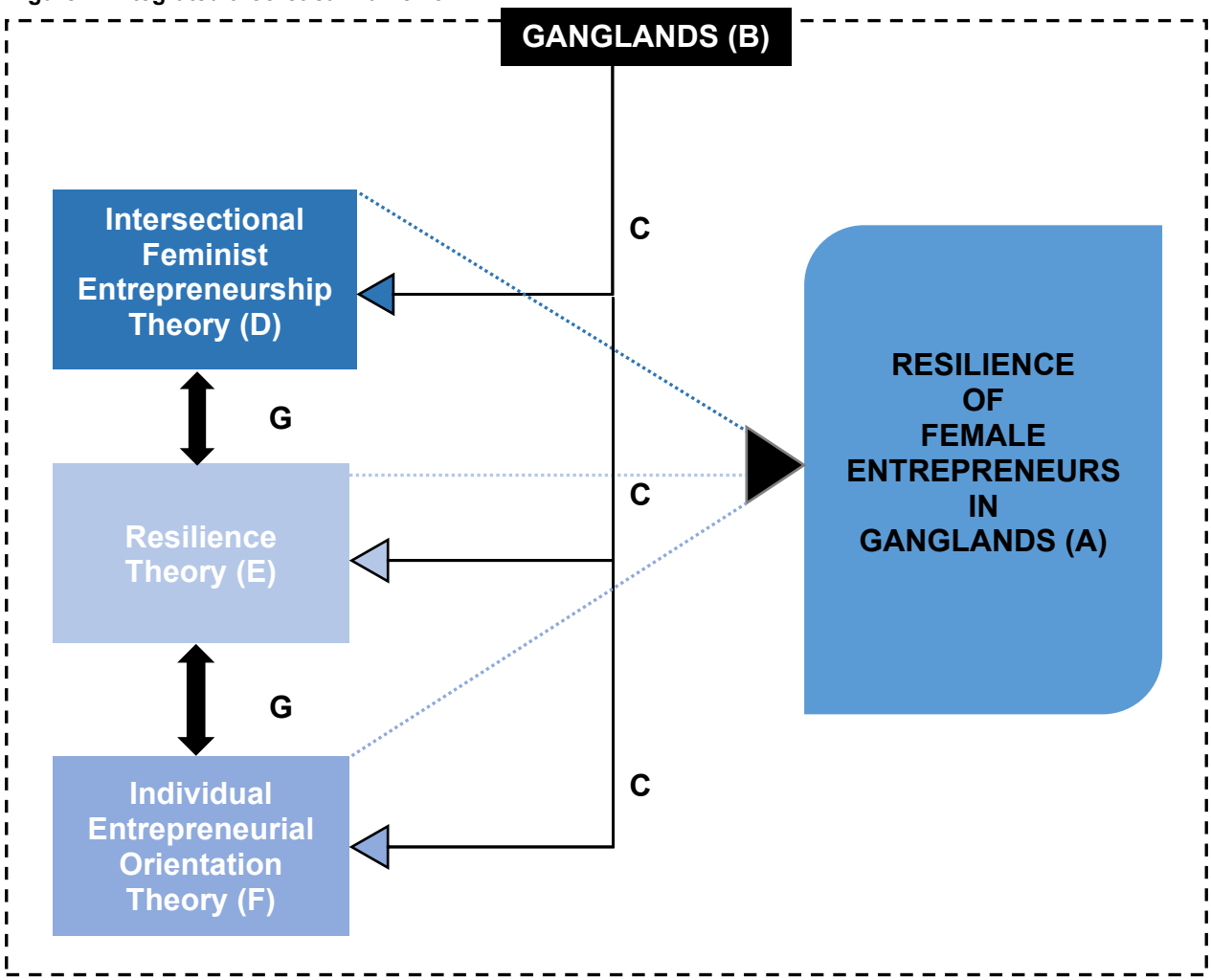
As illustrated, the entire theoretical framework is embedded within the context of ganglands (B), represented by a perforated boundary surrounding the three theories. The arrows (C) flowing inward from this boundary indicate that ganglands are not merely a backdrop, but an active force that reshapes how each theoretical lens is applied.

- IFET (D), positioned at the top of the framework, anchors the analysis in structural realities. It reveals how intersecting identities, particularly gender, race, and socio-economic status, shape the conditions under which entrepreneurship occurs. IFET explains how systemic exclusion limits access to capital, formal markets, and institutional support, thereby forcing FEs to rely on informal networks and alternative strategies. It reframes entrepreneurship as a survival-oriented response to marginalisation. The arrow from IFET into the central concept (A) reflects how structural conditions, such as gendered exclusion, racialised barriers, and systemic inequality, create the hostile terrain in which FEs must cultivate resilience.

- RT (E), situated at the centre of the theoretical stack, serves as the connective layer between structural constraint (IFET) and entrepreneurial agency (IEOT). It explains the psychosocial and relational processes through which FEs adapt, recalibrate, and endure persistent adversity. Resilience here is not treated as an innate trait but as a socially embedded, ongoing process shaped by emotional endurance, social ties, and community-based support. The arrow from RT to the core concept (A) reflects how resilience is conceptualised as a dynamic, relational process, shaped by ongoing adaptation, emotional endurance, and social ties in response to chronic insecurity.

- IEOT (F), located at the base of the framework, brings a micro-level focus to the analysis. It captures the specific entrepreneurial behaviours, such as innovation, autonomy, and proactiveness that enable FEs to navigate uncertainty, manage risk, and pursue opportunity in constrained environments. These traits are not expressed in isolation but are shaped by the surrounding context of violence and marginalisation. The arrow from IEOT into the resilience construct (A) signifies how entrepreneurial behaviours shape individual strategies that support business survival and agency within violent and uncertain environments.

Figure 2: Integrated theoretical framework



Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

The double-sided arrows (G) reflect the interdependence between these theories. For instance, the entrepreneurial traits captured by IEOT do not emerge in a vacuum. They are shaped by the structural exclusions identified by IFET and are enabled or constrained by the resilience pathways highlighted in RT. Likewise, resilience itself is shaped by both structural positioning (IFET) and entrepreneurial agency (IEOT), making these frameworks mutually reinforcing.

Taken together, this integrated theoretical model enables a contextually grounded and multi-scalar understanding of female entrepreneurship in ganglands. It moves beyond reductionist views that frame township entrepreneurs solely as victims of violence or informal economic actors and instead positions them as strategic agents navigating layered systems of violence, marginalisation, and opportunity. This triangulated framework not only strengthens the conceptual foundation of the study but also addresses the limitations of applying any single theory in isolation.

2.1.5. Theoretical Limitations and Research Contribution

While this integrated approach offers a robust framework, each theory has limitations that warrant consideration.

2.1.5.1. Intersectional Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory

IFET has been critiqued for lacking context-specific depth (Welter, 2020; Marlow, 2020; Hussain, 2022), for being overly theoretical, offering little practical guidance on overcoming constraints such as access to resources, social capital, and market opportunities (Collins, 2015; Moi, 2017; Chipango, 2024; Ahl, 2006), and for focusing on identity politics without fully examining the systemic forces that shape marginalisation (Chipango, 2024). It often treats race, class, and gender as fixed traits rather than politically constructed categories shaped by broader economic and social forces (Carastathis, 2008).

The theory's Western-centric roots have also been questioned for overlooking relational ontologies such as Ubuntu, which prioritises collective resilience and community-based strategies, which may be more relevant in non-Western and conflict-affected contexts (Chipango, 2024; Metz, 2020; Wang, 2019). Davis (2008) warned that intersectionality risks becoming a buzzword rather than a functional tool for addressing real-world inequalities.

This study responds to these critiques by applying IFET within gangland settings and grounding it in structural, context-specific analysis that extends beyond identity to explore broader forces shaping female entrepreneurship. Grounded in empirical data, it offers practical insights into resilience while incorporating collective and relational entrepreneurship. Furthermore, rather than sidelining IFET, this approach aligns with calls to complement it by integrating alternative theoretical frameworks, as advocated by Carbado (2013), to enable a more holistic understanding.

2.1.5.2. Resilience Theory

RT primarily focuses on individual and community-level adaptability, often overlooking structural barriers such as systemic violence and socio-economic deprivation, which are prevalent in ganglands. Boston et al. (2024) highlighted this gap, calling for a broader approach that accounts for these structural factors. Additionally, as Bachtiar et al. (2023) noted, RT tends to prioritise immediate coping mechanisms over long-term sustainability and growth strategies, and therefore fails to offer lasting solutions in environments marked by ongoing violence and instability. This can lead to the romanticisation of resilience as individual grit or coping, masking the deep-rooted injustices that necessitate it (Satkunanathan, 2021). In gang-affected environments, resilience must be understood not in isolation from gendered and racialised oppression, but in relation to it.

This study responds to these critiques by embedding RT within a broader intersectional and entrepreneurial framework. Rather than portraying resilience as uncritical perseverance, the study positions it as a constrained form of agency, shaped by socio-political forces and structural limitations. By documenting the specific resilience mechanisms employed by FEs, the study provides a comprehensive understanding that bridges the gap between individual resilience and structural challenges.

2.1.5.3. Individual Entrepreneurship Orientation Theory

While IEOT offers valuable insights into entrepreneurial tendencies, its applicability in high-risk, resource-constrained environments is limited (Mohammadi, 2021), particularly in gangland contexts. The theory often assumes a straightforward positive correlation between entrepreneurial orientation and business success (Gupta & Gupta, 2015; Saeed et al., 2014); however, empirical findings remain inconsistent, with some studies reporting weak or no significant relationship (Wiklund & Shepherd, 2003).

Although recent scholarship acknowledges the heterogeneity of entrepreneurs (Pidduck et al., 2023; Wales et al., 2021), much of the existing research on IEO continues to focus on individuals within formal corporate structures. This narrow focus neglects a broader range of entrepreneurs, including FEs, operating outside traditional business settings, without formal business education or institutional support (Clark et al., 2024; Salehe et al., 2024). Moreover, much of the existing IEOT research underplays the emotional, psychological, and improvisational capacities that often define entrepreneurship, including traits such as

perseverance, purpose-driven action, and creative problem-solving, particularly in resource-constrained environments (Mohammadi, 2021).

This study addresses these limitations by examining entrepreneurs outside traditional corporate settings and business education pathways. It incorporates overlooked factors such as emotional resilience and adaptive strategies while exploring how entrepreneurs in resource-scarce environments use bricolage to navigate challenges (Mohammadi, 2021). By expanding beyond conventional IEOT research, it offers deeper insight into entrepreneurial behavior in unpredictable conditions.

With the theoretical foundations established, the review turns to examine how female entrepreneurship is shaped by gendered power relations, systemic inequalities, and socio-cultural constraints. This discussion is informed throughout by the integrated theoretical lens.

2.2. The State of Female Entrepreneurship in South Africa

Female entrepreneurship in South Africa reflects both vibrant participation and persistent inequality. South Africa ranks second in Africa for women-owned businesses (Mastercard, 2022) and has seen early-stage entrepreneurial activity among women climb from 9.5% in 2022 to 13.5% in 2023 (Meyer et al., 2024).

Women entrepreneurs operate across diverse sectors, with wholesale and retail dominating at 66.7% of female-owned enterprises (GEM, 2023). Yet participation in high-growth industries remains negligible, only 0.6% are active in the ICT sector, compared to 63.8% of men (GEM, 2023). While 66.2% express confidence in their capabilities and 61.7% see promising opportunities, 52.5% cite fear of failure as a deterrent, exceeding the global female average of 49.8% (GEM, 2023). Despite their vital role in the informal economy, only 21% of SMEs are women-owned or led (Mastercard, 2022), highlighting persistent barriers like limited access to finance, exclusion from networks, restrictive norms, and heavy caregiving burdens (FOMO & International Finance Corporation 2020).

South Africa also records a high rate of female business discontinuation, with more women exiting than sustaining ventures beyond the 3.5-year “established business” threshold (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023). Many start businesses out of necessity rather than opportunity yet play a critical role in job creation and household survival. Notably, 84.1% of women-owned businesses employ one to five people, compared to 73.5% of male-owned firms (GEM, 2023). Few operate medium-sized enterprises (6–19 employees: 6.1% vs. 13.7%

for men) or large enterprises (20+ employees: 4.9% vs. 11.8% for men), yet their impact on community well-being remains significant (GEM, 2023).

On the broader African continent, women continue to lead global entrepreneurship trends, with about 24% of adult women engaged in business, predominantly in the informal sector (IFC, 2021; Gatiti, 2020). South African women are part of this momentum but face entrenched structural barriers, particularly when transitioning from survivalist to scalable ventures.

2.3. Female Entrepreneurship in South African Townships

2.3.1. Contextualising Township Economies

Female entrepreneurship in SA's townships reveals a complex interplay of exclusion, ingenuity, and everyday resilience. These historically marginalised spaces, shaped by apartheid-era spatial planning and compounded by ongoing economic neglect, remain structurally and symbolically peripheral, marked by high unemployment, poor infrastructure, and fragmented markets (Mahajan, 2014; Parker, 2020; Thomas et al., 2020; Todes & Turok, 2018; van der Linde, 2020). This layered exclusion is not incidental but structural; as Nqapela and Fakir (2017) observed, "the township was never originally conceived of, or designed as a place of potential, for possible revitalisation," and these spatial roots remain "the primary source of every conceivable obstacle faced in the vitalisation of the township economy" (para. 6).

Within this precarious ecosystem, SMMEs play a crucial role in sustaining township life, often serving as both engines of local economic activity and informal social safety nets, with women at the forefront, occupying multiple roles as income generators, caregivers, and community stabilisers (Bullough et al., 2021; Makwara, 2019; Meyer et al., 2024). These businesses often emerge from both necessity and commitment, shaped by the dual burdens of spatial marginality and social responsibility.

While this resilience is often rooted in relational ties, it also unfolds within a broader context of social fragmentation. Preisendörfer et al. (2014) argued that many South African townships function as "low-trust cultures," where social capital is uneven and mistrust is pervasive. This complicates the notion of embeddedness often associated with township entrepreneurship, revealing that FEs must navigate not only hostile economic terrain but also the challenge of building and sustaining businesses in environments where trust-based networks are fragile or strained.

2.3.2. Economic Contribution and Social Embeddedness of FEs

Globally, Africa records one of the highest rates of female entrepreneurship, with 26% of adult women engaged in business activities (Gatiti, 2020). In SA, approximately 21% of women own SMMEs, contributing significantly to household livelihoods, local food systems, and informal trade networks (Mastercard, 2022). In township settings, FEs are deeply embedded in tightly woven community networks, where entrepreneurial success often hinges on mutual support, trust, and interdependence (Grant, 2013).

Unlike conventional models of entrepreneurship that prioritise growth and profit (Orser, 2022), these women often pursue ventures that serve both economic and social purposes. Their businesses are rooted in collective wellbeing and relational reciprocity, functioning not only as income-generating enterprises but also as vehicles for support, stability, and community resilience (Lepeley et al., 2020; Maharaj, 2022; Theron, 2015).

IFET underscores this interdependence, framing entrepreneurship as a tool for social transformation rather than simply individual economic gain (Harquail, 2019; Orser & Elliott, 2015). It highlights how women use business ownership to challenge exclusionary structures, foster gender equity, and uplift their communities (Harquail, 2019; Orser & Elliott, 2015; Walker-Mohamed et al., 2024).

According to Brush (1992), many women view their businesses as extensions of their social roles; spaces where care, survival, and contribution converge. In townships contexts, these roles are particularly vital, as FEs often act as both economic agents and community anchors, bridging service gaps left by the state and formal sectors (Nambiar et al., 2020). They provide essential goods and services, create employment, stimulate local trade, and reinvest in their communities (Henri et al., 2023). These are acts of economic participation that carry immense social meaning and value.

2.3.3. Intersecting Constraints and the Hidden Cost of Resilience

Despite their critical role in township economies, FEs contend with a web of structural, gendered, and emotional constraints. Gendered expectations and the burden of unpaid care work limit their time, mobility, and entrepreneurial focus, making it difficult for them to scale or formalise their businesses (Chant, 2014; Orser, 2022; van der Linde, 2020). FEs also face financial exclusion, which makes them less likely to secure bank loans or attract investment. When they do, they often receive smaller amounts under more restrictive terms (Brush et al.,

2009; FOMO & IFC, 2020). These barriers reflect broader systemic biases, including limited asset ownership, exclusion from mentorship, market access, and networking opportunities (Akhalwaya & Havenga, 2012; Jacob, 2021; Moagi et al., 2021; Nambiar et al., 2020).

Compounding these disadvantages are spatial inequalities that disconnect township businesses from urban markets, reliable infrastructure and institutional support (Turok, 2018). These conditions are further exacerbated by market saturation, price-sensitive customers, and competition over homogeneous goods (Hloni & Zhou, 2023; Sitharam & Hoque, 2016). However, within this fragmented landscape, competition is structural rather than interpersonal, shaped by enduring inequities rather than business rivalry alone.

Systemic racism, class-based exclusion, and institutional neglect further constrain the entrepreneurial journeys of Black and Coloured women, who make up the majority of township-based entrepreneurs, and are often excluded from opportunities such as formal education, and professional development (Chant, 2014; Ngubeni et al., 2022; van der Linde, 2020). Women with disabilities, frequently referred to as the “forgotten minority,” face additional layers of marginalisation, navigating entrepreneurial pathways in contexts that rarely accommodate accessibility or inclusivity (Hidegh et al., 2023). These overlapping forms of exclusion reflect the persistent devaluation of feminised labour and the continued framing of women entrepreneurs as less legitimate economic actors, limiting their access to recognition, resources, and meaningful participation in the broader economy (Amalu & Okafor, 2010; Bruni et al., 2004; Malmström et al., 2020; Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015).

The emotional toll of this context is often underestimated. The constant pressure to survive financially, physically, and socially generates chronic stress, burnout, and diminished entrepreneurial confidence (Mastercard, 2022; GEM, 2021). Fox (2025) and Satkunanathan (2021) caution against romanticising this resilience, warning that it can obscure the emotional labour and trauma it entails. In the absence of psychosocial support, many FEs must manage anxiety and distress while projecting the strength expected of “resilient” entrepreneurs (Justino, 2012; Mastercard, 2022).

And yet, FEs persist. Their ability to adapt, problem-solve, and sustain operations amid adversity reflects deep entrepreneurial ingenuity and strategic agency (Nambiar et al., 2020; Nordbø, 2022). Some manage to grow their ventures despite insecure tenure, erratic consumer behaviour, and systemic neglect.

However, in gang-controlled townships, the stakes are even higher. Here, persistent violence and criminal governance intensify these pressures, placing safety, autonomy, and business viability under continuous threat. The conditions faced by FEs in these areas are not only more volatile but require constant recalibration of risk, visibility, and mobility. It is within these layered and heightened insecurities that this study is situated. It examines how women continue to build and sustain businesses that matter, both to their communities and to the fragile economies underpinning township life. The next section explores these dynamics in greater depth.

2.4. Compounded Struggles of Female Entrepreneurship in Ganglands

FEs operating in gang-controlled environments face compounded challenges that extend beyond the socio-economic marginalisation experienced by other township-based entrepreneurs. Research on these environments, often labelled “ganglands,” shows that they are characterised by entrenched organised crime, pervasive violence, and social instability, where the everyday presence of gangs undermines not only physical safety but also people’s ability to access basic services and pursue sustainable livelihoods (Viltoft, 2022).

To contextualise these layered threats, the section begins by examining the defining features of ganglands and the broader ecosystem of violence in which FEs operate. The subsequent subsections then explore how, despite persistent volatility, FEs continue to adapt, innovate, and sustain their businesses, emerging as vital economic and social anchors within their communities.

2.4.1. Defining Ganglands: Economies of Violence Under Gang Control

Gang-controlled townships are marked by a distinct intersection of criminal governance and economic instability. Unlike other low-income urban areas, these spaces are dominated by syndicates that exert physical, psychological, and financial threats that not only disrupt business activities but also create persistent fear, limit mobility, and intensify psychological distress (McDaniel et al., 2016; Irish-Qhobosheane, 2024). Salvi et al. (2025) note that in contexts of armed conflict, much like in ganglands, contested incompatibilities between organised groups often lead to widespread destruction and civilian harm. This offers a useful lens for understanding the scale and systemic nature of gang violence in such environments. As Finch et al. (2021) further note, the reach of gang influence extends beyond routine neighbourhood crime, shaping broader socio-economic conditions and constraining legitimate business activities.

Bangerter (2010) noted that gangs often thrive in urban peripheries where state presence is weak, law enforcement is ineffective, and communities lack formal protection mechanisms. These conditions transform marginalised neighbourhoods into zones of lawlessness and criminal rule. Thomas et al. (2020) identified a global pattern across the most violent regions, marked by economic exclusion, state neglect, and criminal dominance, where homicide rates exceed 30 per 100,000.

This global trend is starkly mirrored in SA's most gang-affected areas, such as Nelson Mandela Bay, the Cape Flats, and Westbury in Johannesburg (Morris, 2019). In these townships, gang violence has escalated to crisis levels, with media reports frequently likening them to "war zones" due to the persistence and intensity of the violence (Bhengu, 2023). While this comparison may seem extreme, Applebaum and Mawby (2018) argue that although gang violence differs from traditional warfare, its intensity and impact on daily life often resemble the effects of war.

This parallel becomes more plausible when considering the way gangs themselves operate. Many have adopted the paramilitary-style hierarchies and ideological structures of the prison-based Number gangs, where members hold military ranks such as "General," "Lieutenant," and "Colonel," reflecting a structured chain of command (Petersen, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020). In this sense, the language of war is not merely metaphorical but deeply embedded in how these groups understand and organise themselves.

In recent years, SA has responded to escalating gang violence with military-style interventions, echoing strategies used in Mexico's fight against cartels (Woody, 2017). In 2019, the South African National Defence Force was deployed to the Cape Flats to curb spiralling gang violence (Bernardo, 2020). More recently, Westbury has seen heightened police presence following the assassination of gang leaders, a violent 24-hour period in which eleven people were shot and two killed (Steyn, 2023), and targeted attacks on business owners (Buhr, 2024; Pijoos, 2024).

Despite these interventions, gangs continue to exert significant control over local economies (Cano et al., 2023; Moyo, 2019), leaving business owners, particularly FEs, to operate within an unpredictable and often life-threatening environment. The following section explores these layered and intersecting challenges in greater detail, setting the stage for an examination of how FEs respond to, adapt, and survive within these economies of violence.

2.4.2. Intersecting Barriers Constraining Female Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurship within gang-affected townships presents significant risks for all business owners, yet FEs face layered, gendered challenges rooted in broader historical, social, and economic inequalities (Naudé et al., 2023). While male business owners also face risks, these intersect with gendered power structures that disproportionately disadvantage women, limiting their ability to operate safely, access support, or fully participate in the economy (Behr & Recavarren, 2024).

Although South African-specific literature on FEs in ganglands remains limited, often because these areas are subsumed within broader township analyses, research from other conflict-affected contexts offers valuable insight into the gendered constraints women face in violent and unstable environments. Considering Applebaum and Mawby's (2018) argument that the intensity and disruption of gang violence can mirror conditions typically associated with war zones, this framing provides a compelling lens for understanding the complex, intersecting barriers faced by FEs in gang-controlled townships, as unpacked in the sections that follow.

2.4.2.1. Economic Extortion and Gendered Exploitation

In gang-controlled spaces, extortion is a pervasive and gendered form of structural violence. Although both male and female business owners face coercion through "protection fees" (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023). Extortion is far from gender-neutral; women-owned businesses are often seen as more vulnerable and therefore become frequent victims, especially smaller, women-run enterprises that are considered easy targets in times of conflict (Naudé et al., 2023).

Global patterns reinforce these dynamics. In Haiti, the Madan Saras, a network of female traders, endure economic, physical, and sexual violence as part of extortion schemes (Delva & Moloney, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Similarly, in Kenya, Munyagia (2017) found FEs were disproportionately subjected to extortion related robberies and killings.

In SA, Venter (2023) highlights that extortion has become deeply entrenched in the business landscape, particularly in the Western Cape, where these crimes rank among the highest nationally (Dolley & Ellis, 2024). Here, entrepreneurs, including FEs, often view extortion payments as an unavoidable reality, responding with "Bayafika abafana" ("the young men do come") when asked if they pay protection fees (Ancer, 2024). For FEs, who are already operating on the margins, such payments are especially crippling, draining limited resources

and reinforcing their vulnerability within criminalised economies. Similar patterns are seen in Nelson Mandela Bay, where gang violence is extraordinarily high and targeted killings and open conflict are reported as near-daily occurrences (Thomas et al., 2020).

As global trends suggest, extortion economies do not exist in isolation. They are embedded within broader systems of gendered violence. In South Africa, many of the country's 30 Gender-based Violence (GBV) hotspots identified by the South African Police Service (SAPS, 2020) overlap with gang-controlled areas, where FEs face heightened threats, including targeted killings, which are a defining feature of extortion networks (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2024). With sexual violence rates in SA among the highest globally (Gouws, 2022), the overlap suggests that defying extortion in ganglands is not just an economic risk for Fes – it is a threat to their survival.

Importantly, Irish-Qhobosheane (2024) notes that extortion dynamics vary across gang-controlled areas. In Westbury, the focal site of this study, and neighbouring Eldorado Park, extortion is less pervasive than in other regions. Here, dominant gangs such as the Varados and Fast Guns primarily focus on controlling the drug trade, with extortion functioning as a secondary income stream that typically targets new or foreign-owned businesses (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2024). This variation underscores the importance of context in understanding the gendered impact of extortion. Not all ganglands exert economic violence in the same ways or to the same extent. As entrepreneurship scholars increasingly argue, close attention to context is essential for capturing the complex, situated realities that shape entrepreneurial experiences (Maharaj, 2022).

2.4.2.2. Mobility Restrictions and Gendered Safety Threats

Freedom of movement is essential to business success, yet FEs face severe restrictions in conflict-ridden environments. In areas with weak law enforcement, mobility is hindered by gang territorial control and entrenched gender norms that limit women's ability to network and conduct business safely (Ritchie, 2024).

In SA, although research on mobility constraints specific to FEs remains limited, the spatial overlap between GBV hotspots and gang-affected communities (SAPS, 2020) points to broader constraints on women's freedom of movement. This concern is echoed in the 2024 Victims of Crime Survey released by STATS SA, which highlights that women, particularly those in urban areas, continue to feel unsafe walking alone, both during the day and at night (Stats SA, 2024). In gang-affected areas such as Westbury, these risks are intensified by

ongoing turf wars, with reports indicating that residents were often forced indoors from early evening due to persistent gun violence (Naidoo, 2024). For FEs, such conditions are likely to limit access to markets, reduce opportunities for face-to-face networking, and undermine the spatial autonomy required for business growth.

The intersection of gendered violence, criminal governance, and weak institutional protection compounds these risks. In addition to gang-related threats, FEs also encounter state-linked exploitation that further undermines their mobility and safety. Dlamini (2019) documents the routine harassment of street vendors, many of whom are women, by police, while Phaliso (2023) notes that ineffective policing in high-crime townships often enables unchecked criminal control over local economies. Together, these dynamics produce a hostile and unpredictable environment in which FEs must navigate constant threats, not only from gangs, but also from the very institutions intended to protect them.

Although research on FEs' mobility in the South African context remains limited, global studies reveal similar patterns of gendered immobility, where insecurity, gender norms, and criminal governance converge to restrict women's ability to move freely, access markets, and operate their businesses safely.

In Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, for example, research shows that FE's mobility is constrained not only by security risks such as harassment but also by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that frame women as unfit for entrepreneurship, favouring their participation in traditional employment instead (Althalathini & Al-Dajani, 2021). Similarly, in Haiti, FEs must navigate gang checkpoints, where they are vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence when traveling to and from markets (Delva & Moloney, 2022). These examples illustrate how gendered power relations, reinforced by both state neglect and criminal control, structure the terms of women's participation in violent economies, turning mobility itself into a site of exclusion and vulnerability.

2.4.2.3. Psychological and Social Toll of Violence

Beyond physical and economic risk, FEs in ganglands bear the psychological weight of operating in violent environments. Constant exposure to criminal activity, extortion, and community instability generates chronic stress and trauma, which erodes entrepreneurial motivation and resilience (Saraf & Speakman, 2018). These impacts are magnified by the absence of basic services, such as healthcare, housing, water, and education, which further contributes to mental distress and limits participation in economic and social life (World Bank,

2016). These layered constraints compound the emotional and operational pressures placed on women entrepreneurs in violent settings.

Globally, conflict-related violence produces similar outcomes. In Pakistan, Muhammad et al. (2017) found that FEs live in constant fear of insurgent threats, which discourages them from running businesses and limits their ability to expand. Similarly, Mohd-Nor and Ali (2022) report that in Northeast Nigeria, the psychological toll of violence leads to reduced entrepreneurial drive, financial instability, and heightened personal risk. Women in these contexts often shoulder disproportionate burdens, with research showing they are more likely than men to experience the enduring consequences of war and conflict (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006). In such environments, Ahmed et al. (2024) highlighted the high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder and depressive symptoms, further constraining FEs' ability to function in both personal and economic spheres.

These global patterns are mirrored in SA, where the psychological burden of violence is deeply felt in gang-affected communities, where criminal syndicates exert extensive territorial and economic control (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022). In Kraaifontein, for example, it is reported that informal traders often abandon their stalls out of fear for their lives (SABC News, 2024). In Philippi, one Somali shopkeeper vividly described the emotional toll of extortion, describing the fear and pressure of paying multiple gangs to avoid violence: *"We are caught in the middle… our lives are at risk… we will be paying two gangs of criminals. We are scared"* (Phaliso, 2023). These expressions of fear reflect what Fisk (2021) terms "ambient trauma," a persistent emotional strain that becomes normalised as part of daily life in violent settings.

Persistent violence in gang-affected areas also destabilises the broader entrepreneurial environment. In Westbury, for instance, e-hailing drivers reportedly avoid the area out of fear of robberies and fatal attacks (Sibiya, 2024). This has serious consequences for business owners, including reduced mobility, disrupted service delivery, and isolation from the networks and infrastructure essential for sustaining and growing their enterprises.

For some FEs, this emotional burden is intensified by the infiltration of gangs into family structures. Criminal groups frequently recruit local youth, including sons, nephews, or extended relatives of entrepreneurs, leaving FEs to carry the dual burden of running a business while trying to protect their families in environments where criminal influence is pervasive (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022). These psychological impacts are deeply enduring. As Musisi and Kinyanda (2020) observe, trauma

rooted in violent contexts can have lasting intergenerational impacts, shaping not only present livelihood decisions but also the economic aspirations of future generations.

2.4.2.4. Structural Discrimination and Economic Exclusion

While structural discrimination and gendered exclusion affect FEs across South African townships, these barriers are further magnified in gang-affected communities. In such settings, systemic limitations, ranging from poor access to finance, legal protection, and state support to exclusion from business networks, collide with the persistent threat of violence and criminal control (Diale & Carrim, 2022; Ngubeni et al., 2022). These overlapping pressures produce an environment where FEs' formal economic participation is not only obstructed but actively undermined.

In gang-controlled townships, weak institutional presence, widespread corruption, racialised economic marginalisation, and entrenched gender and cultural norms, which cast men as economic providers and women as caregivers (Diale & Carrim, 2022; Donga & Chimucheka, 2023; Ngubeni et al., 2022), intersect with criminal influence, creating a dual system of exclusion. While women in townships more broadly may struggle to access support from financial institutions or government programmes, those operating in ganglands must also navigate extortion, threats, and informal power structures that distort or replace state functions. This compounds existing exclusion and heightens vulnerability to exploitation.

Comparable dynamics are observed in global conflict zones, where FEs similarly face state neglect, limited legal protection, and socio-cultural constraints on their entrepreneurial participation. In Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, FEs face institutionalised barriers such as bribery, corruption, and deeply embedded biases that question women's legitimacy in business (Althalathini & Al-Dajani, 2021). In Northeast Nigeria, women struggle to balance entrepreneurship with societal expectations of femininity and domestic roles, further constraining their participation in the economy (Mohd-Nor & Ali, 2022). These cases illustrate how contexts marked by instability and patriarchal dominance reinforce systemic barriers that women entrepreneurs struggle to overcome.

Viewed through the lens of IFET, gang-affected environments are not merely sites of layered disadvantage; they are spaces where multiple axes of oppression converge and intensify. Violence, racialised marginalisation, state neglect, and patriarchal criminal economies intersect to produce a uniquely hostile entrepreneurial terrain for women.

IFET offers a critical framework for understanding how these structural inequalities are gendered, embodied, and spatially situated, shaping not only FEs' access to resources and markets but also their emotional well-being, physical safety, and social legitimacy as entrepreneurs. Yet, even under these conditions, FEs continue to adapt, innovate, and persist. The next section explores the strategies and resilience mechanisms that support their survival in such hostile contexts.

2.5. Resilience in Ganglands: Coping Mechanisms and Strategic Agency

FEs operating in conflict-affected settings, including South African townships as noted by Maharaj (2022), do more than just survive; they continually recalibrate, adapt, and persist in the face of overlapping pressures such as violence, spatial exclusion, and institutional neglect (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Naudé et al., 2023; Maharaj, 2022). Although literature on female entrepreneurship in ganglands is limited, existing research shows that FE resilience in conflict-affected contexts is neither incidental nor static (Mohd-Nor & Ali, 2022). Rather, it is dynamic and situational, unfolding in response to everyday threats that shape both life and business (Althalathini & Al-Dajani, 2021; Mohd-Nor & Ali, 2022).

The discussion that follows draws on a combination of global literature from conflict-affected regions and local studies from South African township contexts. While these environments differ in cause and scale, they share critical characteristics, such as chronic violence, informal governance, and institutional neglect, that shape women's entrepreneurial experiences. Rather than treating these sources as interchangeable, this section uses them to deepen conceptual understanding, highlight cross-contextual patterns, and strengthen the analysis of how resilience emerges under violent and unstable conditions.

As RT suggests, resilience under such conditions involves both absorptive and adaptive capacities, referring to the ability to endure shocks while also adjusting practices, behaviours, and structures to changing conditions (Berkes & Ross 2013; Hillmann & Guenther 2021). Although transformative capacity is a central element of RT, its realisation is often limited in conflict-affected contexts. Systemic overhaul remains elusive in communities where persistent violence and socio-political exclusion dominate, as shown in Klug's (2016) study of Westbury, where state-led planning interventions were repeatedly undermined by weak implementation and deep institutional mistrust.

However, literature on FEs in such spaces points to smaller-scale, community-driven transformations (Klug, 2016). As highlighted by Althalathini and Al-Dajani (2021), Duchek

(2020), Maharaj (2022), and Al Shanawani et al. (2024), FEs often push the boundaries of what is possible from within the margins, drawing on strategic adaptation, deliberate innovation, and relational navigation. In this way, resilience often manifests not as radical reinvention, but as continuous adjustment and creative reconfiguration in response to shifting conditions.

Building on this, entrepreneurial resilience in ganglands is layered, shaped by both necessity and agency. Drawing on RT and IEOT, this section conceptualises resilience as encompassing reactive and proactive strategies: the ability to endure adversity while also acting purposefully to resist and rework exclusionary economic conditions. These efforts, often gendered, informal, and improvised, represent calculated responses aimed at sustaining livelihoods and asserting dignity under duress (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Bullough et al., 2014; Welter et al., 2018).

This discussion is structured around two dimensions of resilience. The first addresses coping mechanisms: the social, psychological, and practical tools FEs use to manage threats and maintain continuity. The second focuses on strategic agency: forward-looking adaptations that reconfigure business practices, strengthen networks, and promote sustainability in hostile environments. These strategies reflect entrepreneurial agency that creates space for economic participation amid systemic adversity.

2.5.1. Coping Mechanisms: Navigating Threat, Exclusion and Emotional Strain

2.5.1.1. Adaptive Business Strategies

In high-risk environments, conventional pathways to business growth are rarely viable. For FEs navigating the everyday volatility of gang-controlled spaces, success often depends on their ability to adjust quickly, make practical trade-offs, and maintain continuity under pressure. These adaptations are not driven by long-term vision, but by immediate realities, where preserving continuity, income, and personal safety takes precedence over conventional growth strategies.

RT offers a useful lens for understanding such strategies, particularly the concept of absorptive resilience, which refers to the ability to endure external shocks while maintaining essential functions and routines (Duchek, 2020; Hillmann & Guenther, 2021). The strategies outlined below, rooted in existing capabilities and agile responses, demonstrate how FEs manage instability while keeping their core activities intact.

Leveraging Existing Capabilities – Drawing on the findings of Mohd-Nor and Ali (2022), FEs often bypass formal upskilling and instead rely on existing skills, cultural knowledge, and trade experience to sustain income-generating ventures. These practices demonstrate absorptive resilience by mobilising what Hillmann and Guenther (2021) term “internal capacities” to remain operational amid instability. For example, in war-torn Northeast Sri Lanka, women entrepreneurs relied on pre-existing competencies to establish businesses that supported immediate income without requiring formal upskilling (Ayadurai & Sohail, 2006; Mohd-Nor & Ali, 2022). Similarly, in Nigeria, FEs use their existing capabilities not only to sustain their businesses but also to explore new opportunities for resilience and growth (Mohd-Nor & Ali, 2022).

Flexible Business Models – In volatile settings, the capacity to adapt business practices in real time becomes a prerequisite for survival (Maalouf et al., 2025). These immediate modifications, such as shifting location, adjusting operating hours, or reducing public visibility, illustrate the core principle of absorptive resilience: maintaining continuity by adjusting the business model just enough to stay afloat amid disruption (Duchek, 2020).

This form of adaptation is evident in Honduras and El Salvador, where FEs conduct sales at night, deliver products directly, and avoid storefronts to reduce visibility and exposure to gangs (Hendricks, 2019). Similar strategies are visible among Syrian FEs, who routinely modify their business models in response to displacement, insecurity, and the risk of social sanction. According to Al Shanawani et al. (2024), some avoid advertising on social media to stay off the radar of powerful actors, while others shift operations into private homes to reduce exposure to harassment and meet caregiving responsibilities. These adaptations are not driven by long-term planning but by the immediate need to survive under conditions of persistent threat and instability.

While these individual adaptations are essential, they rarely occur in isolation. They are often enabled and reinforced by broader social networks and informal alliances that provide security, information, and access to shared resources. Moreover, these responses, while practical, also reflect constrained agency as they represent deliberate yet reactive efforts to keep operating under conditions not of the entrepreneur’s choosing. In this sense, adaptive business strategies function not only as coping mechanisms, but also as absorptions of systemic failure, where women entrepreneurs are forced to carry the burden of structural neglect through their own ingenuity.

2.5.1.2. Resilience Through Trust-Based Networks

In high-risk environments where formal institutions are absent, dysfunctional, or complicit in violence, social ties often function as critical survival infrastructure (Kim et al., 2022). For FEs, these relationships, rooted in family, community, and peer networks, form the backbone of informal support systems (Emami et al., 2023).

Relational resilience, understood as the capacity to draw strength, resources, and meaning from interpersonal ties (Masten & Barnes, 2018; Theron, 2015), becomes essential to sustaining business activity and emotional well-being. FEs do not operate in isolation; instead, they rely on social capital, including trust-based relationships and reciprocal obligations (Mask, 2019), to buffer risk, access shared knowledge, and sustain economic participation amid instability.

This section explores how FEs draw on two forms of relational resilience:

Community-Based Support – In conflict-affected and gang-controlled settings, FEs often rely on familial and community-based relationships to share resources, receive emotional support, and navigate security risks (Althalathini, 2020; Althalathini & Al-Dajani, 2021; Althalathini et al., 2020). These support systems function as embedded forms of protective infrastructure, especially in contexts where state institutions have failed to provide safety or economic opportunity. In Palestine, such networks help FEs counter patriarchal limitations and market exclusion by offering essential support, such as childcare, financial assistance, and access to client networks, that directly contributes to business sustainability (Al-Dajani et al., 2015).

Similar dynamics are observed in South African context. In her study of FEs in the township of Philippi in the Western Cape, Maharaj (2022) found that familial and communal relationships form the bedrock of many entrepreneurs' resilience journeys. For example, several FEs described receiving emotional support from parents, financial backing from siblings, and assistance with marketing and caregiving from family members and close friends (Maharaj, 2022).

These practices reflect what Masten and Barnes (2018) describe as adaptive forms of resilience, socially embedded ways of managing risk through shared responsibility and support. In the absence of reliable state protection, trust and reciprocity within families and communities become key mechanisms for survival and continuity. These relationships help

FEs manage daily threats, sustain their businesses, and maintain a sense of stability in otherwise volatile environments.

Peer Support and Knowledge Sharing – Beyond familial ties, peer relationships add a further layer of resilience, anchored in shared learning, mentorship, and emotional affirmation. In conflict zones such as the West Bank and Gaza, for instance, peer mentorship among FEs has proven vital in building confidence, navigating market constraints, and transferring practical business knowledge in unstable settings (World Bank, 2018). These horizontal relationships foster what Theron (2015) refers to as the "co-regulation of resilience," where individuals draw strength and insight from one another to maintain both emotional and operational stability.

In the South African context, peer-based knowledge sharing emerges in similarly powerful ways. Maharaj (2022) documents how a property entrepreneur in Philippi collaborated with local legal professionals to run workshops that demystify property ownership, offering not just practical support, but capacity building and a shared sense of community purpose. These exchanges, while informal, create micro-ecosystems of knowledge and care that help women navigate exclusionary systems.

Framed through IFET, these peer networks represent more than mutual support; they are collective responses to structural abandonment. In gang-affected and marginalised spaces where institutional trust is low, FEs often rely on one another to build alternative economies of care, resistance, and survival. This challenges the notion that entrepreneurial resilience is purely individualistic, revealing instead its deeply relational nature.

2.5.1.3. Psychosocial Resilience: Emotional Endurance

In violent and structurally neglected spaces, entrepreneurial resilience extends beyond economic and social strategies; it is also deeply psychological. For FEs, sustaining focus and functioning amid chronic threat and emotional strain requires a form of internal endurance often overlooked in entrepreneurship literature. Psychosocial resilience, defined as the ability to regulate emotions, retain purpose, and continue operating in the face of trauma, is essential to survival in gang-affected environments (Panagioti et al., 2014; Walsh, 2016).

RT conceptualises this form of endurance as adaptive capacity: the internal ability to adjust and reorganise psychological responses in ways that sustain functioning under stress (Masten & Barnes, 2018; Norris et al., 2008). Rather than eliminating the source of adversity, adaptive

capacity enables individuals to maintain meaning, routine, and identity despite persistent threat. In contexts of prolonged instability, these adaptations become what Walsh (2016) terms stabilising mechanisms, tools that help individuals remain emotionally grounded and mentally resilient when external conditions cannot be controlled. These adaptations include:

Emotional compartmentalisation – Many FEs develop internal strategies to suppress or regulate emotional responses, such as fear, grief, or anxiety, in order to keep their businesses running. One such strategy is emotional compartmentalisation, managing distress internally while projecting confidence externally (Békés et al., 2018). In Northeast Nigeria, women entrepreneurs described suppressing personal fear in order to present confidence in public-facing interactions (Mohd-Nor & Ali, 2022). While such emotional labour can have long-term mental health consequences, it serves as a short-term adaptive tool to preserve routine and uphold public trust in dangerous conditions.

Social Anchoring and Emotional Buffering – Social networks also serve as psychological anchors, helping FEs process fear, reduce isolation, and stay emotionally grounded amid instability (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Thomas & Pascoe, 2019). In Syria, women entrepreneurs reported managing stress from harassment, financial anxiety, and insecurity while continuing to operate their businesses, often by supporting one another emotionally in the absence of formal systems (Al Shanawani et al., 2024). These relational supports act as informal emotional buffers, aligning with Masten's (2014) view of resilience as a socially distributed process, co-produced through empathy, trust, and shared meaning-making.

Spirituality and Faith-Based Coping – Spiritual belief systems often serve as stabilising forces in contexts of chronic violence. In Haiti and Palestine, faith enables FEs to interpret suffering, maintain hope, and exercise agency through a sense of divine trust (Windham et al., 2005; Justino, 2012). Similar patterns emerge in South Africa, where entrepreneurs draw strength from prayer, religious rituals, and spiritual identity (Cullen et al., 2010). In Philippi, one founder shared how her faith helped her process personal trauma and motivated her to launch a youth-focused community initiative (Maharaj, 2022).

This reflects broader literature that frames spirituality as a key driver of entrepreneurial endurance and emotional resilience. Osunmakinde et al. (2025) identify practices such as meditating, praying, discerning, and trusting as central to the resilience journeys of social entrepreneurs. Likewise, Johnson and Jiang (2017) suggest that spiritually oriented workplaces enhance psychological well-being, while Shava and Chinyamurindi (2022) links spirituality to a deeper pursuit of meaning. In this context, spirituality is not escapist; it is an

active resource that informs decision-making, sustains relationships, and reinforces emotional stability in volatile environments.

Informal Mental Health Practices – In the absence of institutional mental health support, many FEs adopt informal or discreet ways of managing emotional strain, ranging from self-reflection and informal counselling to spiritual rituals and temporary withdrawal (Althalathini & Al-Dajani, 2021; Al Shanawani et al., 2024). Such practices are rarely recognised as formal mental health interventions, but they function as everyday acts of psychological maintenance, strategies to preserve equilibrium in the midst of prolonged volatility (Panagioti et al., 2014).

These informal practices are visible in the Syrian context, where emotional strain and isolation are commonly reported. FEs described being weighed down by caregiving responsibilities, and overwhelmed by relentless social and financial pressure, yet they continue to operate without access to mental health care. In response, some adopt quiet forms of tactical withdrawal, such as limiting interactions with outsiders to avoid harassment and emotional overload (Al Shanawani et al., 2024). Though often unrecognised, these practices represent intentional efforts to manage stress and safeguard psychological well-being in high-risk environments.

Viewed through IFET, these coping strategies are not only adaptive but also deeply gendered. The psychological burden carried by FEs is compounded by care responsibilities, community expectations, and the invisibility of emotional labour in both policy and practice. As Mirchandani (1999) and Tomodi (2024) argue, women in conflict-affected and patriarchal contexts are expected to remain composed, supportive, and resilient, even while navigating trauma. Emerging findings suggest that in gang-affected areas, this burden may be particularly acute. FEs are not only managing their own trauma but often feel compelled to shield others, including children, employees, and clients, from the psychological toll of routine violence.

Taken together, these coping responses illustrate how FEs survive within hostile environments, not only through inner resolve but through collective knowledge, social embeddedness, and culturally grounded practices. While RT frames these efforts as expressions of adaptive capacity, IFET brings critical attention to the structural inequities and gendered expectations that shape how resilience must be performed. Yet survival alone does not capture the full entrepreneurial experience in ganglands. In addition to these inward-facing strategies, many FEs actively pursue outward-facing adaptations, including reworking their business models, adjusting their operating environments, and seizing moments of opportunity

despite constraint. The next section explores these strategic expressions of agency in greater depth.

2.5.2. Strategic Agency Navigating Violent Economies

While coping mechanisms help FEs absorb shocks, strategic agency reflects the deliberate steps they take to keep their businesses running in violent and unpredictable environments (Al Shanawani et al., 2024; Maalouf et al., 2025; Mohd-Nor & Ali, 2022). As Althalathini and Al-Dajani (2021) highlight, FEs in these settings are not passive victims of insecurity or exclusion; they are deliberate actors who respond to instability with foresight, purpose, and context-specific strategies. Rather than merely withstanding or reacting impulsively to external threats, they make calculated decisions rooted in local knowledge, trust-based relationships, and long-term survival goals (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Emami et al., 2023). This form of agency is not incidental; it is embedded in daily business practice and evident in both visible and subtle acts of negotiation, innovation, and adaptation.

Applying a theoretical lens, these responses align with the five key dimensions of IEOT: autonomy, proactiveness, innovation, calculated risk-taking, and competitive aggressiveness. As the literature suggests, these traits are often expressed in less direct, more relational ways and are shaped by context-specific risks. Yet, they still represent a strategic posture through which FEs pursue opportunity and defend their market position. Together, these adapted traits show how women actively shape their economic trajectories despite the structural and security constraints that define their environments.

The following subsections explore how these traits manifest in practice, demonstrating how strategic agency is enacted by FEs in high-risk, under-resourced environments.

2.5.2.1. Entrepreneurial Motivation and Autonomy

FEs in conflict-affected settings are often driven by a complex interplay of motivations that go beyond economic survival. While autonomy, agency, and the desire to resist patriarchal norms are significant drivers, as seen in Afghanistan, where women start businesses to challenge gender norms and support other women (Holmén et al., 2011; Sabri, 2015), research from Gaza, Kashmir, and broader conflict-affected regions confirms that women's motivation for entrepreneurship is typically shaped by a mix of push and pull factors (Khan et al., 2023; Özsungur, 2019).

Push factors include the collapse of formal employment structures, the absence of male breadwinners, family responsibility, and prolonged instability, alongside aspirations for financial independence and social recognition (Khan et al., 2023). Özsungur (2019) highlights how hardship and aspiration often co-exist, framing entrepreneurship as both a response to economic pressure and a pursuit of personal fulfilment. Similarly, Althalathini (2020) shows how women in Gaza, Iraq, and Afghanistan enter entrepreneurship out of necessity but are also driven by deeper goals, such as preserving heritage, supporting families, and making a broader social impact.

This sense of autonomy often extends beyond personal ambition to include social and moral dimensions. Solesvik et al. (2019) found that many women pursue business not solely for growth or profit, but to address unmet community needs. Supporting this, research shows that women are more likely than men to prioritise employee wellbeing, ethical leadership, and inclusive business practices (Cruz & Nordqvist, 2012; Machokoto & Nyantakyi, 2023). These values are closely tied to gendered experiences of care and interdependence, where entrepreneurship is understood not merely as a path to individual success, but as a vehicle for connection, purpose, and social transformation (Brush, 1992).

Such motivations align strongly with key dimensions of IEOT, particularly autonomy, proactiveness, and calculated risk-taking (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). However, they also resonate with IFET, which emphasises how women's entrepreneurial agency is shaped by structural exclusion, collective responsibility, and the pursuit of justice. In this light, entrepreneurship in gang-affected environments is more than a means of survival; it becomes a form of strategic autonomy and quiet resistance, carried out within systems that constrain women's mobility, voice, and economic participation.

2.5.2.2. Resourcefulness and Innovation

In hostile settings, innovation is not optional; it is a strategic necessity. FEs often develop niche offerings or adapt products to meet unmet needs, particularly in patriarchal or resource-constrained markets (Althalathini, 2020). In Afghanistan, for instance, women respond to gendered barriers by introducing culturally appropriate services that give them a competitive edge in male-dominated spaces (Althalathini, 2020).

This spirit of innovation frequently goes hand in hand with resourcefulness. In Syria, for example, women entrepreneurs exemplify this by repurposing household items, recycling materials, and relying on informal support systems that provide access to surplus produce,

donated equipment, and rotating savings schemes such as jamiat to sustain their businesses in the absence of formal financing (Al Shanawani et al., 2024).

These practices speak to more than resilience. They reflect a distinct entrepreneurial orientation rooted in improvisation, local knowledge, and creative responses to systemic constraints (Aliber et al., 2006; Desa, 2012). In this context, resourcefulness is not just about surviving adversity; it is an intentional, opportunity-seeking strategy shaped by the realities of exclusion and instability.

2.5.2.3. Proactiveness and Strategic Opportunity Seeking

IEOT identifies proactiveness as a central entrepreneurial trait, reflected not in impulsive reactions, but in forward-looking, calculated responses to changing environments (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996; Kreiser et al., 2020). In conflict-affected settings, FEs demonstrate this through strategic engagement with external systems, digital tools, and informal opportunities to grow and sustain their ventures (Althalathini & Al-Dajani, 2021; Mohd-Nor & Ali, 2022; Shah & Lala, 2023).

In Nigeria, for example, women entrepreneurs enrol in capacity-building programmes not as passive recipients, but as intentional actors seeking to professionalise their businesses and expand market reach (Mohd-Nor & Ali, 2022). Similarly, Salvi et al. (2025) observe that conflict can generate new entrepreneurial opportunities. The withdrawal of foreign direct investment often leaves behind idle labour, vacant infrastructure, and broken supply chains. Proactive entrepreneurs repurpose these abandoned assets, using disruption itself as a springboard for business development by providing essential goods and services in communities underserved by formal actors.

This dynamic is further reinforced by Shah and Lala's (2023) study in Kashmir, which finds that success in volatile regions hinges on the ability to seek, recognise, and act on opportunities amid uncertainty. FEs in such contexts adapt quickly, navigate institutional voids, and reconfigure available resources to their advantage. Proactiveness emerges not simply as a personality trait, but as a context-sensitive strategy grounded in foresight and adaptability.

Digital platforms amplify this orientation. Social media has emerged as a key enabler for FEs, especially where mobility is restricted or formal infrastructure is lacking. In Palestine, for instance, media coverage by Al-Jazeera significantly increased a FE's business credibility and visibility (Althalathini & Al-Dajani, 2021). Across conflict zones, platforms like Instagram,

TikTok, and Facebook provide low-cost avenues for product promotion, brand building, and customer engagement, often with minimal financial investment (Akpuokwe et al., 2024; Matusin et al., 2023; Olsson & Bernhard, 2021).

In these ways, FEs in high-risk environments show a clear strategic posture. Whether adapting to institutional failure, navigating digital channels, or filling market gaps, they exemplify proactive entrepreneurship aligned with the principles of IEOT. Far from merely surviving, these women position themselves with purpose and actively shape their economic futures through intentional, informed, and context-driven action.

2.5.2.4. Business Model Adaptation

Adaptability is central to long-term survival in gang-affected and conflict-prone economies. In such environments, FEs frequently adapt their business models to reduce visibility, manage risk, and ensure continuity. In countries like Honduras and El Salvador, for example, FEs avoid storefronts altogether, opting instead for home-based or mobile operations to minimise exposure to extortion and gang interference (Hendricks, 2019). These invisible businesses are not simply reactive; they reflect calculated, strategic responses to high-risk operating conditions.

Althalathini (2022) observes that women in conflict zones sustain and grow businesses not just out of necessity, but through strategic recalibration that includes introducing new products, experimenting with technology, and working around institutional voids. Others adopt hyperlocal resource loops, such as repurposing surplus produce or discarded materials, to sustain operations with minimal costs (Al Shanawani et al., 2024).

This kind of innovation is mirrored in the work of Mutagwaba (2009) and Rawal (2023), who observed that FEs diversify services or target new markets to secure more stable income streams, even in the absence of reliable capital or support structures. Similarly, Shah and Lala (2023) identify ‘organising competencies’, including resource mobilisation, business redesign, and social leveraging, as key enablers of entrepreneurial success in conflict-affected Kashmir. These competencies reflect proactive adaptation, where women continually fine-tune their models to align with shifting risks and opportunities.

Conversely, Kreiser et al. (2020) warn that while hostile environments may initially spark entrepreneurial orientation, driving innovation, risk-taking, and opportunity-seeking, this effect has limits. When external threats surpass a certain threshold, they may suppress

entrepreneurial activity and trigger regression (Kreiser et al., 2020). This highlights that business model adaptation is not linear; it is a fluid, context-sensitive process that balances ambition with caution and innovation with survival.

Taken together, these insights reveal that adaptation is not a fallback strategy; it is a deliberate posture shaped by lived realities. In volatile environments, FEs do more than respond to crisis. They recalibrate, redesign, and reimagine their businesses to reduce exposure, respond to unmet needs, and stay economically viable amid uncertainty.

2.5.2.5. Strategic Use of Informal Networks

In conflict-affected and fragile settings, informal networks are not merely sources of social support; they serve as critical components of business strategy. FEs intentionally leverage these relationships as economic safety nets and stabilising infrastructures amid systemic breakdowns. In Iraq, for instance, small business owners invest in local hiring and community development to strengthen neighbourhood ties and protect their operations (Katsos & AlKafaji, 2019). Similarly, in Haiti, the Madan Saras build strategic supply chains that connect rural producers to urban markets, enabling business continuity in contexts of state collapse (Borns, 2023; Mintz, 2010). These are not ad hoc responses; they are deliberate, embedded strategies used to navigate insecurity, access markets, and maintain communal cohesion.

In the South African context, limited access to formal entrepreneurial networks poses ongoing challenges. As Chimombe (2025) and Polori (2021) observe, many women operate in relative isolation, lacking the financial, technical, and emotional support typically provided through formal structures. In these cases, informal networks, comprising family, friends, and community members, become essential channels for resource exchange, mentorship, and solidarity (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Ogundana et al., 2023). These relationships help women cope with instability and build emotional resilience, enabling them to share knowledge, gain encouragement, and build collective resilience (Brush, 1992; Chimombe, 2025; Al Shanawani et al., 2024).

Globally, informal entrepreneurial networks also address institutional gaps. According to Ogundana et al. (2023), such networks enable women to access funding, build skills, and maintain customer bases, functions typically facilitated by state or corporate institutions. Likewise, Asiedu et al. (2023) report that in low-trust, resource-constrained environments, women with access to peer networks show higher levels of innovation and improved business practices.

In Syria, informal knowledge-sharing also plays a vital role. Women entrepreneurs pass on their expertise by mentoring peers and youth within family, neighbourhood, or religious circles, where they teach practical business strategies such as recycling, small-scale production, and budgeting (Al Shanawani et al., 2024). These acts of mentorship move beyond survival, fostering social resilience and ensure the continuity of entrepreneurial practice within the community.

Taken together, these examples reflect IEOT's emphasis on opportunity-driven, embedded entrepreneurship. Relationship-building is not peripheral; it is central to entrepreneurial resilience. In high-risk environments, informal networks function as more than buffers against instability; they become platforms for innovation, growth, and strategic navigation.

2.5.2.6. Competitive Aggressiveness

Competitive aggressiveness is increasingly recognised as a relevant trait in high-risk environments. In economies marked by scarcity, institutional breakdown, and ongoing volatility, competition becomes not only more intense but also essential to survival (Dele-Ijagbulu et al., 2020; Kuratko et al., 2014).

Contrary to the assumption that violence suppresses entrepreneurial rivalry, emerging evidence suggests that competitive aggressiveness does not disappear in such environments. It is reconfigured to align with local constraints. In conflict-affected regions like Kashmir, informal entrepreneurs actively defend their customer bases, step into market gaps left by institutional collapse, and use tactics like rapid pricing adjustments and fast delivery to sustain or grow their operations (Dele-Ijagbulu et al., 2020; Shah & Lala, 2023). These behaviours, though sometimes informal and unlabelled, reflect core features of competitive aggressiveness: proactive positioning, strategic responsiveness, and calculated defence of market share in uncertain terrain.

Among FEs, however, the expression of competitive aggressiveness often diverges from traditional, confrontational models. In contexts shaped by patriarchal norms and persistent insecurity, research shows that women tend to adopt more relational, collaborative, and community-embedded approaches to business strategy (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013; Datta & Gailey, 2012). These choices are shaped by both gendered expectations and survival imperatives, where visibility can invite risk, and mutual support offers a buffer against threat.

As a result, FEs may gain competitive advantage through less visible but equally strategic means: trust-based referrals, strong reputational capital, and preferential access to informal supply chains. Althalathini and Al-Dajani (2021) demonstrate how women entrepreneurs in conflict-affected states like Palestine and Iraq tactically position themselves in the market through diaspora connections, media visibility, and innovation, practices that signal competitiveness, but expressed through culturally and contextually adaptive modes.

Taken together, these insights confirm that competitive aggressiveness remains an important entrepreneurial trait in violent economies. However, among FEs, it is often adapted to context, expressed through gendered, relational, and often covert forms of strategic action. Rather than being absent, it is recalibrated to fit the lived realities of navigating risk, exclusion, and informal economies.

2.5.2.7. Negotiation and Compliance Tactics

While not traditionally foregrounded in IEOT frameworks, the strategies employed by FEs in conflict-affected settings reflect deliberate, calculated decision-making. Compliance, in this context, is not a sign of submission but a tactical form of negotiation, where business owners rely on social ties, managed visibility, and reputational capital to maintain access and continuity without directly confronting power structures (Irish-Qhobosheane, 2024). These forms of relational negotiation echo the practices of Haiti's Madan Saras, who operate through tightly knit supply chains and community trust in environments marked by absent or exploitative governance (Mintz, 2010; Borns, 2023).

In Syria, similar strategies are evident among women entrepreneurs who choose seclusion or discreet modes of market entry to avoid harassment and social sanction (Al Shanawani et al., 2024). Althalathini (2022) further observes that women frequently work through male relatives or sustain informal alliances to maintain business continuity in dangerous, highly restrictive environments. These practices reflect a form of compliance rooted in agency, leveraging the existing social fabric to navigate risk and uphold entrepreneurial activity under constraint.

Taken together, the strategies and examples discussed show that FEs in conflict zones are not simply reacting to their environments, they are actively shaping how they do business within them. Through adaptive business models, informal alliances, digital innovation, and compliance-based negotiation, they enact the dimensions of IEOT in ways that are both strategic and context-sensitive. Even where competitive aggressiveness takes on less

conventional forms, traits like autonomy, proactiveness, and innovation remain central to how FEs operate.

Viewed through the combined lens of IEOT, IFET, and RT, these actions reveal that strategic behaviour does not emerge in spite of instability, but often because of it. FEs are not passive recipients of adversity; they navigate exclusion with ingenuity, foresight, and relational strategy.

Understanding these strategic responses is essential for recognising the broader value of FEs in ganglands, not just as economic actors, but as stabilising forces in fragile environments. The next section turns to this question of value, positioning FEs not merely as survivors, but as vital contributors to community resilience, economic continuity, and social cohesion.

2.6. The Value of Female Entrepreneurs in Ganglands

FEs in gang-affected communities are not only essential to economic survival, they are foundational to local stability, informal service delivery, and social cohesion. Yet too often, they are framed as passive survivors, and their deeper contributions remain under-recognised in both policy and scholarship. These women are not merely enduring instability; they are sustaining entire communities where formal systems have receded.

Research across SA and comparable conflict settings reveals how FEs contribute meaningfully to local development. Their businesses provide vital goods and services in areas underserved by the state or private sector, generate household income, and often create employment and mentorship opportunities for others (Al-Dajani et al., 2015; Maharaj, 2022). In many instances, their enterprises are the only accessible source of basic needs, ranging from food to childcare, within high-risk communities. This economic footprint, though rarely measured in conventional terms of scale or profit (Brush et al., 2009), constitutes a foundational layer of local commerce and livelihoods.

Equally significant is the social value FEs create. Their enterprises often double as safe spaces, sites of trust, care, and informal support. Whether mentoring young people, supporting extended families, or responding to crisis, many FEs take on responsibilities that extend beyond traditional business roles (Theron, 2015; Kim et al., 2022). These contributions help sustain cohesion in communities fractured by gang violence, offering a sense of stability that formal institutions frequently fail to provide.

Comparative research from conflict-affected regions such as Palestine, Iraq, Nigeria, and Haiti echoes these patterns. Women entrepreneurs in these settings serve as stabilising forces, not only filling institutional voids but also innovating locally grounded solutions that reflect and respond to their specific contexts (Althalathini & Al-Dajani, 2021; Mintz, 2010; Delva & Moloney, 2022). Their actions reaffirm the value of entrepreneurship as a tool for self-determination and community development, not just survival.

Viewed through an integrated theoretical lens, the broader significance of FEs becomes even more apparent. RT emphasises their ability to recalibrate and sustain operations under pressure (Duchek, 2020), while IFET reveals how these women embed care, social value, and gendered agency into their business practices (Orser & Elliott, 2015). IEOT further highlights the behavioural strategies they employ, calculated risk-taking, innovation, and proactiveness, to assert their place in volatile markets (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996).

These insights reposition FEs as vital contributors to both economic continuity and social resilience in gang-affected settings. Their strategies offer insight into what works in contexts where formal systems have failed, highlighting the micro-level innovations that underpin community stability. At a time when state responses are limited, learning from, and investing in, the women who are already holding these spaces together is both a practical and ethical necessity.

2.7. Conclusion

This literature review has built a layered picture of female entrepreneurship in gang-affected township settings. It began with a brief overview of the state of entrepreneurship in South Africa, before turning to the township economy and the structural inequalities that shape women's entrepreneurial journeys, including how poverty, spatial exclusion, and limited institutional support intersect with gendered expectations and constraints. From there, the review moved into a focused exploration of the specific pressures that FEs face in gang-controlled spaces, where violence, fear, and social fragmentation are part of daily life.

To fill the gaps in South African literature on this topic, the review drew on global research from conflict-affected regions such as Palestine, Iraq, Haiti, and Syria. These parallels help contextualise the experiences of FEs in ganglands, showing how women operate within high-risk environments through a mix of necessity, intention, and innovation. What emerges is not a story of victimhood, but one of calculated navigation, where women weigh visibility, safety, and survival in every business decision.

This review, guided by RT, IFET, and IEOT, analysed how FEs cope with adversity and act strategically. Their efforts go far beyond economic survival. They adapt business models, build informal networks, repurpose scarce resources, and assert relational forms of competitive positioning. Their work is embedded in community care, social responsibility, and quiet resistance, anchoring fragile systems in places where formal structures have broken down.

Yet despite their critical role, FEs in ganglands remain under-recognised in mainstream research and policy. Their contributions are often flattened into generic narratives of informality or resilience, obscuring the specific strategies, risks, and trade-offs that define their work. By bringing these realities into focus, particularly through the lens of women running small enterprises in Westbury, this review affirms the need for a more grounded, nuanced understanding of entrepreneurship in contexts of gang violence.

In doing so, it lays the foundation for this study's next step: examining how FEs themselves describe and experience resilience, and what their stories reveal about agency, survival, and transformation in SA's gang-affected townships.

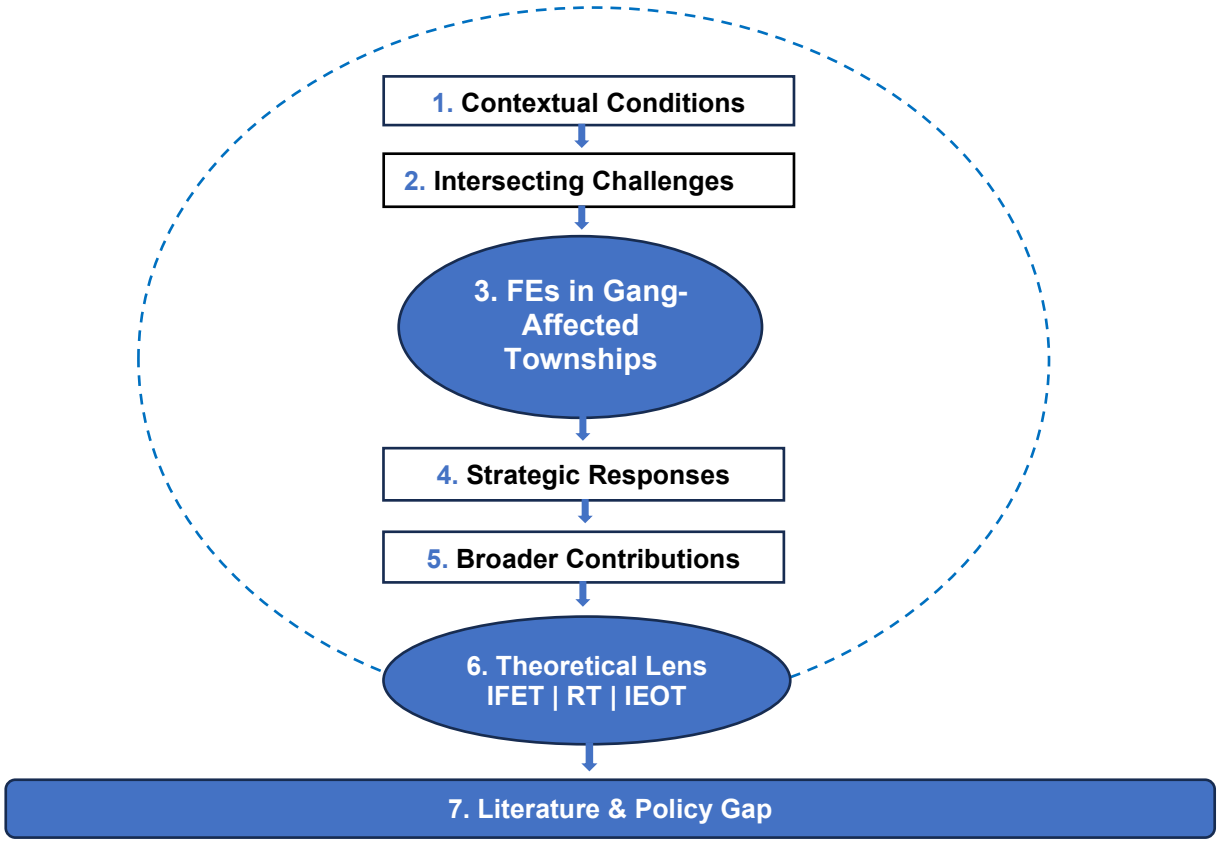
2.8. Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that places FEs at the centre of a dynamic system shaped by structural violence, gendered exclusion, and adaptive agency within gang-affected environments. Importantly, the framework is grounded in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, which identified recurring themes across studies of female entrepreneurship in South African gang-affected townships and comparable conflict-affected settings. These strands of literature informed the development of the framework's core categories and relationships. It visually maps the interrelationships between contextual forces, intersecting challenges, entrepreneurial responses, and broader contributions, interpreted through an integrated theoretical lens.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the framework begins with:

1. **Contextual Conditions**
   These refer to the structural forces that define the terrain of enterprise in conflict-affected spaces, including gang dominance, spatial restrictions on women, systemic poverty, and state neglect. These conditions constrain mobility, undermine safety, and limit access to institutional support, setting the parameters within which entrepreneurship unfolds.

Figure 3: Conceptual framework



Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

2. **Intersecting Challenges**

   The contextual conditions give rise to a complex set of interlocking pressures, including exposure to violence, trauma, economic exclusion, limited infrastructure, and chronic emotional strain. These challenges rarely occur in isolation. Instead, they intersect in ways that uniquely shape the everyday realities of FEs operating in ganglands.

3. **Female Entrepreneurs**

   At the centre of the framework are FEs, whose entrepreneurial activity is shaped by the challenges above. They are not passive recipients of adversity, but strategic actors who mobilise lived knowledge, relational networks, and community obligations to navigate instability. Their positioning within the framework reflects that they are both shaped by and actively responding to systemic constraints.

4. **Resilience and Strategic Responses**

   In navigating adversity, FEs employ a range of responses, including business model adaption, informal resource pooling, psychological self-regulation, digital engagement, and compliance-based negotiation. These responses reflect traits captured by IEOT

(such as proactiveness, innovation, and risk-taking) and are deeply embedded in relational, context-specific strategies. They also align with RT and IFET.

5. **Broader Contributions**

   These strategic responses generate broader community benefits. FEs provide essential goods and services, create local employment in under-resourced neighbourhoods, and strengthen informal support systems and foster social cohesion. In spaces where state presence is minimal, their businesses often function as stabilising anchors, spaces of care, continuity, and informal governance.

6. **Theoretical Lens**

   The framework is interpreted through three integrated theoretical perspectives:

   - IFET: Explains how intersecting systems of oppression (such as gender, race, class, and space) shape entrepreneurial experience.

   - RT: Provides insight into how individuals and systems endure, recalibrate, and persist in the face of sustained adversity.

   - IEOT: Focuses on behavioural dimensions of entrepreneurship, including autonomy, innovation, and calculated risk-taking.

7. **Literature and Policy Gap**

   The final layer of the framework highlights the gap this study seeks to address. Despite their critical role, FEs in gang-affected areas are rarely the focus of scholarship or policy. Existing township entrepreneurship research tends to generalise insecurity, collapsing ganglands into broader, generic categories of poverty or informal enterprise. As a result, the distinct pressures of operating under criminal governance, including persistent violence, spatial entrapment, and the psychological toll of instability, are overlooked. Moreover, the specific experiences of women are often homogenised, with little recognition of how intersecting threats in ganglands uniquely shape entrepreneurial pathways. This study therefore seeks to re-centre these women as contextually embedded actors, whose strategies and contributions demand specific analytical and policy attention.

This conceptual framework offers both a structure and a rationale for the study. While informed by existing literature and theory, it is intentionally flexible. As this is an interpretivist, qualitative

study, the framework will be refined and expanded in light of empirical findings to ensure that it remains rooted in the lived experiences of FEs navigating gang-affected township spaces.

2.9. Assumptions

- **Assumption 1** – Intersectional identities (e.g., gender, class, race, location) shape the entrepreneurial experiences and resilience of FEs in gang-affected environments.

- **Assumption 2** – Resilience is not static but a dynamic process of adaptation, coping, and strategic action in response to persistent adversity.

- **Assumption 3** – Entrepreneurial orientation traits, such as innovation, proactiveness, and autonomy, influence how FEs navigate constraints and pursue opportunity.

2.10. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter provided the theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding female entrepreneurship in gang-affected South African townships. Drawing on IFET, RT, and IEOT, the literature review mapped out the structural, psychological, and relational dimensions of resilience as experienced by FEs operating in high-risk, under-resourced environments.

Building on these insights, the conceptual framework in Section 2.9 draws together key themes from the literature and provides a structured lens for analysing the study's empirical data. The chapter also outlined the study's key assumptions and contributions, highlighting how it addresses a critical gap in research on gendered entrepreneurship in conflict-affected settings.

The next chapter turns to the study's research methodology, detailing the design, sampling, data collection, and analysis processes used to explore how FEs in Westbury experience and enact resilience.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology employed in the study. It addresses key components such as research design, population and sampling, data collection procedures, and ethical considerations, each of which informed the design and implementation of the research.

3.2. Research Paradigm

A paradigm is defined as a world-view or “a set of linked assumptions about the world which is shared by a community of scientists investigating the world” (Deshpande, 1983, p. 101). Healy and Perry (2000), identify four main categories of research paradigms: positivism, realism, critical theory, and interpretivism.

This study adheres to the interpretivist research paradigm, which asserts that truth and knowledge are subjective, embedded within culture and history, and shaped by people’s experiences and their interpretations thereof (Ryan, 2018). It emphasises the importance of understanding and interpreting human behavior and social phenomena from the perspective of the individuals or groups involved in the research (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach is deemed suitable for the proposed research because, as Myers (2009, p. 38) asserts, it effectively addresses “the human phenomenon of subjective understanding.”

Given the interpretivist research paradigm that guides this study, it is important to consider the associated ontological and epistemological implications. Healy and Perry (2000) explain that ontology primarily pertains to the reality that researchers examine, which determines the extent of our knowledge about it (Yong et al., 2023). Epistemology, on the other hand, concerns the relationship between this reality and the researcher (Healy & Perry, 2000), as well as the methods through which we acquire knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1998 cited in Pessu, 2019, p. 38).

Ontologically, the study acknowledges that reality is subjective and socially constructed (Saunders et al., 2019), recognising that the experiences and perspectives of FEs in ganglands shape their reality. Epistemologically, the study views knowledge as situated and context-dependent, emphasising the importance of understanding these entrepreneurs' lived experiences and interpretations. As indicated by Healy and Perry (2000), exploring this

constructed reality is grounded on interactions between the interviewer and respondent, requiring the researcher to be actively engaged as a "passionate participant" during fieldwork.

By adopting an interpretivist approach, the study seeks to uncover the subjective truths and meanings that FEs attribute to their experiences in navigating the challenges of gang violence, contributing to a deeper understanding of their resilience and the value they bring to these environments.

3.3. Research Design

Barnes et al. (2003) describe a research design as a blueprint that ensures control over factors influencing the validity of findings. It outlines when, where, and how data is collected and processed (Turkson et al., 2021).

This study adopts a qualitative approach, which prioritises words over numerical data for exploring complex social phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Unlike quantitative methods, which are often rigid and structured, qualitative research is more collaborative and participant-centred (Park & Park, 2016). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argued that qualitative research aligns closely with an interpretive approach, as it requires researchers to understand the subjective and socially constructed meanings related to the subject being studied (Saunders et al., 2019).

While qualitative research encompasses several designs, this study employs a REA. Developed in 1988 by Bently and colleagues (Kumpunen & Vindrola-Padros, 2022), REA is grounded in ethnographic principles. Ethnography involves examining people's interactions, behaviors, and perceptions within their natural environments, such as groups, teams, organisations, and communities (Reeves et al., 2013).

Traditionally used in anthropology and sociology, it explores the social and cultural contexts of individuals and communities over extended periods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Fetterman (2010, p. 1) states that ethnography aims to “tell a credible, rigorous, and authentic story” by giving voice to people in their local context, typically using direct quotations and detailed descriptions of events.

In contrast, REA, also referred to as “quick ethnographies” (Handwerker, 2001), is a multi-method ethnographic approach focused on understanding human experiences and behaviors (Sangaramoorthy & Kroeger, 2020). It aims to rapidly produce in-depth, actionable insights into sociocultural and behavioural dynamics relevant to the study’s context (Sangaramoorthy

& Kroeger, 2020). This method involves collecting and analysing data from multiple sources, including interviews, participant observations, document reviews, surveys and focus groups, over a short period of time (Baines & Cunningham, 2013). These diverse data collection methods, known as time-deepening strategies (Millen, 2000), enable data triangulation, which improves the validity and reliability of findings (Baines & Cunningham, 2013) and informs practical, achievable recommendations (Sangaramoorthy & Kroeger, 2020).

REA data collection typically lasts a few weeks to three months (Handwerker, 2001; Reeves et al., 2013). A key benefit of REAs is their ability to address time and resource constraints, a common challenge in traditional ethnography, which can take years to complete (Aqil et al., 2023; Kumpunen & Vindrola-Padros, 2022; Sangaramoorthy & Kroeger, 2020).

REAs are highly valuable because the goal of ethnography is to gain an insider's perspective on specific issues or situations (Sangaramoorthy & Kroeger, 2020). This is achieved by researchers immersing themselves in participants' environments to understand their lives and 'learn from' rather than merely 'study' them (Spradley, 1980). It goes beyond mere on-site data collection; it involves a deep commitment to understanding community perspectives and needs, using various flexible research tools essential for examining the modern social world (Sangaramoorthy & Kroeger, 2020). This is especially relevant to this study, which explores how FEs in Westbury practise resilience amid gang violence and systemic adversity. The method's emphasis on immersion, flexibility, and community-informed insight makes it particularly well-suited to this context, where rich, context-specific data must be gathered quickly while honouring participants' lived realities.

Although REAs have gained popularity in recent times (Kumpunen & Vindrola-Padros, 2022), critics question whether they achieve the necessary depth of immersion to be considered 'real ethnography' (Agar, 2006; Hammersley, 2018). There are also concerns about the limited time spent in the field (Power, 2002), which may hinder the collection of rich, high-quality data (Spradley, 1980) needed to interpret values, norms, and cultural practices (Watson, 2011).

Feldman and Jenkins (1992) note that some researchers are criticised as 'parachute ethnographers,' conducting work seen as extractive or exploitative. This critique arises from their focus on easily accessible sites and subjects, resulting in surface-level insights and broad conclusions lacking sufficient triangulation or context (Feldman & Jenkins, 1992), thereby potentially overstating the generalisability of their findings (Rist, 1980). Critics also argue that rapid qualitative data collection methods lack rigor, leading to findings that lack theoretical

depth or relevance for audiences familiar with traditional research methods (Sangaramoorthy & Kroeger, 2020).

In response to concerns that REAs lack validity due to limited field time, Scrimshaw and Hurtado's (1988, p. 97) pose a compelling question "must one spend a year in the field collecting ethnographic data to make useful recommendations…?". McNall et al. (2004, p. 287) reinforce this, arguing that "the timeliness of information is no less critical than its accuracy."

Anthropologist Michael Agar also weighed in on what defines ethnography and which methods yield valuable data, emphasising the need for flexibility in ethnographic methodology (Agar, 2006). Agar suggests ethnographers focus on a community or issue within a defined geographic context. This enables researchers to offer both insider insights into community dynamics and outsider analysis of context (Agar, 2006). These goals align with rapid ethnography's aim of producing meaningful insights through efficient data collection (Aqil et al., 2023).

Advocates of REA argue that rich, community-driven ethnographic data can be gathered within limited timelines and budgets (Baines & Cunningham, 2013; Handwerker, 2001; Millen, 2000; Sangaramoorthy & Kroeger, 2020), while still upholding core ethnographic principles (Ranabahu, 2017).

Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger (2020) highlighted the need for timely, practical data, especially for initiatives involving marginalised populations that are hard to reach. Aqil (2023) also highlighted the role of researcher identity, noting that factors such as race, age, gender, and class shape the depth of immersion and trust-building. Bucerius (2013) added that leveraging researcher identity can expedite access to key informants and enhance credibility of data collection.

In this study of FEs operating SMMEs in Westbury, one of SA's most gang-affected communities, the researcher's identity was pivotal. The researcher's shared identity as Coloured, female, and from a similar community facilitated rapport, accelerated access to stakeholders, and fostered trust. This background deepened the researcher's understanding of local dynamics and challenges and ensured culturally sensitive and credible data collection.

Westbury fits Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger (2020) definition of a vulnerable population. REA provides a pragmatic way to gather community-level data quickly (Kumpunen & Vindrola-

Padros, 2022), making it well-suited to complex settings like Westbury. To minimise data quality issues linked to limited field time (Ranabahu, 2017), the study followed three key phases: preparation, socialisation, and data collection. These are discussed further in the data collection and quality control sections below.

3.4. Timescale

The study was conducted over an 8-week period, aligning with the REA data collection period suggested by Handwerker (2001) and Reeves et al. (2013), which typically ranges from a few weeks to three months. This timeframe allowed for participatory engagement and enabled a comprehensive understanding of how FEs in Westbury navigated challenges, developed strategies, and contributed to their community, while also ensuring the findings remained timely and relevant.

3.5. Nature of the Study

The study adopted an exploratory approach. As Saunders et al. (2019) explained, exploratory research is primarily conducted to develop new insights, uncover emerging concepts, and deepen understanding of a given subject. The problem statement and research objectives highlighted the need to examine how FEs operating SMMEs in ganglands sustained their businesses amid ongoing conflict. Accordingly, the study engaged directly with these businesses to gain firsthand insight into how they navigate such challenges.

3.6. Target Population and Sample

A population refers to a group of potential study participants to whom the findings can be generalised (Salkind, 2012). The target population for this study comprised FEs aged 18 and older who operated SMMEs in townships affected by gang violence, specifically Westbury in Johannesburg, South Africa, which is widely recognised as one of the country's top three most gang-ridden townships (Morris, 2019). Although precise figures for Westbury are unavailable, Gauteng hosts approximately 903,220 SMMEs (33.45% of South Africa's total SMMEs) (Magodi, et al., 2023). Given Westbury's inclusion within Johannesburg's central business district cluster, it likely contains a notable concentration of SMMEs serving the local township population.

3.6.1. Sampling

3.6.1.1. Sample Size Estimation

According to Salkind (2012), a sample refers to a smaller subset of the population under examination. Highlighting the ongoing debate surrounding the determination of the appropriate number of participants in qualitative research, Subedi (2021) emphasised that in qualitative research, the focus of sampling should be on meeting the research goals rather than striving for extensive sample representation. Anderson (2017) cited in Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe (2024) agrees, stating that while “size does matter”, “more is not always better.”

The study selected participants from the population of FEs operating SMMEs in Westbury, Johannesburg. While the initial target was between 10 and 30 participants, data collection continued until saturation was reached. By the ninth interview, recurring patterns had emerged, and no significantly new insights were identified, suggesting that saturation had been achieved. A tenth interview was conducted to confirm this finding, ensure no additional perspectives were missed, and honour a pre-scheduled meeting.

This sample size was considered sufficient to gather rich and diverse insights within the constraints of the study’s timeframe; adhering to the principles of REA, which prioritise smaller samples to allow for rapid but in-depth data collection (Sangaramoorthy & Kroeger, 2020). This approach aligns with recommendations from Subedi (2021), who notes that ethnographic studies often include between 10 and 50 participants, depending on the scope and depth required. For instance, Oh and Yamada's (2021) REA study on second-generation Korean American alcohol involved 10 participants, while Hill et al.'s (2023) research on HIV-related PrEP equity included 23 participants.

3.6.1.2. Sampling Technique

This research used two non-probability sampling techniques, purposive and snowball sampling, to select the participants. According to Saunders et al. (2019), a non-probability sample refers to a situation in which the researcher cannot guarantee that every unit within the population will be represented in the sample.

Purposeful sampling, commonly used in qualitative research (Palinkas et al., 2015), involves the deliberate selection of participants with specific knowledge and/or experience relevant to the study (Robinson, 2014). This method ensures that the sample is rich in information

(Campbell et al., 2020; Patton, 2002), offering deeper insights into the research questions. In particular, purposive sampling allows researchers to focus on participants who provide detailed, diverse, or unique perspectives, thereby enhancing the depth, rigor, and trustworthiness of the data and results (Campbell et al., 2020). It is particularly valuable when the aim is to explore complex behaviours or experiences in depth (Patton, 2002), rather than to generalise findings to a broader population (Palinkas et al., 2015).

To mitigate potential bias and reduce the risk of premature saturation due to sample homogeneity, the study incorporated strategies to ensure participant diversity. Selection criteria focused on FEs aged 18 and older operating SMMEs in Westbury, Johannesburg, while also considering business type, stage of development, and socio-economic background. This approach enabled the inclusion of varied experiences and perspectives, limiting the overrepresentation of any single viewpoint.

To further diversify the sample, the study employed snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral, where initial participants were asked to recommend others. This method is particularly useful for accessing individuals who may be difficult to reach through conventional sampling techniques (Pasikowski, 2023).

Additionally, use of local guides with deep knowledge of the area was instrumental in identifying and accessing a diverse group of FEs. These guides were briefed on the importance of diversity and inclusivity and helped ensure the sample aligned with the information-rich criteria set out by Campbell et al. (2020) and Patton (2002). Their involvement supported the purposeful sampling process and helped the researcher build trust and rapport with participants, enriching the overall quality of the data collected.

3.6.1.3. Data Collection

The study followed a structured data collection process informed by Ranabahu's (2017) guidelines, which emphasise minimising data quality issues linked to limited time in the field, as is typical of REA. The process was organised into three key phases: Preparation, Socialisation, and Data Collection. Each phase contributed to effective participant recruitment, trust-building, and the systematic collection of high-quality qualitative data.

3.6.1.3.1. Preparation Phase

This phase focused on laying the groundwork for data collection by defining the study's scope, developing data collection tools, conducting background research, and securing ethical approval. Key steps included:

- **Defining the study's scope** through a comprehensive literature review to identify research gaps and inform the formulation of initial research questions.

- **Developing data collection tools**, including a semi-structured interview guide, observation templates, and photography guidelines, to align with the study's objectives.

- **Conducting a background study** by reviewing publicly available records, media articles, and policy reports to provide contextual insight into Westbury and inform interview development.

- **Obtaining ethical clearance** from the university's ethics committee to ensure adherence to confidentiality, informed consent, and participant protection protocols.

3.6.1.3.2. Socialisation Phase

This phase centred on building trust, engaging participants, and establishing research partnerships prior to formal data collection. Given the sensitive nature of entrepreneurship in a gang-affected environment, participant recruitment was approached with care and ethical consideration.

- **Participant Identification and Recruitment**
  Participants were identified through multiple sources, including key informants, personal and business referrals, and local business directories. This approach helped ensure a diverse and representative sample of FEs.

- **Initial Contact and Rapport Building**
  Potential participants were contacted via phone and WhatsApp, during which the researcher explained the study's purpose, ethical safeguards, and participation requirements. These early interactions were crucial in establishing rapport and trust before field visits.

- **Role of Community Contacts and Key Informants**
  Key informants, including community leaders, introduced participants to the researcher, coordinated interviews, and assisted with logistical challenges such as ensuring safety in high-risk areas. Their involvement reinforced community trust and facilitated smooth access, aligning with ethnographic best practices (Lokot, 2021).

3.6.1.3.3. Data Collection Phase

Once participants were recruited and rapport was established, the study adopted a qualitative multimethod approach to enable methodological triangulation. This allowed the researcher to examine how different methods complemented each other (Mashuri et al. 2022) and to validate findings by converging information from multiple sources (Carter et al. 2014).

Methodological triangulation, a qualitative research strategy involving the use of multiple data collection methods to explore the same phenomenon from different perspectives, was employed in this study (Denzin, 1978). This approach enhanced the credibility and richness of the data. Triangulation was not used merely to cross-validate findings, but also to explore how each method revealed complementary dimensions of the entrepreneurial experiences under investigation. **Figure 4: Data collection process flow** below maps the five core methods used.

Throughout this phase, ethical standards were rigorously maintained, with confidentiality and informed consent upheld at every stage. In line with Estefam (2020) and Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger (2020), the study adopted a participatory approach, recognising participants as educators and the researcher as a learner. This approach facilitated deeper participant engagement, enriched the study's findings by centering their lived experiences, and ensured that data collection remained contextually grounded and ethically sound.

The data collection methods included:

1. **Document Analysis**

Document analysis is a recognised qualitative research method involving the systematic review of written materials, both printed and digital, to extract meaningful information, gain contextual insights, and validate findings (Bowen, 2009). Baines and Cunningham (2013) highlight its significance in REAs, noting its ability to complement other research methods, enhance triangulation and enrich overall findings.

In this study, document analysis involved reviewing reports, publications, academic studies, community records, media articles, and policy documents to situate the experiences of FEs within Westbury's broader historical, social, and economic landscape. Community records and official reports offered insight into local structural and socioeconomic conditions, while media and academic sources highlighted the broader challenges of entrepreneurship in violent environments.

This method also clarified the regulatory context and socio-political dynamics of the area, helping interpret the constraints faced by FEs. Cross-referencing interview and observation data with documented trends further enhanced the study's credibility through triangulation.

2. Key Informant Collaboration

Key informant collaboration, rooted in ethnographic research (Lokot, 2021), involves gathering insights from individuals with in-depth knowledge or lived experience of a specific setting (Cossham & Johanson, 2018) These individuals were selected based on their ability to provide insider perspectives on cultural dynamics, historical context, and localised challenges often absent from document analysis or secondary sources (Pahwa et al., 2023).

The study identified, recruited, and worked closely with local knowledge holders, particularly community leaders, who were purposively selected based on their:

- Knowledge of the community and research topic,
- Role in the local social structure, and
- Ability to provide access to participants and facilitate fieldwork.

Initial informants were identified through existing contacts, who referred individuals with relevant expertise. Once recruited, key informants helped the researcher navigate the research setting, facilitated introductions to FEs, coordinated interviews, and provided logistical support. Their involvement ensured data collection was grounded in community dynamics, enhancing contextual relevance and credibility.

While key informants played an essential role in facilitating fieldwork, providing contextual guidance, and navigating sensitive community dynamics, their insights were not coded or

analysed as primary data. Instead, their contributions were integrated into the broader research process to support ethical, grounded, and culturally informed engagement.

3. Semi-structured interviews

DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) describe semi-structured interviews as a widely used qualitative data collection method that facilitates interactive discussions between the researcher and participant, balancing structured guidance with flexibility. This approach allows participants to share detailed, often sensitive insights, while enabling researchers to explore their perspectives, emotions, and beliefs without being confined to a rigid set of questions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Mashuri et al. (2022) emphasise that semi-structured interviews are particularly effective for gathering in-depth information while maintaining focus on the study's objectives.

This study followed a structured interview schedule **(Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule)** to guide discussions while allowing space for participants to elaborate on their experiences. The schedule was designed around core themes:

- Entrepreneurial background and motives,
- Intersectional challenges faced by FEs,
- The impact of gang violence on business operations,
- Resilience strategies used to sustain and grow businesses,
- Strategic adaptations and market positioning, and,
- The broader social and economic impact of FEs in their community.

Each interview was expected to last approximately one hour, though many ran longer as participants had significant insights to share. In line with Rubin and Rubin's (2005) guidance on effective interviewing, sessions included main questions, follow-up inquiries, and probes to explore responses in more detail. As Mason (2002) noted, the structured yet conversational style of these interviews enabled rich, meaningful exchanges in a one-on-one setting.

Before each interview, participants received a clear explanation of the study's purpose and the confidentiality measures to insure informed consent. Interviews were recorded to prevent data loss, and follow-up questions were asked afterward to clarify any potential misunderstandings.

To assess the effectiveness and clarity of the semi-structured interview schedule (**Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule**), a pre-test, as recommended by Rowley (2012), was conducted with two FEs operating in neighbourhoods bordering Westbury, specifically Coronationville and Newclare. These areas share similar socio-economic dynamics and community profiles with Westbury, which made them suitable for testing the relevance and accessibility of the questions.

One pre-test was conducted in person and the other telephonically, to accommodate the participant's availability and lack of internet access. The test revealed no language issues or need for question adjustments. Translators were not required, as all participants communicated effectively in the interview language. In cases where Afrikaans was spoken, the researcher interpreted without assistance, ensuring smooth communication.

4. **Participant observation**

This method involves researchers immersing themselves in participants' daily activities to better understand their behaviours and routines (Palinkas et al. 2015). In this study, permission was obtained from FEs to shadow them and, where possible, tour their business premises. The researcher observed participants as they conducted their business, maintaining a discreet presence to minimise disruption.

A predetermined observation schedule guided the research to ensure alignment with the study's key areas and support triangulation with interview data. This schedule focused on the following:

- **Business Setup and Security**
  Observing the physical layout and security measures of the business, including locks, surveillance cameras, and perimeter barriers (like outside fencing or gates), to understand how these elements contributed to the entrepreneurs' safety and daily operations. Interaction with these security features was noted to understand how the entrepreneur managed and responded to safety concerns.

- **Entrepreneurial Activity and Operations**
  Monitoring daily business practices, decision-making processes, and interactions with customers to gain insights into the entrepreneur's strategies and resilience in a volatile environment. This included observing tasks like inventory management and customer interactions. The focus was on how decisions were made in real-time, especially in response to challenges or disruptions.

- **Social and Community Dynamics**
  Noting interactions with community members and other businesses, as well as the entrepreneur's visibility and reputation within the community. This helped assess their social networks and support systems.

- **Adaptation and Resilience Mechanisms**
  Observing real-time problem-solving, resourcefulness, and innovative practices or strategies used to identify how the entrepreneur adapted to challenges and maintained business operations.

- **Economic and Psychological Indicators**
  This involves observing how financial transactions are handled, including payment systems. Additionally, signs of psychological resilience, such as demeanour and stress management, were noted to assess how the entrepreneur coped with the pressures of operating in a challenging environment.

Although the schedule offered structure, the realities of day-to-day business operations meant that it did not always hold consistently across all businesses. Given the diverse nature of the enterprises, some did not involve financial transactions, while others operated in ways that did not align neatly with the predetermined categories. Additionally, the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of business activities meant that certain planned observations were not always feasible or relevant in every instance. As a result, flexibility was necessary to ensure that observations accurately reflected the lived experiences of entrepreneurs while still aligning with the study's core objectives and supporting triangulation with interview data.

5. Visual Documentation through photography

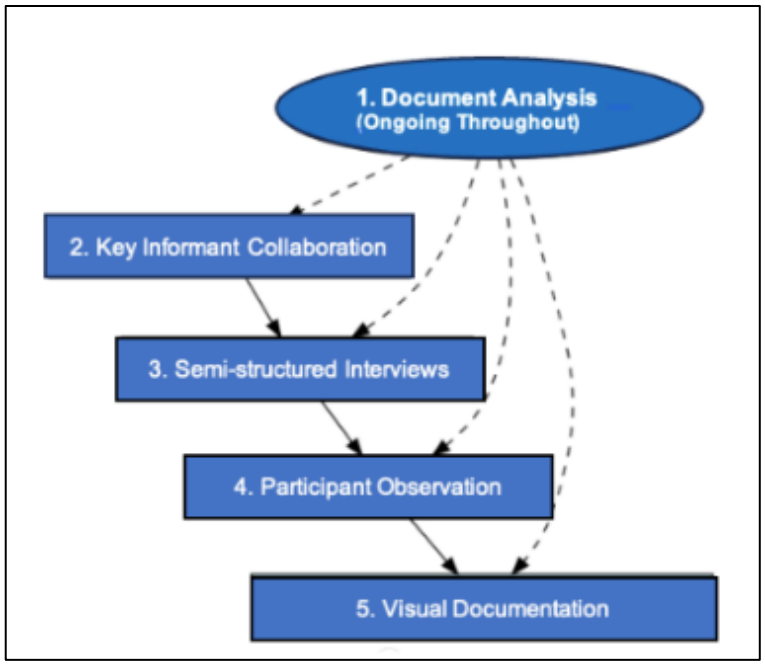
Often described as a silent voice, photography serves as a powerful medium for communication and understanding, offering a unique way to capture and convey nuances that written or oral language may miss (Walker cited in Cleland & MacLeod 2021). According to

Cleland and MacLeod (2021), photographs enable researchers to explore cultural and social influences by revealing the significance people attach to activities, places, objects, and rituals, while also documenting and analysing social events and issues.

In this study, photographs were used to capture the gangland environment, community interactions, and the daily operations of FEs in their business and social settings. They also documented tools and materials used in these businesses. Throughout, privacy and consent were strictly observed. All photos were taken only with explicit permission from participants and community leaders, with care taken to avoid faces and identifying details unless consent was given.

These visuals contributed to data triangulation and were integrated into the analysis to support and illustrate key findings. Photography sessions were scheduled to align with interviews and observations and were coordinated with key informants to ensure they reflected relevant aspects of the study's focus on gang-affected environments.

Figure 4: Data collection process flow



Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

The study used a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, key informant input, document analysis, and photography. Each method complemented the others, providing complementary perspectives. Semi-structured interviews captured participants lived experiences, while observations and photographs provided direct insights into safety strategies, spatial dynamics, and daily operations. Key informants added local

context, and document analysis situated the findings within the structural and historical context. Thematic analysis drew on all these sources, with triangulation ensuring interpretations reflected both participants' voices and observable realities.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

According to Mirza et al. (2023), ethics in research address moral dilemmas that arise during the research process. It focuses on what is right or wrong and the obligations of researchers to protect and respect the rights and interests of their participants, their audience, their academic community, and society as a whole (Bos, 2020).

Before commencing the study, the necessary permissions were obtained. This included securing approval from the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) under clearance code: H22/08/56. Once approved, informed consent was obtained from all prospects identified to participate in the study. These participants were provided with a thorough explanation of the study's significance, with an emphasis on the voluntary nature of their participation and assurances that there were no associated risks or costs. To confirm their participation, individuals were asked to provide consent through a signed consent form **(Appendix C: Participant Consent Form)**, which was delivered in person. Participants were also informed of their right to accept, decline, or withdraw from the study at any point.

This study adhered to ethical standards by following the ten ethical principles prescribed by Saunders et al. (2019), with specific strategies applied as outlined below:

Table 1: Ethical considerations

Ethical Principle	Application in this Study
1. Upholding integrity and impartiality.	The study ensured objective and unbiased data collection, analysis, and reporting, avoiding misrepresentation or selective interpretation of findings.
2. Respecting others.	Participants were treated with dignity and respect throughout the research process, ensuring their voices and experiences were presented authentically without misrepresentation.
3. Ensuring the protection of all study participants from potential harm	Interviews were conducted in participant-chosen premises that were deemed secure. Additionally, care was taken to avoid retraumatisation during discussions, thus ensuring both their emotional and physical well-being.

4. Safeguarding the confidentiality of data and preserving the anonymity of study participants	Participants' identities were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms, and no personally identifiable information was included in the research report.
5. Emphasising voluntary participation and right to withdraw	Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any stage without consequences.
6. Avoiding coercion	No incentives or pressure were applied to encourage participation. Participants were approached with full transparency about the study's purpose and scope.
7. Attaining informed consent	Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the commencement of interviews, ensuring they understood the study's purpose, their rights, and how data would be used.
8. Avoiding deception in data analysis and reporting	Data was accurately recorded and analysed without manipulation or exaggeration. Direct quotes and verbatim responses were used to maintain authenticity.
9. Complying with ethical standards in data management	Data was securely stored on encrypted files, accessible only to the researcher.
10. Ensuring the safety and well-being of the researcher	Interviews were conducted at the participants chosen locations, which were secure, and the researcher conducted regular check-ins with a trusted contact to ensure safety throughout the data collection process.

Note. Adapted from Saunders et al. (2019).

Furthermore, participants received detailed information about the planned data collection procedures and the expected study timeline. To maintain confidentiality, all collected data and findings were treated as confidential, and the identities of participants were not disclosed when presenting the results. The study strictly upheld ethical standards, ensuring that no unethical behavior compromised any aspect or stage of the proposed research.

3.8. Data Quality Control

3.8.1. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness serves as an alternative to reliability and validity, commonly used in quantitative studies, for assessing the quality of research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Bell et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Guba (1981) identifies four key criteria for establishing trustworthiness: credibility (similar to internal validity), transferability (comparable to external validity/generalisability), dependability (parallel to reliability), confirmability (akin to objectivity) (Guba, 1981).

3.8.1.1. Credibility

Credibility refers to the degree to which research findings accurately reflect the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe it as one of the most important elements in establishing trustworthiness. This study ensured credibility by applying well-established qualitative methods throughout the research process (Bell et al., 2019). To strengthen this further, it followed credibility-enhancing strategies proposed by Shenton (2004):

- **Developing early familiarity with the culture of research participants**
  The researcher immersed themself in the gangland where FEs operate. This involved spending time in these areas and engaging with community members to gain an understanding of their experiences. Consulting local documents to gain deeper insights into the context and, with consent, visiting participants' businesses offered valuable firsthand knowledge of their environment and daily lives. Following the advice of Lincoln and Guba (cited in (Shenton, 2004), the researcher was cautious not to become overly immersed to maintain professional judgment.

- **Triangulation**
  Incorporating multiple data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews, observations, and photographs.

- **Encouraging participant honesty**
  Participants were assured of their right to decline or withdraw at any stage without explanation, helping foster openness and trust.

- **Applying iterative questioning**
  Key topics were revisited using rephrased questions to detect inconsistencies and assess the reliability of responses.

- **Regular debriefing sessions**
  Debriefs were used to reflect on emerging insights, strengthen interpretation, and introduce alternative perspectives.

- **Participant checks**
  Participants reviewed their transcripts to confirm accuracy. They also commented on emerging interpretations, helping verify meaning and clarify patterns.

- **Providing 'thick' description**
  The study provides detailed contextual accounts of participants' environments, enabling readers to understand the actual situations and contexts.

- **Comparison with prior research**
  Findings were reviewed alongside relevant studies to identify areas of convergence or divergence, adding to the credibility and depth of the analysis.

3.8.1.2. Transferability

According to Merriam (1998), transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which a study's results can be applied to contexts beyond the immediate research setting. While qualitative studies typically focus on specific environments and individuals, researchers argue that patterns and insights identified in one setting may be relevant elsewhere (Stahl & King, 2020).

To support transferability, researchers are encouraged to produce what Geertz (1973 cited in Bell et al., 2019) termed thick description, which are detailed accounts of the research, enabling others to assess the potential applicability of findings to different contexts. Scholars like Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Firestone (1993) stress the importance of including sufficient contextual information to support these assessment. They caution that researchers, being familiar only with the context of the study, may overlook factors that readers might consider crucial. Therefore, this study provided thorough and detailed descriptions of the research setting, participants, and data collection methods, aiming to aid readers in evaluating the study's applicability to other contexts.

3.8.1.3. Dependability

This approach emphasises the importance of trustworthiness in research (Stahl & King, 2020). It involves adopting an auditing method, which includes meticulously documenting an accessible audit trail throughout all stages of the research process (Bell et al., 2019). Additionally, the process requires peers to act as auditors to verify that appropriate processes

were followed (Bell et al., 2019). In so doing, transparency is ensured, and replication becomes feasible.

Shenton (2004) argued that detailed reporting enables future researchers to replicate the research design, even if findings differ, making it a "prototype model." He further suggested that, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the methods and their impact, qualitative reports should clearly outline:

- The research design and its strategic implementation,
- The data collection process including practical field actions, and
- A reflective evaluation of the project's effectiveness in conducting the inquiry process (Shenton, 2004).

3.8.1.4. Confirmability

According to Bell et al. (2019), confirmability strives to ensure that research is conducted with integrity and impartiality, limiting the influence of personal values or theoretical biases on the process and findings. Shenton (2004) notes that every effort should be made to ensure that the study's findings accurately reflect the ideas and experiences of participants, not the researcher's, highlighting triangulation as a key method for reducing researcher bias. Miles and Huberman (1994) further stressed the importance for researchers to openly acknowledge any predispositions, noting that such transparency is a critical for achieving confirmability.

Drawing from this advice, to uphold confirmability in the study, the researcher maintained a detailed journal to record reflections, assumptions, and potential biases throughout the research process. In addition to acknowledging these preconceptions, the researcher made a conscious effort to set them aside during data collection and analysis to minimise their influence on the findings.

3.9. Data analysis

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative data analysis is often likened to peeling back layers of an onion, a process involving several stages, including data preparation, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of the findings to reveal deeper meaning (Creswell, 2009).

This study used thematic analysis to structure and interpret the data. Braun et al. (2019) describe thematic analysis as a flexible approach that identifies patterns or “themes” across qualitative datasets. Due to its adaptability, it has gained widespread use across diverse research fields (Lester et al., 2020). Humble and Mozelius (2022) attribute the increasingly broad use of thematic analysis to its straightforward approach for finding themes that are relevant to the chosen research study design and the research question(s).

As recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018) the following six steps were used to analyse the qualitative data:

Table 2: Qualitative data analysis steps

Step	Description
a) Organise and prepare the data for analysis	This phase involved familiarisation with the data, including transcribing interviews, reviewing materials, typing field notes, categorising data by source, and structuring it for import into the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti to support thematic analysis. This stage also helps identify data gaps or limitations that may inform additional data collection or future research (Lester et al., 2020).
b) Read through the data	A thorough review of the data through repeated reading helped the researcher grasp key ideas, overall tone, as well as the depth, credibility, and relevance of the information.
c) Code the data	The researcher segmented the data and applied descriptive labels to meaningful units. Triangulation was used to enhance validity and reliability by comparing findings across the different data sources used.
d) Generate key themes for analysis	Once initial codes were generated, the researcher explored themes that emerged from connections within the coded data.
e) Advance how the themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative	This step involved delving deeper into the identified themes, exploring the connections between them and determining how best to structure and present them in the narrative.
f) Interpret the findings	This step involved summarising the findings, comparing them to literature, analysing the findings, addressing limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

Note. Adapted from Creswell and Creswell (2018).

3.10. Statement of Reflexivity

According to Olmos-Vega et al. (2022), reflexivity is a continuous, collaborative, and multi-dimensional process through which researchers critically examine how their subjectivity and the broader research context influence all aspects of a study. It unfolds throughout the research process, involving both individual and collective engagement with personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual factors. Similarly, Malterud (2001) notes that a

researcher's background and position affect not only what is investigated, but also how findings are interpreted, and conclusions are framed.

The researcher’s interest in the resilience of FEs is rooted in personal experience. Growing up, the researcher’s mother engaged in informal entrepreneurship, selling everything from food products to clothing to support the family. At the time, these efforts were not associated with the formal concept of entrepreneurship; that connection only became apparent later through business studies. This early experience, coupled with later work supporting rural women entrepreneurs, planted the seeds for the researcher’s interest in women’s entrepreneurial resilience, particularly within under-resourced environments.

The idea for this study arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. While global narratives often celebrated the adaptability of FEs during the crisis, the researcher questioned how these realities played out in township contexts, particularly in gang-affected areas like Westbury, where gang violence persisted despite lockdowns. Familiar with the realities of Westbury, the researcher wondered how women entrepreneurs sustained their businesses amid violence, fear, and loss. A Facebook post from a Westbury entrepreneur, describing the necessity of acquiring a gun for protection, crystallised the importance of this research and reinforced the conviction that township experiences cannot be assumed to be homogenous.

At the start, the researcher held several assumptions: that extortion would be a prominent experience among FEs; that resilience would primarily manifest through business growth; and that entrepreneurial decision-making would be largely profit-driven. Field engagement challenged these assumptions, deepening the researcher’s appreciation for the complex social, emotional, and relational factors shaping entrepreneurship in violent contexts.

The fieldwork process was emotionally demanding. The researcher experienced fear for both personal safety and the wellbeing of participants, recognising the risks inherent in conducting research in a gang-affected area. Interviews were conducted discreetly to protect participants and maintain confidentiality. Frustration and anger surfaced as the researcher witnessed government neglect and the community’s daily struggles, juxtaposed with state narratives that championed entrepreneurship while offering little tangible support. Through engagement with participants, the researcher developed a deeper understanding of the layered challenges faced by FEs and was humbled by the strength, determination, and pride of the women who shared their stories.

Throughout the study, the researcher worked consciously to bracket assumptions, allowing participants' voices to guide the research and minimise bias. Participants maintained full control over interview arrangements, selecting settings where they felt most comfortable and determining how, when, and where interviews would take place. The researcher prioritised active listening without imposing interpretations and allowed interviews to extend beyond rigid time limits to honour the depth of participants' experiences. Awareness of positionality remained constant, particularly regarding the privilege of leaving the environment after each interview, while participants faced ongoing risks.

Reflective journaling played a critical role in supporting methodological rigour. It provided an outlet for documenting both methodological observations and personal emotional responses, allowing the researcher to process emotions while maintaining critical distance during analysis. This reflective practice helped ensure that emotional reactions did not overshadow participants' voices or distort the findings.

Ultimately, the study transformed the researcher's understanding of entrepreneurship in gang-affected contexts. It affirmed the necessity and importance of challenging conventional assumptions about entrepreneurial success and recognising the broader social realities within which entrepreneurship unfolds.

3.11. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter outlined the study's methodological approach, rooted in an interpretivist paradigm and employing REA as a context-sensitive qualitative design. Using purposive and snowball sampling alongside multiple data collection methods, the study aimed to capture the lived experiences of FEs in Westbury, a gang-affected township. Reflexivity was integrated throughout the research process to ensure critical engagement with the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and the broader research context. This methodological approach supported a grounded understanding of the participants' adaptive strategies, resilience, and contributions. The next chapter presents the key findings that emerged from this inquiry.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the study's findings, guided by the primary and secondary research questions. These questions explore the challenges faced by FEs in the gang-affected community of Westbury, the strategies they use to navigate these challenges, and how they sustain their businesses despite persistent adversity.

To set the scene, the chapter begins by contextualising Westbury as the research site, outlining its socio-economic conditions and the realities of gang violence. This is followed by an overview of participant demographics and a brief summary of the data collection and analysis process. Although the findings presented in this chapter are based primarily on interviews and participant observations, photographic evidence and document analysis were also used to corroborate, frame, and enrich the interpretation of key themes. Key informants supported the research process by facilitating access and providing contextual guidance, but their inputs were not analysed as primary data sources.

The chapter concludes with the presentation of findings, structured around the key themes that emerged from the data. The themes are presented in a sequence that mirrors the lived realities of FEs, starting with the hardships they face, then moving through their coping mechanisms, strategic adaptations, and broader community impact. This structure also aligns with the research questions, ensuring a coherent and meaningful presentation of how FEs navigate business ownership in a violent and unstable environment.

4.2. Contextualising the Research Setting

Westbury, located west of Johannesburg, is a predominantly Coloured community, formerly known as Western Coloured Township (Halim, 2018). The area has long faced deep-seated social, economic, and structural challenges, with gang violence remaining one of its most persistent issues.

This violence is not a recent phenomenon but part of a broader historical pattern. According to the Ending of Cycles of Violence report by Irish-Qhobosheane et al. (2019), Westbury has been trapped in recurring waves of extreme gang-related violence since the early 1990s. The first major outbreak occurred in 1994, followed by a resurgence in 2000 driven by the rise of

new drug lords and increased drug-related activity. The third cycle, which lasted until 2018, saw a sharp increase in murders and growing police involvement in criminal networks.

However, gang violence has not subsided. Instead, it continues to intensify, sparking frequent community protests and mounting calls for government intervention, including the deployment of the military to address the ongoing crisis (Mohlabe, 2020).

Conducting research in this environment was both deeply immersive and emotionally challenging. Each visit required the researcher to set aside preconceived notions in order to engage meaningfully with the community, allowing for a deeper understanding of its complexities and the lived realities of the study participants.

4.2.1. Accessing the Research Setting

Visiting Westbury was often met with a great sense of apprehension, exacerbated by the difficulty of securing transport to the area. Despite traveling mostly during off-peak daytime hours, when Uber drivers are typically more available, booking a ride often proved challenging. The reluctance of drivers to accept rides to the area became clear, with some visibly uneasy and openly admitting, *"I don't normally take trips in this area.* "Others explicitly stated that they would never accept rides to Westbury at certain times of the day.

These reactions reflected the widespread perception of Westbury as dangerous and highlighted how fear and stigma continue to shape public interactions with the community.

4.2.2. Contrasting Realities Within Westbury

A stark contrast exists between the upper and lower parts of Westbury. The lower part, where most of the fieldwork was conducted, is marked by visible socio-economic challenges, dilapidated infrastructure, and neglected buildings. Rows of semi-detached homes line the narrow streets, some modest and aging, while others are visibly decaying. Signs of inadequate municipal support were also evident throughout the area. These observations echo Steyn's (2023) views, which highlight the systemic neglect experienced by the community, exacerbated by persistent gun violence and poor service delivery.

Figure 5: Lack of services in Westbury



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

Figure 6: High density flats in Westbury



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

This section is also home to several high-density flats, which, like the surrounding streets, were buzzing with activity, vendors selling goods, children playing, and residents going about their daily routines. During data collection, groups of young men were often seen standing on street corners. The uncertainty of whether these were normal social interactions or signifiers of gang affiliation created an underlying sense of unease.

In contrast, the upper part of Westbury, where FE3 operates, had a markedly different atmosphere. The streets were quieter, the homes larger and better maintained, and there was a noticeable sense of order. While the visible signs of poverty and social distress were less pronounced than in the lower section, they were still present, just not as immediately striking.

Figure 7: Homes in Lower-side of Westbury



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

Figure 8: Homes in upper-side of Westbury



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

4.2.3. Navigating the Environment

Westbury's physical layout posed practical challenges during data collection:

- Alleyways are a dominant feature, making navigation extremely difficult.
- Many homes do not have clearly marked numbers, resulting in community members, often children, frequently assisting the researcher in locating specific addresses.
- Some homes were tucked deep inside alleyways, while others were situated along narrow streets barely wide enough for two cars to pass.

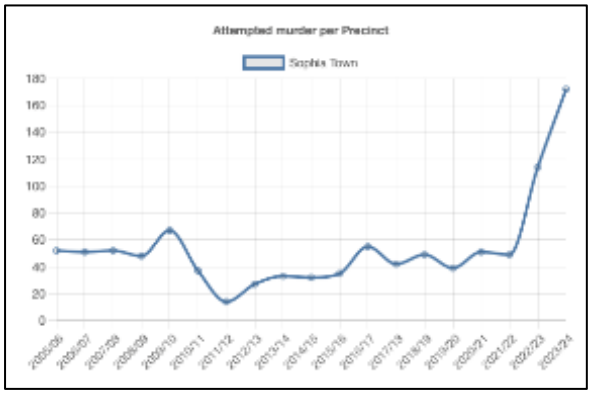
Each visit to an entrepreneur's business offered deeper insight into the logistical challenges they face. Most ran their businesses from home, with the exception of FE2 and FE4, who operated from separate premises, providing a useful contrast to home-based operations.

4.2.4. The Ever-Present Reality of Violence

Although no incidents occurred during fieldwork, the threat of gang violence was constant. One of the Westbury community WhatsApp groups, of which the researcher was a member, frequently reported shootings, fatalities, and rising tensions, often in areas where interviews had taken place earlier in the day. The experience of engaging with FEs during daylight, then reading about fatal shootings in those same areas at night, emphasised the precarious balance of daily survival in Westbury.

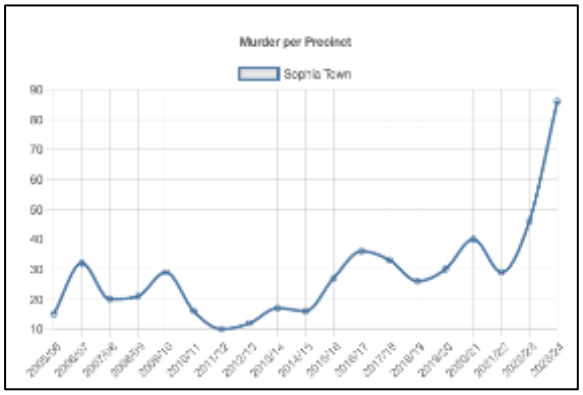
The frequency and severity of these incidents were not isolated perceptions but reflected a broader trend of escalating violence in the area. Crime Hub data confirms a sharp rise in violence within the Sophiatown precinct, which records incidents from Westbury. Reported attempted murder cases rose from 39 in 2019/20 to 172 in 2023/24, representing a staggering 341% increase (Institute for Security Studies, 2024). Similarly, murder cases rose from 30 to 86 over the same period, marking an increase of 187% (Institute for Security Studies, 2024). These figures reinforce the daily WhatsApp updates shared by residents, illustrating how deeply gang violence shapes daily life in Westbury.

Figure 9: Attempted murder cases Sophiatown precinct, 2019/20-2023/24



Note: Attempted murder per precinct by Institute for Security Studies, 2024 (https://www.issafrica.org/crimehub/sophiatown-precinct-statistics)

Figure 10: Murder cases Sophiatown precinct, 2019/20-2023/24



Note: Attempted murder per precinct by Institute for Security Studies, 2024 (https://www.issafrica.org/crimehub/sophiatown-precinct-statistics)

4.3. Participant Demographics

The study initially identified 30 potential participants through purposive and snowball sampling. Of these, 12 expressed interest, and 10 ultimately participated, meeting the study's minimum target. While specific reasons for non-participation remain unclear, it is likely that safety concerns, scepticism about the research, and practical constraints such as limited time and business responsibilities played a role.

Participants operated across diverse industries, including education, catering, events, construction, and retail, with many involved in multiple sectors rather than a single line of business. Their businesses varied in size, with FE4 employing the largest team (10 staff). In line with the National Small Enterprise Act, 1996 (amended 2019), their businesses fell within the micro-enterprise category of the SMME sector, defined as businesses with 0–10 employees and an annual turnover of less than R5 million (Department of Small Business Development, 2019).

The table two below summarises key participant characteristics

Table 3: Participant demographics

Participant ID	Age	Marital Status	Children	Education	Business	Registered	Employees	Years of Experience
FE1	49	Divorced	2	Matric	Event Décor, Catering & Baking	Yes	1	9
FE2	50	Married	2	Grade 9, Level 5 Child Care Certificate	ECD Center Owner & Educator Trainer	Yes	6	15
FE3	65	Married	3	Grade 9, Hairdressing Certificate	Hairdresser	Yes	1	23
FE4	58	Divorced	2	Matric, Diploma in Foundation Phase Teaching	ECD Center Owner & Educator Trainer	Yes	10	33
FE5	57	Divorced	3	Grade 10, Level 4 Child Care Certificate	ECD Centre Owner	Yes	4	6
FE6	40	Single	1	Matric	Construction, Cleaning & House Shop	Yes	4	3
FE7	49	Divorced	2	Matric	Event Décor	No	1	4
FE8	53	Widow	1	Grade 11, Level 3 Smart Start Child Care Certificate	ECD Centre Owner	Yes	2	8
FE9	57	Married	0	Matric, Level 4 Smart Start Child Care Certificates	Direct Sales (Beauty Products and Cleaning Materials) & House Shop	No	1	7
FE10	47	Single	1	Matric, Entrepreneurship Certificates & Business Administration	Catering & Baking	Yes	1	20

Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

The absence of youth (18–34 years) among participants is notable but consistent with national trends in South African entrepreneurship. Although the study was open to all legal adults, the final sample consisted of older FEs, reflecting a broader decline in youth entrepreneurial activity. The GEM 2022 report shows that the Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity rate for 18–24-year-olds dropped from 19.3% in 2021 to 8.0% in 2022, while the rate for 25–34-year-olds declined from 12.6% to 10.4% (GEM, 2022).

Youth entrepreneurship is often positioned as a solution to SA's high youth unemployment, currently over 40% for ages 15–24 (Stats SA, 2024), but structural barriers hinder meaningful

participation. These include limited access to information, inadequate education and training, financial constraints (Allan Gray Orbis Foundation & Entrepreneurship to the Point, 2024), and weak entrepreneurial networks (GEM, 2022). In Westbury, these challenges are compounded by local socio-economic conditions such as gang violence, high unemployment, poverty, and substance abuse (Mbokoho, 2023), further limiting youth entrepreneurship.

Although the study aimed for age diversity, the absence of younger women reflects national patterns rather than sampling limitations. According to the GEM 2023 report by Bowmaker-Falconer et al. (2023), most women entrepreneurs in SA are over the age of 35, with the highest participation recorded among those aged 35–44 (12%), followed by the 45–54 (10.5%) and 55–64 (6.5%) age groups. By contrast, the report notes, participation is lower among younger cohorts, with only 8.6% of women entrepreneurs falling within the 18–24 bracket and 11.3% within the 25–34 bracket. This distribution underscores how youth entrepreneurship, particularly among women in high-risk areas like Westbury, remains limited.

4.4. Data Collection

Data collection took place over two months and involved multiple methods to triangulate findings. These included:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Participant observations
- Key informant insights from community leaders and religious figures
- Document analysis of relevant materials
- Visual documentation through photography (with consent)

Visual documentation captured elements of the gangland environment, business settings, and participant interactions, though its use was limited due to privacy concerns. These images provide additional contextual depth and will be selectively used to illustrate and support relevant findings.

Thematic saturation was reached after 10 interviews, as no new insights emerged in the later stages. Instead, recurring patterns were observed across multiple data sources, reinforcing the validity of the findings.

4.5. Data Analysis Process

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, using a rigorous and iterative approach to ensure that findings remained grounded in participants' narratives. The process was not linear, it required ongoing engagement with the data, continuous code refinement, and structured theme development.

Importantly, this process was not limited to interview data, it also included observational field notes, which were documented in a research diary, transcribed, and coded in the same manner as interview transcripts.

Phase 1: Data Familiarisation

The first phase involved deeply engaging with the semi-structured interview data to ensure accuracy, consistency, and immersion in participants' narratives. This involved:

1. **Interview Data:**

    - All semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and then manually transcribed verbatim, followed by repeated rounds of review.

    - Listening to the original recordings while reading the transcriptions to ensure accuracy.

    - Checking for any personal identifiers and anonymising data for confidentiality.

    - Re-reading transcripts to immerse in the data before coding began.

2. **Observational Data:**

    - Observations made during interviews and participant interactions were documented in a research diary.

- These handwritten notes were later typed up and uploaded into ATLAS.ti Online as individual documents.

- Observations focused on non-verbal cues, business environments, customer interactions, and security concerns.

- Key verbal insights about participants' businesses that naturally emerged were also recorded and later coded using the same thematic framework.

Phase 2: Coding Strategy and Code Development

Coding was conducted using ATLAS.ti Online, applying thematic analysis through an open coding approach. Transcripts were reviewed line by line to identify significant information that best addressed the research questions. Each piece of relevant data was assigned a descriptive label (code) that captured its meaning. If the identified information aligned with an existing code, it was grouped under it; if no suitable code existed, a new one was created. This process continued until all significant information was systematically coded.

- Coding was iterative, it required multiple rounds of refinement, reassessment, and recoding.

- The researcher repeatedly revisited transcripts and codes, ensuring that assigned labels accurately reflected the data.

- New insights often emerged, requiring previous codes to be modified, merged, or split to improve precision.

The outcome of this process was a structured code set, with each code representing a meaningful aspect of the participants' lived experiences.

Phase 3: Sorting and Thematic Categorisation

Once all transcripts and observation notes were coded, the next step involved identifying patterns within the coded data to develop overarching themes.

- An inductive approach was used; themes emerged from the data rather than being pre-determined.

- Codes were systematically reviewed to identify shared meanings, grouping related codes together to form distinct themes.

- The process was iterative, involving constant comparison to ensure that themes accurately captured the core narratives within the data.

- Some codes were re-examined and reassigned during this process to improve thematic coherence.

Through this inductive analysis, the study generated five themes, each representing a key aspect of FEs' resilience in gang-affected environments. Each theme is introduced alongside a table that provides an overview of its meaning, assigned codes, the corresponding SRQs it addresses, and its relevance to the broader primary research question.

4.6. Theme 1: Gang Violence and Business Survival

Table 4: Theme 1 - gang violence and business survival

Meaning	Primary Codes	Related SRQ	How it Answers the PRQ
Focused on the direct impact of gang violence, how it actively shapes the business environment, forcing women to adapt or consider exit. Shows how survival requires daily negotiation with instability.	1. Impact of Gang Violence on Business Viability 2. Gang Violence Disrupting Business Operations 3. Taking Safety Precautions 4. Weighing Relocation for Safety & Better Opportunities 5. Contemplating Business Closure Due to Gang Violence 6. Reported Absence of Extortion	**SRQ1:** Identifies the social & economic challenges faced by FEs due to gang violence. **SRQ2:** Examines strategies used to mitigate these challenges.	Gang violence directly threatens the operational viability of FEs, compelling them to adopt context-specific strategies for survival and continuity. These include adjusting trading patterns, investing in safety, and weighing relocation – underscoring resilience as a response to structural insecurity.

Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

Gang violence has become a persistent and overwhelming challenge, threatening the success and continuity of businesses in Westbury. In recent years, it has escalated to the point where

business owners have become direct targets. One of the most alarming incidents involved the fatal shooting of a well-known pharmacist inside his pharmacy (Pijoos, 2024), just two weeks after another attack in which three business owners were shot while closing their shops, one of whom succumbed to his injuries (Buhr, 2024).

Beyond the tragic loss of life, these violent attacks create a climate of fear among FEs and their customers. The findings indicate that many customers are discouraged from visiting the area, while FEs are forced to adapt their operations, implement costly security measures, and, in some cases, consider shutting down their ventures due to safety concerns. Although several participants described experiences of shootings and intimidation, none reported direct extortion. The following section explores the business disruptions caused by gang violence, as well as the survival strategies FEs have adopted in response.

4.6.1. Impact of Gang Violence on Business Viability

Businesses reliant on foot traffic have been particularly affected by gang violence. FEs reported that fear keeps customers away, making business sustainability increasingly challenging:

> *"People are so afraid to come into the place just to support you and buy that thing. They're scared of being robbed. They're scared of being hurt."* (FE1)

> *"If people hear Westbury, they're scared… The first question they ask is, which part in Westbury? If they hear this street [where the FE operates], they say no, we're not gonna come there." (FE2)*

In addition to businesses dependent on foot traffic, those with established client bases have also been impacted. This is evident in the experience of FEs in education-focused enterprises, where safety concerns have prompted parents to withdraw their children, resulting in declining enrolment and financial instability.

> *"My health permit allows me for 45 children. For the past two years, I've been operating with 30 or fewer because people are scared, they scared to bring their children out here"* (FE2)

> *"But now the fear is 'my child is not safe anymore and just to come into the community, it's not safe for me as a person' and on that regard we lost a lot of children." (FE4)*

This fear was not limited to outsiders, as FEs observed that locals, despite their familiarity with the area, also avoided it due to safety concerns.

> *"Our own people, the ones who lived here and grew up here, are too scared to come. There's one woman who told me her husband doesn't even want her to come here."* (FE3)

4.6.2. Gang Violence Disrupting Business Operations

The persistent threat of gang violence has significantly disrupted business operations, forcing FEs to conduct daily activities with constant fear. Always on high alert, they frequently adjust their routines to avoid potential danger. During violent outbreaks, operations come to a standstill as FEs prioritise their safety over work, as expressed by FE1:

> *"There's no business at that time [violent outbreaks], because we, ourselves as a people living here, are so fearful you try and stay indoors… You don't want to go out because you don't want to be in the middle of something when something breaks out… it's so difficult for a normal person to be operating in a place like that [volatile], especially if this is your livelihood." (FE1)*

For some FEs, gang violence has severely disrupted key aspects of their operations, making previously accessible spaces unsafe and largely inaccessible. This challenge is evident in the experience of FE2, who runs an education-focused business:

> *"We used to take our children to the park. They actually opened the parks specially for us. Now we can't do that anymore… They shoot in the street, we can't run with 10, 20 children. So, the children, they are limited now to do activities, which is not good for us… which is also very stressful because we have to keep them active." (FE2)*

Entrepreneurs also encountered direct threats while carrying out routine business activities. For FE9, a simple task like walking through the area to deliver products to clients became dangerous:

> *"I had a delivery because I do deliveries all over... and I walk and I do it. And I come back and this one guy says... ["die is my spot"] "this is my spot." The other guys are coming from the bottom... the guy's got a knife so I'm scared..."* (FE9)

Similarly, safety concerns extended beyond business owners to their clients. FE4 recalled a harrowing incident where a parent dropping off their child at her school was confronted by armed gang members, with her property caught in the crossfire:

“When the window was shot at… one of my fathers just dropped his child and he was standing at the gate and the gangs came past and they pointed him with a gun… I said not even the parents are safe anymore, right in front of the gate… Am I putting adults lives now in danger?” (FE4)

Figure 11: Stray bullet hole in the window of FE4's business premises



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

The dangers associated with travel, particularly at night, forced FEs to adjust their work schedules, seek alternative arrangements, or even reconsider the viability of business opportunities in Westbury, as highlighted by the reflection of FE7.

> *"When I have to like go and collect my stuff when it's late, I don't like going back into Westbury… I have to ask my clients ‘okay what time can I collect? Um can’t I come tomorrow morning?’... And when the shooting is a lot, then I hesitate to go fetch it that time of the night, that’s why I have to go sleep by my daughter. And then I’ll come tomorrow, which is a lot of work for me because now tomorrow I have to now drive from her [daughter] place to back there [the client’s venue], pack out all the things and [ja] yes, it makes it difficult." (FE7)*

> *“Um, also, like I said, I'm very scared to take events in Westbury where I know where there’s certain areas where they shot a lot... I'll first ask where is that…? And then I'm a bit reluctant to do a quote for people because I’m scared... because you don’t know if someone’s trying to lure you in…”(FE7)*

4.6.3. Taking Safety Precautions in Response to Gang Violence

In response to ongoing gang violence, FEs implemented various security measures to safeguard themselves, their businesses, and their customers. Many have secured their premises, limited access, and adjusted their operating hours, as reflected in the experiences of FE2 and FE8:

"You can see it's [the premises] very secured. The gates are always locked… We have a big music box, when we hear shooting, we put the music all out. The children mustn't hear anything… so we can't expose the children to that." (FE2)

"...we've got ADT, we've put in cameras… I think you saw the gate was locked when you came." (FE4)

"To protect myself, I tried to fence the place and to keep my doors locked at all times..." (FE8)

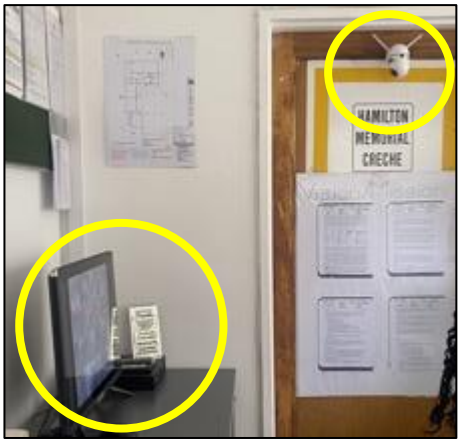
Observations further confirmed the extent of these safety precautions:

At FE5's property, high walls, a gate secured with a chain and lock, and burglar bars on the windows were observed. Access to the premises was tightly controlled, requiring someone to unlock the gate for entry." (Observation: FE5)

Similarly, at FE8's, the property was protected with high gates secured with a chain and lock, and it also had barbed wire on the fence for added security." (Observation: FE8)

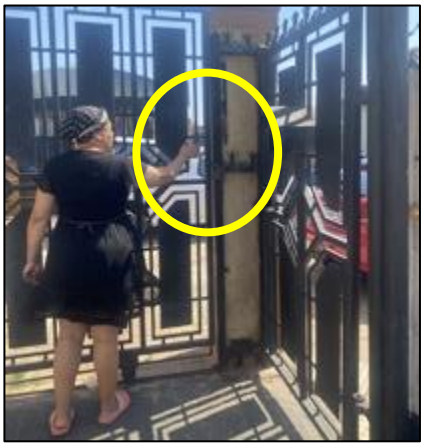
These findings are further supported by visual evidence. Photos taken at various FEs' premises illustrate the heightened security measures implemented due to safety concerns.

Figure 12: Security camera & monitor at FE4's business premises



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

Figure 13: Locked gate at FE1's business premises



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

Beyond securing their premises, business owners have also adapted their work schedules to minimise exposure to violence, as described by FE6:

Well, during the day mostly they buy, so my mom and I set a time, by 5 o'clock, we close… Most of the shops close by 6 [pm]… So if you don't buy food here in the area by 6 [pm], it's bad." (FE6)

4.6.4. Weighing Relocation for Safety and Better Opportunities

On the one hand, FEs struggled with the decision of whether they could continue their businesses in such a volatile environment. While they were not considering shutting down their businesses, many seriously contemplated relocating to a safer area, a decision that carried significant emotional weight. The reflections from the following FE's illustrate this finding:

"I won't give up my business. But I will happily move to another area outside of Westbury." (FE8)

"Okay, the move um is also something that makes me emotional and has made me emotional… It almost feels like a stab in my heart... This has been coming for about two years or three years, and when I started taking it more seriously, it really felt like a physical pain stab. It's so painful that we are pushed to get to this point..." (FE10)

4.6.5. Contemplating Business Closure Due to Gang Violence

On the other hand, the persistent violence, financial losses, and operational disruptions led some FEs to seriously consider shutting down their businesses entirely, as reflected in the following statements:

"I think about giving up the business every day... You ask yourself; do I stay and keep pushing? Or do I save me and mine?" (FE1)

"That time when they started shooting and killing the businesspeople, I spoke to my mom and said maybe a person shouldn't have a business because the last thing I want is to be shot dead." (FE6)

4.6.6. Reported Absence of Extortion

Although not included in the formal interview schedule, participants were asked at the end of each interview whether they had experienced extortion or protection-related demands. All ten

participants responded unequivocally that they had not. This finding was consistent across interviews and aligns with Irish-Qhobosheane (2024), who notes that extortion is not pervasive in Westbury, where gangs primarily focus on drug-related activities.

Despite the constant threat of violence, the absence of extortion is notable given prevailing narratives that associate gang-affected communities with routine extortion. Theme 1 demonstrates that FEs continue to operate under immense pressure, adapting to an environment marked by insecurity and fear. However, the challenges they face extend beyond physical threats. Severe economic constraints and deep-rooted social inequalities further jeopardise business sustainability, issues explored in greater detail in Theme 2.

4.7. Theme 2: Barriers to Business Sustainability

Table 5: Theme 2 - barriers to business sustainability

Meaning	Primary Codes	Related SRQ	How it Answers the PRQ
Systemic economic, financial, and institutional challenges that compromise the long-term viability of FEs' businesses in gang-affected environments.	1. Lack of Financial & Institutional Support 2. Financial Strain & Cash Flow Challenges 3. Competition & Rivalry 4. Societal Gender Biases 5. Race & Class Disparity Affecting Access to Opportunities	**SRQ1:** Identifies financial and institutional challenges restricting FEs' growth.	These barriers constrain long-term sustainability by limiting access to capital, institutional resources, and equitable market participation. FEs demonstrate resilience through alternative income strategies, informal support, and adaptive operations in response to exclusion.

Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

Business sustainability refers to an enterprise's ability to maintain operations, generate income, and grow over time despite external and internal challenges (Bateh et al., 2013). For FEs in Westbury, this sustainability is consistently threatened by systemic barriers that extend beyond routine operations.

The findings reveal that financial constraints, lack of institutional support, competition, societal biases, and racial and class disparities severely hinder business viability. These barriers not only limit business growth but also place FEs into precarious financial and operational positions, where survival often depends on resilience and constant adaptation.

4.7.1. Lack of Financial and Institutional Support

Access to financial and institutional support emerged as a major barrier to business sustainability. FEs reported struggling to secure funding and support from government institutions, private organisations, and financial service providers. Many described repeated attempts to access assistance, only to face bureaucratic obstacles, neglect, or outright rejection, as revealed by FE3 and FE4:

> *"I feel like the government has failed us in a big way... Where they see what's going on. When are they stepping in and coming to help?... and I can tell you that I have reached out to government on numerous occasions. …I was asked to do a lot of things [complete application forms and provide supporting documents] which I had done… Another thing that I've also noticed is that the people that you know that can help that's in government that you go to for advice, they are already in a comfortable space themselves, even though they're Coloured people, they're our people, they come from the townships, they have found a way to now be in the right spot. I would think now you would help the rest… help people that need the help… especially if you're sitting in that um sort of uh portfolio, but now it's like um, 'I'm already here, I'm getting a salary, I'm getting mine, so, I'm sorry I'm going to give you the run around.'" (FE3)*

> *"We understand that it's difficult for them [government officials] to come into the community, but we need their help and if they don't come and inspect our premises and see what we do, we won't get that certificate and if we don't have that certificate, we can't apply for funding." (FE4)*

Even when applying through formal financial channels, FEs encountered rejection or dismissive responses as evidenced by the experiences of FE3 and FE4. FE3 voiced frustration over the significant challenges in accessing funding, while FE4 shared her experience of being denied assistance despite diligently meeting all application requirements.

> *"You know, it's very, very hard to find and to get financial help - very hard." (FE3)*

“I've applied last year to [bank name], and they said, ‘Oh, your application came in too late,’ so it's not for lack of trying. I've applied to [organisation name], they came out actually to look at the place and say, ‘no, with these nice playground equipment, you don't need [organisation name].’ Then they walked out.” (FE4)

4.7.2. Financial Strain and Cash Flow Challenges

FEs experienced significant financial strain, grappling with cash flow challenges, high operating costs, and difficulties in securing timely payments from clients, all of which contributed to ongoing instability. Additionally, they faced challenges as customers often went to great lengths to bargain for lower prices, further affecting their financial sustainability.

The burden of high operating costs was particularly evident in FE4’s reflection:

“We've got, ADT. We've put in cameras that came out of my pocket. It's another expensive that could have been utilised for food for the children. But now I must pay ADT Security.” (FE4)

Similarly, the challenge of price bargaining was highlighted in the experiences of FE1 and FE7:

“Coming from an impoverished community, there's not really money for I call it um this is luxury, it's a luxury product. So, um then it turns again to the game of the size, the prices, the haggling, which makes it a very um difficult again, when it comes to pricing and your profit.” (FE1)

"The reason why that [selling food during the day] stopped is because, again, people wanted to bargain down the prices..." (FE1)

"And that's what I also find with our people. They don't want to pay but they want all the extravagant things." (FE7)

For some, the financial strain was compounded by unreliable payments from clients, forcing them to operate at a loss:

"I've got 50 children, not all of them pay every month… we barely just making it. I don't want to lie...” (FE2)

"The people don't pay me as I want them to pay me." (FE5)

“Others don't pay. They say they will pay me, then after two weeks they still haven't paid me… and you know, that's my only income... (FE8)

4.7.3. Competition and Rivalry

In an already challenging business environment, competition, while not inherently negative, further strained FEs sustainability efforts. Rather than fostering collaboration, competition was often marked by rivalry and conflict.

“There is competition with women… Where there’s a lot of Coloureds, there’s fighting, and women are only fighting.” (FE6)

"When it comes to Coloured women, we are very competitive. It's like, ‘I want to keep mine to myself’… I don't understand why our ladies are like that. Um, it's a very competitive spirit instead of helping each other out." (FE1)

Furthermore, while some FEs made efforts to support one another, these instances were rare.

“You'll find a handful of entrepreneurs that will assist… each other and help each other and refer each other. There’s always cat issues… I would want to expect the same from the next person but not everyone is the same." (FE7)

4.7.4. Societal Gender Biases

The findings suggest that gender-based discrimination significantly influences business opportunities and access to support for FEs. They often encounter systemic biases that reinforces traditional gender roles, viewing them primarily as homemakers while favouring male counterparts in areas such as funding, market access, and business legitimacy.

These findings align with the concept of the triple burden, where women entrepreneurs must simultaneously navigate domestic responsibilities, economic exclusion, and structural gender biases. While not exclusive to FEs in Westbury, this multifaceted challenge is prevalent among FEs in SA. For instance, a study by Chinomona and Maziriri (2015), focusing on women entrepreneurs in Gauteng province, identified significant obstacles, including limited access to

finance, gender discrimination, and societal attitudes that undermine women's entrepreneurial efforts. These barriers were strongly echoed in the following FE's experiences:

> *"…The world is still so a male-dominating place that women are seen as um the homemakers but also as a provider at the same time – so now you've got challenges um as a woman because you've got other things to do. First of all, that men don't generally do. Um you've got your housework; you've got kids to tend to. Uhm, you know, your time is split where a man's time is not really split in that aspect. And generally, men are seen, are more heard than women. You know, when they [men] start up something, people will just listen to this man and um and it's even more hard – it's harder than uh when you are in the same business as a man. They [people] would rather first support the man before they support the woman." (FE1)*

FEs also reported being pressured to lower their prices or negotiate more than their male counterparts:

> *"If they come to you, if people come to you for business they will feel that they can either bargain you down or hardball you or [ja] yes, they'll come with tricks. And if they don't succeed, instead of just taking your price, they'll go to a man, you know, and they'll go and pay… even more on that side then they, what they would have paid." (FE1)*

Businesses operating in industries historically associated with women often face challenges to have their work recognised as legitimate. Research on gendered labour market dynamics supports this, showing that when women are overrepresented in certain professions, these fields tend to be devalued, making it more difficult for practitioners to gain recognition and receive fair compensation (Stamarski, Son Hing, 2015). This devaluation is evident in the experiences of FEs. For instance, FE4, who runs an education-focused business, describes how societal perceptions undermine the legitimacy of her work. Similarly, FE7, who operates in the events industry, highlights how her profession is often dismissed as a hobby rather than a serious business:

> *"We are impacted negatively, because firstly they think it's ECD, it's childminders. You know, it's not a profession… 'Our grannies looked after children, so what makes it different now? And they didn't get paid for it.'" (FE4)*

"People don't understand. Sometimes people will think it's just balloons. But it's not. People don't know the work that goes in there. I think people think that events is a hobby because you make things look nice. It's hard work." (FE7)

4.7.5. Race and Class Disparity Affecting Access to Opportunities

Racial and class disparities were also identified as major barriers to business sustainability. The findings indicate that there was a prevailing belief that systemic racial biases influenced business success, as illustrated in the following reflections:

"… we'll start with the race… I feel that Coloured people are marginalised a lot. When there is um opportunities for FEs in our field, you will go there [government departments]. You'll do all the right things. You'll make all the right noises, you'll give in all the right papers and everything. It still feels like you need to bribe someone to be heard or to get what you need to get. But any other race, it's much easier for them." (FE1)

"… racial wise… we've been denied most of the time opportunities because of being a Coloured." (FE5)

FE's in Westbury experienced marginalisation, both in terms of economic opportunities and broader societal perceptions, with businesses in certain areas often perceived as more credible and deserving of support, while those in townships like Westbury struggled to gain the same level of recognition, trust, and customer support. This class divide exacerbated economic inequalities, making it even more difficult for entrepreneurs in these communities to grow and sustain their ventures, as reflected in FE1's experience:

"Then when it comes to class, uhm class will always play a role in any business. I feel, uhm, I know that when I was selling and concentrating on people out of the township… in suburbs, the suburban areas, they would support you easily. You can be selling the exact same thing in the suburbs then what I am selling, mine can even be better, but people are first going to go there because of the class. When you have a business in um a township, people sort of don't pay you no mind. It's like, you know, you are playing a game or something. You take that same business you put it in a… uhm suburban area, the ball game changes immediately. Everybody sits up and they look. Now you become someone in the game. So it feels so like, do I have to really move out to those places to prosper? So I cannot build my community? There's nothing that's

going to really happen for us here because of this class aspect and this class thing." (FE1)

Furthermore, FEs also felt excluded from funding opportunities and economic programs perceived to predominantly cater to other communities.

"Just the other day, [brand name] went to Soweto and Noordgesig, they didn't come to us. I suppose it's because it's Westbury... Again, the other day, there's workshops that's happening there, they don't come to our places…" (FE2)

"We are the forgotten people here… When we walked in by the education [department], the district it was, 'haaa, are you from Westbury or are you from Eldos? We heard about Westbury, and we can't come out to Westbury to do inspections…' So the gang violence, gave them a perception already, that we are all like that. And we had to convince them, there's nothing wrong with, different from us being from Westbury than being from Sandton. We all human beings and we're here to access information on how to get some funding." (FE4)

The findings related to Theme 2 reveal that sustaining a business in gang-affected townships is fraught with challenges, including financial exclusion, competition, and social biases, all of which create significant barriers. However, despite these difficulties, FEs exhibit remarkable resilience, demonstrating their ability to persevere under such conditions. This resilience is explored further in the following theme, which delves into the psychological and emotional strength that enables FEs to navigate challenges.

4.8. Theme 3: Psychological Toll and Emotional Resilience

Table 6: Theme 3 - psychological toll and emotional resilience

Meaning	Primary Codes	Related SRQ	How it Answers the PRQ
The internal strength, belief systems, and emotional coping mechanisms that enable FEs to persist amid chronic stress, trauma, and fear.	1. Perseverance through Adversity & Self-Belief 2. Motivation for Self-Employment 3. Passion for Business 4. Faith & Spiritual Resilience 5. Mental Health Challenges & Trauma	**SRQ1:** Identifies psychological challenges faced by FEs in ganglands. **SRQ3:** Examines how psychological resilience enables long-term perseverance and success.	FEs experience severe emotional strain linked to violence and instability, yet draw on inner strength, faith, passion, and responsibility to continue. These psychological drivers form a key pillar of long-term entrepreneurial resilience in contexts where formal mental health and institutional support are lacking.

Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

This theme highlights the emotional and mental toll of running a business in a violent and unpredictable, gang-controlled environment. FEs face chronic stress, trauma, and emotional exhaustion as they navigate the instability surrounding them.

The psychological toll on FEs is mirrored in the broader community's experience, with numerous reports highlighting residents' deep-seated fear due to daily gang-related shootings, which have severely eroded their sense of security and overall well-being. Speaking to News24, one resident described the pervasive fear in Westbury: *" … I think you can see how fearful people have become in the community. It is unfair to us and our children in the community who are not involved in gangsterism and drugs. People are scared to leave their homes and even scared to go to the shops. We are getting robbed of our freedom" (*Pijoos, 2023).

Despite these challenges, the findings highlight the remarkable resilience of FEs. Their strength extends beyond mere survival; they remain committed to sustaining their businesses despite the instability around them. Many draw resilience from their faith, personal drive, or a deep sense of responsibility toward their businesses and communities. Their ability to persist, adapt, and push forward speaks to their enduring commitment and psychological resilience.

4.8.1. Mental Health Challenges and Trauma

The persistent exposure to gang violence, uncertainty, and the emotional strain of daily survival took a severe toll on the mental well-being of FEs. Many reported experiencing chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and even symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (*PTSD)*.

> *"It's traumatic! Everything that happens, that's the other things that's… not spoken about. When it comes to this whole violence… it's mentally challenging… psychologically it screws you up. Sometimes, we will sit, and the shooting will be so loud, you know, and you will just go into a panic attack or you will have anxiety. …I've got… depression… anxiety and PTSD. There's days when I get my very, very dark days where I feel like I can just stay in bed with the depression and just lay there in the dark room and do nothing at all and just cry the whole day because nothing wants to work out." (FE1)*

> *"A few weeks ago I said guys, I'm reaching breaking point because I don't have an outlet… it's a big, big, big burden. I need to refuel myself because you can't pour from an empty jug." (FE4)*

For some, the weight of their environment, combined with personal struggles, intensified their distress, making it increasingly difficult to cope.

> *"I do feel scared, and I'm very wary of my surroundings. I'm forever looking in my mirror. I'm forever looking around. I'm very observant. It's become a norm…but um I'm just angry... I'm angry at everything that is just going on you know. I'm angry and I do get anxious at night now... when I hear those shots it's like my stomach turns, I must switch off the lights and get into bed. It's like that." (FE7)*

Observations confirmed the deep impact of ongoing violence, with visible signs of distress among participants. While observing FE1, she pointed to the house next to hers and, with a tone of hopelessness, remarked, "The owner had put it up for sale due to the violence." (Observation_FE1).

Similarly, during an observation of FE10, she suddenly voiced, "I no longer feel the same connection to the place I grew up due to the violence," her voice was heavy with sadness. (Observation_FE10).

4.8.2. Perseverance Through Adversity and Self-Belief

Despite the emotional and mental toll of their circumstances, FEs demonstrated strong perseverance and confidence in their ability to succeed. They spoke of their determination to keep going, pushing through daily challenges, and refusing to let adversity define their businesses, as reflected by the following excerpts:

> *"… it's really difficult because it's strenuous. You have to stretch your brain in all the ways you can, but you have to keep the wheels rolling… It takes a lot of drive. It takes a lot of push. It takes a lot of want to, wanting to do this and passion, because um if you don't have that, then this is not for you." (FE1)*

> *"Even though the challenges came and totally just rocked my world and threw me off course so many times, but I just got back up." (FE10)*

> *"It gets too much at times, but I'm not one to like lay in my [struggles] – sit in that tent and camp there." (FE7)*

This perseverance was not rooted in denial of their realities but in a conscious decision to carry on, despite the emotional weight of their daily lives. Rather than disengaging, they developed active ways of managing their stress and mental health, treating these efforts as necessary to continue functioning.

Some actively sought support by speaking to family members or using prescribed medication, while others coped through intentional mental preparation or by maintaining a steady routine as evidenced by these statements:

> *"I feel that I need and I've actually voiced to some of my family I need mental help but I take a tablet that helps me. I take the Prazepam sometimes when it's too much." (FE1)*
> *"You have to prepare yourself mentally for it. You get up in the morning and you say OK, I'm going [to work] … Even though I'm Scared, I'll just put on a brave face today." (FE2)*

Others relied on small but meaningful ways of coping, strategies that offered a sense of focus or brief mental escape:

> *"Sometimes to release my mind from everything, I'll play games, now and then I'll do Bible quizzes." (FE9)*

> *"Throwing myself into more work and more work is maybe some type of a coping mechanism… Making time to consistently support my son in his soccer career um by going to the games, going to gym sessions..." (FE10)*

Observations reinforced this resilience and self-belief, with business owners exuding confidence and pride in their work despite the hardships they faced.

> *While speaking with her employees, FE4 proudly said, "That's why we are a school of excellence." This was further reflected in the awards and trophies displayed in her office, showcasing the school's achievements over the years. (Observation: FE4)*

> *FE9 carried herself with energy and confidence, speaking with boldness and optimism. Her upbeat and self-assured demeanor reflected a deep belief in her business and its success. (Observation: FE9)*

Figure 14: Certificates awarded to FE4's school



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

Figure 15: Trophies awarded to FE4's school



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

4.8.3. Motivation for Self-Employment

For many, entrepreneurship was a response to financial hardship or a desire for independence. Financial struggles, retrenchment, and the lack of stable employment opportunities pushed them to start their own businesses, as confirmed by the following reflections:

> *“I lost my job due to retrenchment in 2018 and then I was at home for a little while, and circumstances uh drove me to start the business up again… financially, things didn't go well, and I thought, well, start up this business.” (FE1)*

> *"I got retrenched from there due to COVID… I'm committed to making it [the business] work because I want to be my own boss..." (FE6)*

> *"I decided, you know what, life is so short and I'm never going to know if I don't try. I always wanted to do it [start a business]." (FE7)*

4.8.4. Passion for their Business

Beyond financial survival, many entrepreneurs expressed a deep sense of passion for their work, seeing their businesses as more than just a means of making money. Their strong commitment to their craft kept them motivated to persevere:

"My passion is cooking and baking. So, I took that, and I turned it into a little bit of a business... I love the business so much, it's a passion, that's not something that I'm just willing to give up.*"* (FE1)

"I've always had a passion for hairdressing." (FE3)

"You have to be born with a passion… I always say it's not really about the money... That is my motivation. I love children." (FE2)

This passion was also evident during observations, particularly in how entrepreneurs valued their journey and the significance of their craft. During an observation with FE3, she took out a mannequin doll head and explained, *"This is the doll I first got when I started my first hairdressing job to practice on, and I have kept it ever since as a reminder of where I started."* Her decision to hold on to this item reflects not only nostalgia but also a deep passion for her work.

Similarly, FE6's passion was evident in the way she approached her daily business operations. A customer arrived and placed an order for chips. FE6 greeted the customer warmly, accepted the payment, and advised her to return in a few minutes for collection. Her passion was visible both in her interaction with the customer and in the care she took in preparing the order. From the way she handled the payment, counting it and placing it securely in the cash box, to preparing the order, putting on gloves before peeling the potatoes, frying the chips, and carefully labelling the order with the customer's name, every step was carried out with attention to detail. It was clear that this was not just a job, but something she took immense pride in.

Figure 16: FE3's hairdressing practice doll head



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

Figure 17: FE6 preparing a customer order



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

4.8.5. Faith and Spiritual Resilience

Faith and spirituality served as a powerful source of strength for FEs. They all expressed a strong reliance on prayer, saw their work as a calling, and believed that divine intervention would help them sustain their businesses. The following reflections capture the findings of the theme:

> *“We just walk by faith here. You just come to work every day. As I park my car, I just say, ‘God, let me not get caught up in a crossfire.’ I really just come to work, and I just pray for my children's safety so they can come here every day. Going home, they can be safe.” (FE2)*

> *"One thing I always do is pray about it [opportunities]. You know, if it is for me, it will happen. If it's not, it's not for me." (FE7)*

> *"My faith is so strong, you know. Even when I told (name of husband), 'don’t worry, man, we’ll get through this, we’ll make it happen.' I gradually built up my clientele, and things went well…" (FE3)*

> *" I will not allow things like gang violence to stop me from doing or achieving what I want in life. I will not… Because I said, because it's God's plan for my life. It is not my plan. If it was my plan, I wouldn't have done all this." (FE5)*

Observations reinforced FEs' belief in incorporating faith and prayer into their work. While observing FE8, I witnessed the end-of-day routine, where the children gathered to sing and pray together. I could see how much FE8 valued this engagement with the children. It was clear this routine was a meaningful part of their daily activities. (Observation: FE8)

The findings related to Theme 3 reveal a complex reality for FE in Westbury, where psychological hardship coexists with emotional resilience. While they endure severe mental strain, trauma, and emotional exhaustion due to persistent violence and financial uncertainty, their self-belief, passion, and faith drive them forward. However, resilience extends beyond personal endurance, FEs actively implement strategies to sustain and grow their businesses, as explored in Theme 4.

4.9. Theme 4: Business Growth and Sustainability

Table 7: Theme 4 - business growth and sustainability

Meaning	Primary Codes	Related SRQ	How it Answers the PRQ
Strategies used by FEs to ensure long-term viability, adapt to instability, and pursue business growth in violent contexts.	1. Mission-Driven Commitment & Staff Retention 2. Business Longevity & Continuity 3. Business Adaptability & Financial Growth 4. Strategic Positioning & Market Retention 5. Networking & External Support	**SRQ3:** Examines resilience mechanisms and strategies FEs use to sustain and grow their businesses.	FEs adopt deliberate and adaptive strategies – anchored in commitment, flexibility, visibility, and relational networks – to maintain and expand their businesses amid chronic instability. These actions reflect a strategic, context-responsive form of resilience that sustains enterprise and community impact in hostile environments.

Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

FEs consistently expressed a deep commitment to sustaining and growing their businesses despite operating in environments marked by persistent violence and socioeconomic challenges. In this context, business growth and sustainability extend beyond profit-making, they are driven by survival, community impact, and long-term resilience.

The findings highlight that sustaining a business in such conditions requires adaptive strategies, community engagement, and personal resilience rather than merely following conventional business growth models. This align with studies from Mohd-Nor and Ali (2022), which highlights that FEs in violent-conflict settings not only promote social inclusion but also play a crucial role in improving their socioeconomic well-being and strengthening community resilience. Similarly, Hernández et al. (2024) emphasises the significance of support networks in sustaining women-led enterprises during crises.

The findings revealed five key factors contributing to business sustainability:

4.9.1. Mission-Driven Commitment and Staff Retention

Entrepreneurs expressed a deep sense of responsibility toward their businesses and employees, often prioritising staff retention over financial security. Despite the constant struggle with financial uncertainty, they prioritised the well-being of their employees, often making personal sacrifices to do so. This sentiment was well captured by FE2, who stated:

"The thing is, I can't let my people go that's been working here for me for many years. Sometimes I shoot myself in the foot, most of the time, but I have to pay them… I must tell you, sometimes I don't know where the money comes from, but it comes. We pay the people, they are happy…" (FE2).

The thought of ever closing their businesses was also inconceivable for many FEs, as they expressed an unwavering commitment to keeping their businesses running despite financial hardships. Their responses reflect a deep sense of persistence and determination, highlighting how their businesses are an indispensable part of their lives. Rather than viewing closure as a possibility, they emphasised their commitment to continue. This perspective is supported by Yan et al. (2023), who assert that entrepreneurial persistence is crucial for both the success of the venture and personal development. They highlight that persistence involves sustained effort in a business despite obstacles and setbacks (Yan et al., 2023), an attribute clearly reflected in the attitudes of FEs, whose relentless determination is evident in the following sentiments:

"While I'm here, it'll [the business] still continue. As long as people place orders and come to collect them, or if I can deliver, the business will carry on. That's a fact!" (FE1).

"No, hey. That's like… it feels like… Non-negotiable… I don't think I will ever give up." (FE10).

"No. I don't want to close [the business], never." (FE8)

Beyond financial trade-offs and strong determination to succeed, personal sacrifices played a crucial role in sustaining businesses in these challenging environments. FEs endured long hours and relentless work, with their daily realities shaped by the continuous effort required to keep their businesses running. This aligns with Mashapure (2022), who found that FEs often make significant personal sacrifices, such as extended working hours and limited personal time, to ensure the survival and growth of their businesses. This commitment is exemplified by FE10, who shared:

"I didn't have a car… We would walk with the cake packed in pans [from the industrial kitchen she once rented] and bring it home… and then I would continue working until morning hours to (chokes back tears) finish whatever I needed to finish." (FE10)

4.9.2. Business Longevity and Continuity

FEs prioritised long-term continuity, maintained through succession planning, strategic reinvestment, and, in some cases, family ownership.

Succession planning was particularly important for FEs seeking to preserve their business legacy and ensure continuity beyond their own involvement. This aligns with Yu and Cai's (2017) argument that intergenerational succession plays a crucial role in business performance and increases the likelihood of survival across generations. FE2 exemplified this process, sharing:

> *"My mother started this business. And I'm also about to hand it over to my daughter…"(FE2)*

For others, business continuity was fostered through exposure and active involvement of family members in daily operations. During observations of FE1, FE4, FE5, and FE6, each introduced me to relatives actively contributing to their businesses. At FE4, it was her daughter, FE5, it was her mother; at FE6, her mother and sister were involved. At FE1, in particular, she smiled warmly while introducing her son, sharing:

> *"He often helps me with baking because he loves the creative process." (Observation: FE1)*

Beyond succession, long-term sustainability was achieved through strategic reinvestment, with entrepreneurs channelling profits back into their businesses to build assets and expand operations. This approach was exemplified by the reflections of FE7 and FE10, who explained:

> *"When I do have big events, what I do is take some of that money and start buying. So I have my personal stock of my own stuff." (FE7)*

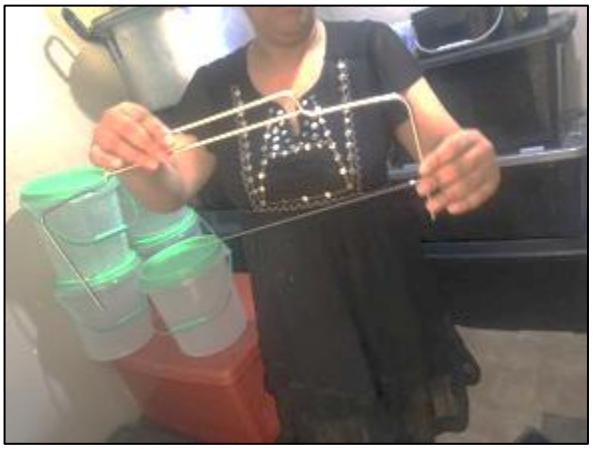
> *"What I did with whatever orders I had, I would take some money of the profit and I would buy something. Maybe buy a few chairs, buy tables, buy tablecloths and that's how the equipment phase started to grow. And I would do that every time with whatever orders I get." (FE10)*

Observations further highlighted this commitment to reinvestment. For instance, during the observation of FE1, the researcher was invited to view her equipment room. Though small,

the room was neatly organised, with each item labelled and stored in its designated place. FE1 spoke proudly about the equipment she had accumulated over the years, showcasing some of the items and explaining their uses.

Similarly, during a tour of FE10's premises, she showed the researcher some of the industrial-sized equipment, including ovens, refrigerators, and mixers, which she had purchased using business profits.

Figure 18: FE1 demonstrating business equipment use



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

Figure 19: FE10's workspace & equipment



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

4.9.3. Business Adaptability and Financial Growth

To sustain their businesses, FEs employ adaptive strategies such as expanding clientele beyond the local community, negotiating flexible payment terms, diversifying income streams, and tailoring their offerings to meet market demands. This flexibility is crucial for long-term survival, especially in high-risk environments, and aligns with Agrawal et al. (2024) who emphasise that entrepreneurs who proactively adapt to changing conditions are more likely to sustain their businesses, as adaptability enables them to navigate challenges such as financial constraints and resource limitations.

This adaptability was evident as FEs actively expanded their offerings, branching into new ventures beyond their initial business focus to diversify income streams. FE1 and FE4 exemplify this dynamic approach.

> *"I started cooking and selling food from home. The reviews was good, people wanted um catering, big time catering. Then I've branched out on that, and um I started baking cakes. First for family members, for birthday parties… other people saw the cakes, and*

um I had to start working out pricing for cakes and then I started selling cakes, only birthday cakes. Then it branched out to um other things, like biscuits, um koeksisters, donuts and all sorts of um party trinkets, that they want. So, if something, um, that I see is interesting and it's um the budget is going to be good for people - affordable, then I would try that out, if it works, and then I would sell that as well… I do even um event planning, where I will do the whole event, and I'll do um decor, all of that." (FE1)

"I do program training for preschools for Africa. Where I teach teachers and principals what to implement in the classroom. I also teach level NQF level 4 and NQF level 5 for (name of institution) it's a higher education institution." (FE4).

Beyond diversifying offerings, many entrepreneurs also strategically extended their reach to attract clients from outside Westbury, which they described as both financially advantageous and critical to sustaining their businesses:

"I have many clients who come from Sandton. I even get people coming from Durban… Just the other day, I did a woman's hair who came all the way from George… I also have a nurse who came from Vryburg." (FE3)

"A lot of people from outside, even as far as Randfontein, used to bring their kids to this school." (FE4)

"The bulk of my support comes from outside." (FE10)

FEs also adapted to their clients' financial constraints through flexible payment arrangements and a variety of payment methods. FE3 explained:

"Some clients come and say, 'Hey FE3, can I get my hair done, but I don't have money to pay you right now?' Then I say, 'Yes, of course,' and I'll let them pay at the end of the month." (FE3)

"You could negotiate prices with your people. You would give people on credit because you know where this person lives and they'll come and pay you at the end of the month." (FE1)

Observations further emphasised this adaptability, particularly with FE9, who has multiple income streams. She sells a variety of products, including beauty and cleaning supplies,

through direct sales across her area and surrounding communities, while also running a house shop where she sells several food items. (Observation: FE9)

4.9.4. Strategic Positioning and Market Retention

This finding reveals how entrepreneurs strategically position their businesses and enhance market visibility through a combination of word-of-mouth referrals, long-term customer relationships, social media, and direct marketing efforts such as printed materials and customer feedback. These strategies play a crucial role in attracting and retaining customers while strengthening brand presence.

The literature supports these findings, highlighting the significant impact of these strategies on business success. Matusin et al. (2023) for instance indicate that social media marketing positively influences consumer engagement and electronic word-of-mouth, which in turn enhances customer retention and business growth. Additionally, Barreto (2014) have found that both offline and online word-of-mouth play a crucial role in shaping consumer behaviour and brand perception, contributing to market visibility and customer loyalty.

Word-of-mouth, in particular, emerged as a powerful marketing tool, with businesses thriving on personal recommendations, as reflected in the following accounts:

> *“New clients will always be referrals... it's mostly been word of mouth, word of mouth advertising.” (FE10)*

> *“… by word of mouth, one person will tell another… I get new people because one person will bring another.” (FE3)*

Long-term customer relationships also contributed to business sustainability. In the case of FE3 for instance, some clients demonstrated sustained loyalty by traveling significant distances for services or remaining customers since childhood:

> *“I still have clients from back when I worked there who still come to me… she comes all the way from Vryburg to get her hair cut.” (FE3)*

> *"I have one girl whose hair I still do – [name] is now 16 years old. I’ve been cutting [name] hair since she was six months old." (FE3)*

Social media played a key role in expanding market reach, with FEs actively using digital platforms to promote their businesses. This is reflected in FE1's account:

> *"I've got an Instagram account, a TikTok account I started recently, and a Facebook page just for the business. I use my WhatsApp a lot and get referrals from people."* (FE1)

Observations reinforced these findings:

> *During the observation of FE3, she worked on a client's hair while engaging in warm and friendly conversation filled with laughter. When she finished, she asked the client if she was happy with her hair and the client nodded approvingly while looking at herself in the mirror. When the client left, the researcher noticed that no payment was made or requested and asked FE3 about it. She explained that the client would be paying electronically but mentioned that she also accepts cash payments. This interaction reflected her commitment to customer satisfaction and, in turn, long-term client retention. (Observation: FE3)*
>
> *Similarly, at FE6's premises, pamphlets advertising the hair products she sells were printed with the intention of displaying them outside the to attract potential customers. (Observation: FE6)*
>
> *In terms of branding, only FE2 and FE4 had visible signage and business names displayed on their premises. This suggests a limited use of formal branding and visual marketing across the businesses observed, with most relying instead on word-of-mouth and informal channels. (Observation: FE2, FE4)*

Figure 20: FE3 styling a customer's hair



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

Figure 21: FE4's hair product pamphlet



Note. Photograph by the researcher, 2024.

4.9.5. Networking and External Support

FEs actively engaged in networking and leveraged social and business connections to access financial and operational resources to sustain and grow their businesses. These findings align with the views of Singh and Basri (2024), who argue that entrepreneurs who actively seek out and engage in networking opportunities are better positioned to secure financial and operational support, ultimately leading to enhanced business growth and sustainability.

FE1 and FE10 echoed the positive impact of networking, describing it as a continuous process and often a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Likewise, FE10 highlighted how her involvement in volunteering and community ties opened doors to lucrative business opportunities:

> *"Ever since I started a business, networking became a natural thing. Like wherever I go, whoever I talk to, we continuously just network."* (FE10)
> *Sometimes you'd be um like at a party and… people start talking and um you see cakes and things and then you throw it in the mix that, "oh, I also do [bake cakes]" … it's really sometimes being at the right place at the right time." (FE1)*

> *"The best thing about volunteering was my exposure to so many people… she [the client] met me and gave me a hug, and [name removed] from the youth center introduced me and explained what I do… within a week or two, she [the client] gave me my first opportunity by ordering food. What started with a simple hello and a hug*

became my biggest support throughout my journey today, [company name] is now one of my biggest corporate supporters." (FE10)

Furthermore, entrepreneurs also sought out available resources to sustain their businesses:

"We tap into some resources where we can get help from, and it makes a difference... At the beginning of the year, we had first aid training, [name removed] was here... and we also tap into other resources like, if there's [company name] training." (FE4)

Entrepreneurs also actively sought out structured support and training opportunities. FE4, for example, described how local female principals came together after COVID-19 to explore formal funding options for the first time. Despite encountering discriminatory assumptions about where they were from, they persisted in navigating institutional systems to access support:

Right after Covid, we decided as all the female principals, because it's mostly female. (uhm) we have never received any funding from government. So, let's start and get on to that wagon and see where we can access funding. Because things were difficult after Covid. And then we first knocked on the Nutrition Store, Department of Nutrition. When we walked in, it was (haaa) coloureds. Are you from Westbury or Eldos? But we stood our ground. I mean, we said no and then we are part of them now

Mentorship also emerged as an intentional strategy. FE7 recounted how she took the initiative to approach a younger male entrepreneur for guidance:

I found there's a guy also… his name is [name]… he does awesome work. I asked him one day, I said to him - and he's a young guy - don't you want to be my mentor?

The findings demonstrate that despite the challenges of violence and instability, FEs remain dedicated to business growth, employing various strategies to ensure sustainability. However, their impact extends beyond individual success, FEs also play a crucial role in uplifting their communities, a dynamic explored in the following theme.

4.10. Theme 5: Social and Economic Community Impact

Table 8: Theme 5 - social and economic community impact

Meaning	Primary Codes	Related SRQ	How it Answers the PRQ
The role of FEs in supporting their communities and fostering social and economic upliftment.	1. Serving & Supporting the Community 2. Supporting Fellow Entrepreneurs 3. Community Empowerment through Jobs & Outsourcing 4. Family and Social Support Systems	**SRQ2:** Examines strategies used to mitigate these challenges **SRQ3:** Examines how FEs sustain their businesses and contribute to their communities.	FEs enhance resilience by embedding their businesses within reciprocal community networks. Through local service provision, mentorship, and job creation, they reinforce social cohesion and economic stability. These strategies not only sustain their enterprises but also strengthen collective resilience in contexts of violence and exclusion.

Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

This theme highlights the vital role FEs in gang-affected areas play in supporting and uplifting their communities. Beyond sustaining their businesses, FEs actively engage in initiatives such as providing essential services, mentoring aspiring entrepreneurs, and creating employment opportunities, all of which strengthen the local economy and support vulnerable community members. These findings align with those of Kabagerayo et al. (2022), whose study on the socio-economic impact of female entrepreneurs in Burundi found that women-led businesses not only provided key services but also fostered entrepreneurship through mentorship and job creation, significantly contributing to community development.

4.10.1. Serving and Supporting the Community

Female entrepreneurs played an active role in uplifting their communities, extending their impact far beyond business operations. Many provided direct support to those in need through food donations, free services, and creating safe spaces for social engagement. Additionally, they empowered others by facilitating access to opportunities.
FE2 described this spirit of generosity:

> *"We share. We give. Whatever there is, we give. I used to run a soup kitchen from here [the business premises]." (FE2)*

Similarly, FE5 recounted her hands-on involvement in supporting vulnerable children:

"I went to some houses to take the child literally from the bed. Came to the creche, washed them. I had to wash some of them most of the time, dress them, ask around for clothing." (FE5)

Beyond direct assistance, some entrepreneurs opened their business spaces for communal use, as FE4 explained:

"I avail my school for meetings. They call it the hub. If there's a funeral, there's no space. We will avail, free of charge, as long as you clean up and see that nothing is broken... That's the relationship with the community." (FE4)

Others focused on empowering individuals by creating pathways for personal and professional growth. FE9 described her efforts in connecting people with opportunities:

"I'll tell them, here's an opportunity… I told some of these people to register themselves and, yes, some of them are going for training." (FE9)

This commitment to community upliftment was further evident during the observation of FE9. During a phone conversation, she commented that she would "fetch the buckets and give to people at the flats." After the call, she explained that she is part of a female-led network that distributes food to those in need.

4.10.2. Supporting Fellow Entrepreneurs

Female entrepreneurs played a key role in empowering others within their business communities. Many leveraged their connections to create business opportunities for their fellow entrepreneurs, ensuring that local businesses also benefited from their connections and support systems. This commitment is exemplified by FE2, who shared:

"There's another guy, he used to stay a few streets away... He actually owns a culinary school. A big massive one. So, what I did now is… our graduation for the ECD Level 5. I took the graduation to his culinary school. He's gonna make money out of it." (FE2)

Referrals were a key form of support FEs provided, intentionally directing clients and opportunities to others in their industry:

“I try my best to wherever I can, I'll give… people’s numbers. Yes. I have a few ladies who bakes. Whenever I have, I'll ask ‘do you have someone for the cake? I have a few ladies. You can phone them for quotes.’ I refer them…I want to help.” (FE7)

Some entrepreneurs actively assisted others in navigating bureaucratic regulatory processes, advocating for fellow business owners to receive institutional support:

“I made friends with the inspectors, all the inspectors of the different departments, health inspector, environmental, all of them. I said to them, I got people [FEs] there [in Westbury] that needs our help. So, I gathered about 40 ladies… People [the businesses of these ladies] are registered. Yeah, they are compliant…” (FE2)

Observations further illustrated this supportive dynamic. While observing FE2, two women visited her, and during their interaction, she took time to explain the contents of several documents in detail. She patiently answered their questions, offering guidance and clarification with a compassionate and encouraging tone. The women’s attentive engagement and willingness to seek her input suggested that FE2 was serving in a mentorship role, with the visitors looking to her for advice and support. (Observation: FE2)

4.10.3. Community Empowerment Through Jobs and Outsourcing

Many FEs made a conscious effort to create job opportunities by hiring both permanent and temporary workers from the local community. Their efforts aimed to uplift those around them and provide financial relief, as illustrated by the following reflections:

"*Permanent employees, I got four teachers and one lady that cooks for me. But I create jobs for the people around me… There’s always job creation... I find something [work] for everybody to do.****"*** *(FE2)*

"Currently, we are four. Why I say four? Because my mother's also helping us..." (FE5)
"Now, 10 employees." (FE4)

“My daughter, and I have another cousin… they can work. I pay them like from R600 up for the day… they always asking is there something [work], please, cause it’s something [money] extra for them.” (FE7)

In addition to directly employing community members, many FEs actively supported local businesses by outsourcing work to trusted individuals and service providers within their networks. They intentionally built relationships with reliable vendors, ensuring that economic opportunities remained within their community.

> *“I go here in the community, I get my people that I know they're going to, that’s worked like that before that I know that does the same thing, that is good with cooking or baking. I call up my people, I say, hey, we've got a job. They come in, we do it um and then the bigger the job, I will also ask them, ‘do you have someone else you can bring that is trustworthy? That is not gonna, you know, let us down.’ And that's how we do.” (FE1)*

> *“I outsource stuff [equipment] from people… I have a good relationship with those two sisters… I outsource because I don't want my pictures to look the same all the time.” (FE7)*

4.10.4. Family and Social Support Networks

Strong family ties and close social connections provided essential support, helping FEs sustain their businesses and community initiatives. Many FEs leaned on their families, employees, and community members for motivation, encouragement, and assistance, as reflected in the following excerpts:

> *" [Employee name] is the one that sometimes motivates me… and my daughter, she also gives me a lot of support." (FE8)*

> *“Family, is people that will support and say, “Listen, I want a cake here.” “I want this here.” “There's a wedding here.” “There's a party there.” (FE1)*

> *“These nice playground materials are made out of recycled material, and who does that? My parents.” (FE4)*

Observations also highlighted the significance of collaborative family involvement. During the observation of FE6, she and her mother engaged in a thoughtful discussion about the business and potential new products to introduce. Their interaction was warm and engaged, with her mother actively contributing ideas and offering valuable input. (Observation_FE6)

Support systems extended beyond family, with some entrepreneurs finding strength in their faith communities, friends and clients:

> *"Firstly, support from my church… one or two people in my church, my support structures, and then my neighbours." (FE9)*

> *"There are one or two friends that will motivate, or they hear of something [opportunities], then they'll give me a call and say, FE6 did you hear?" (FE6)*

> *"Most of my clients would um on days communicate and just drop a message and say, ['ons dink van jou'] 'we're thinking about you.'" (FE10)*

> *"I was saying to [Pastor name] the other day sometimes I just feel like screaming and he said to me then scream, cry if you need to… he prayed for me..." (FE7)*

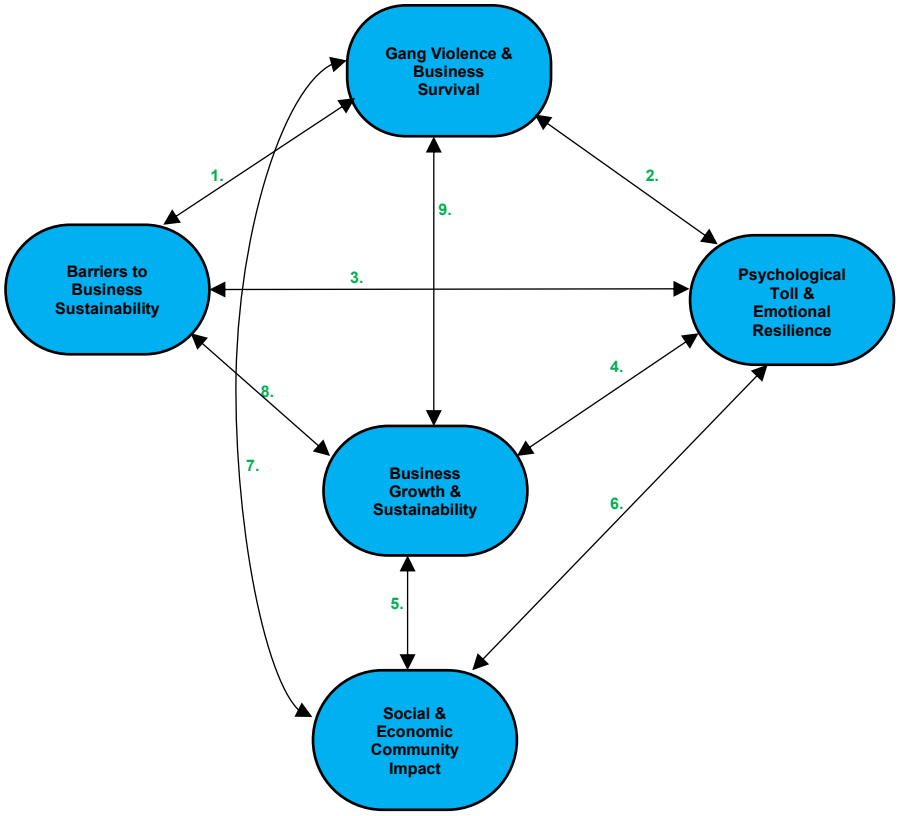
Observations also revealed the supportive nature of these networks. During the observation of FE1, she asked her son to run an errand but instructed him to wait for [Person's Name], who would soon arrive to accompany him, as she didn't want him walking alone. Their interaction reflected warmth and care, indicating not only her concern for his safety but also the presence of a trusted support system that played an active role in their daily lives. (Observation: FE1)

The findings of Theme 5 illustrate that FEs in gang-affected areas are more than just business owners, they are pillars of their communities. Their contributions extend beyond financial gain to include community support, mentorship, job creation, and social empowerment. Despite operating in violent and unpredictable environments, they remain deeply committed to uplifting those around them.

4.11. Causal-Thematic Map of Interrelated Themes

The Causal-Thematic map (Figure 22) illustrates the dynamic and interconnected nature of the themes, showing how each influence, and is influenced by, others. Rather than presenting themes in isolation, the map traces how FEs in gang-affected contexts experience overlapping pressures and respond through strategies of survival, adaptation, and community engagement. The detailed thematic connections unpack these relationships, demonstrating how each theme interacts with others in ways that reinforce or compound resilience and risk.

Figure 22: Causal-Thematic map of interrelated themes



Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

1. **Gang Violence and Business Survival ↔ Barriers to Business Sustainability**
    - Gang violence threatens business operations while also exacerbating structural barriers, creating a cycle of instability. Entrepreneurs described how violence in the area directly hinders their ability to access essential resources, particularly funding, because institutional actors avoid gang-affected communities. As FE4 explained, *"We understand that it's difficult for them [government officials] to come into the community… if they don't come and inspect our premises, we can't apply for funding."* In this context, gang violence doesn't just threaten business survival-it exposes and reinforces the structural neglect that keeps township businesses on the margins.

    - Barriers such as limited financial and institutional support constrain entrepreneurs' ability to invest in safety infrastructure, recover from disruptions, or adapt operations. Several FEs explained how exclusion from financial support limits their capacity to sustain their businesses. As FE1 shared, *"It's so hard to get funding… to get the right people to notice you… your business depends on things like that."* Without state protection, the burden of security falls entirely on entrepreneurs, even in life-threatening situations. One FE recalled being told by police to approach gang bosses directly after a fatal shooting outside her premises: *"The police came saying to me,*

'You know who's the gang bosses… go to the gang bosses and tell them what happened.' I must go to the gang bosses… But I can really never go and put my life at risk, isn't it the police's job?" (FE4). These reflections show how the absence of institutional support leaves FEs vulnerable to violence they cannot mitigate alone.

2. **Gang Violence and Business Survival ↔ Psychological and Emotional Resilience**
   - Constant exposure to gang violence creates fear, stress, and trauma, placing significant strain on the mental resilience of FEs. As FE1 put it, *"It's traumatic! Everything that happens… it's mentally challenging… psychologically it screws you up… I've got depression… anxiety and PTSD."*

   - In these volatile contexts, psychological resilience is essential, not just for enduring violence, but to stay motivated and keep businesses running. Despite fear and emotional strain, many continue because giving up is not an option. As FE10 explained: *"Even though the challenges… threw me off course so many times, I just got back up. I stick it out. I have stuck it out… there isn't a day where I can say I didn't make it."*

3. **Barriers to Business Sustainability ↔ Psychological and Emotional Resilience**
   - Economic hardship, gender bias, and institutional neglect place extreme psychological pressure on entrepreneurs, making resilience essential. As FE2 shared: *"We barely just making it… It's stressful because I don't wanna tell people that I don't have money to pay them."* She added that operating at full capacity would ease the strain, but fear of gang violence had led families to withdraw their children, leaving her business financially vulnerable. These pressures make it difficult to function and sustain a business amid ongoing uncertainty.

   - Strong emotional and psychological resilience enables FEs to persist despite constant challenges. As FE1 put it, *"You have to stretch your brain in all the ways you can, but you have to keep the wheels rolling… It takes a lot of push… because if you don't have that, then this is not for you."* This mindset shows that resilience isn't optional, it's a daily necessity to keep going.

4. **Psychological Toll and Emotional Resilience ↔ Business Growth and Sustainability**
   - Entrepreneurs with strong emotional endurance are more likely to implement growth strategies, expand operations, and sustain their ventures despite adversity. As FE10 expressed, *"I believe that you can do anything you put your mind to… I started with*

nothing and today I have all this equipment... my cakes have been like all over the place." Her reflection shows how belief and persistence enable FEs not only to survive adversity, but to grow despite it.

- Business success, in turn, reinforces resilience. When entrepreneurs experience stability and long-term impact, they gain a sense of accomplishment that strengthens their psychological well-being. FE4 shared her pride when a parent said, *"My son said, 'please phone FE4 and tell her I'm the first pilot of colour that graduated today,'"* referring to a child she had taught decades ago. These moments of recognition, she explained, are *"much more than monetary"*; they validate years of effort and strengthen the emotional resolve to continue, even amid adversity.

5. **Business Growth and Sustainability ↔ Social and Economic Community Impact**
   - Sustainable businesses contribute to community development by providing jobs, mentorship, and services. As FE2 explained, her business doesn't only employ permanent staff*, "I got four teachers and one lady that cooks for me,"* but also creates ongoing opportunities for others in the community: "There's always job creation... I find something [work] for everybody to do." This shows how long-term business sustainability can foster broader social and economic upliftment.

   - Community engagement, in turn, strengthens business survival by embedding FEs within reciprocal networks that function as vital support systems. As FE1 shared*, "I go here in the community, I get my people that I know… I say, hey, we've got a job... and then the bigger the job, I will also ask them, 'do you have someone else you can bring that is trustworthy?'"* By working with trusted local collaborators, FEs are able to expand capacity, fulfil larger orders, and maintain reliability, demonstrating how deep community ties directly support business growth and continuity.

6. **Social and Economic Community Impact ↔ Psychological Toll and Emotional Resilience**
   - Supporting the community enhances personal fulfilment, which in turn boosts resilience and motivation to persist. During the observation of FE9, she spoke warmly about distributing food through a women-led network and how much it meant to her to "help those who really need it." At the same time, support is reciprocal, flowing back to FEs. As FE10 shared*, "Most of my clients would, on days [during violent outbreaks], communicate and just drop a message and say, 'We're thinking about you.'"* These

acts of care and solidarity sustain emotional resilience through moments of fear and instability.

- Psychological resilience enables FEs to continue operating and contributing to their communities through mentorship, job creation, and service. As one entrepreneur put it, “It gets too much at times, but I'm not one to… sit in that tent and camp there.” Her emotional strength fuels continued outreach and generosity: *“That’s always who I’ve been. I’m a giver. I like to give, I like to share, I like to help where I can.”* These reflections show how emotional endurance not only sustains entrepreneurs personally, but also drives their commitment to others, even amid chronic adversity.

7. **Gang Violence and Business Survival Challenges ↔ Social and Economic Community Impact**
   - Gang violence disrupts community development by limiting economic opportunities and forcing entrepreneurs to scale back support. As one FE explained, *“People are struggling out here... We share. Whatever there is, we give. I used to run a soup kitchen from here.”* However, as violence reduced business income, these acts of care became harder to maintain. These accounts reflect how violence not only threatens livelihoods but also fractures the social support systems that FEs have long sustained.

   - At the same time, strong community networks through emotional support, loyal customers, and collaborative initiatives help FEs endure threats linked to violence, reinforcing business survival in hostile conditions. As FE9 shared, *“Firstly, support from my church… one or two people in my church, my support structures, and then my neighbours.”* Similarly, FE6 explained, *“There are one or two friends that will motivate, or they hear of something [opportunities], then they’ll give me a call and say, ‘FE6, did you hear?’”* These acts of solidarity provide emotional support, helping FEs continue despite the instability around them.

8. **Barriers to Business Sustainability ↔ Business Growth and Sustainability**
   - Financial, institutional, and social barriers, including public perceptions that devalue certain types of work, hinder business growth even when FEs have the drive and potential to expand. As FE7 noted, *“People don't understand. Sometimes people will think it's just balloons. But it's not... I think people think that events is a hobby because you make things look nice. It’s hard work.”* Such perceptions trivialise their work and force FEs to fight for legitimacy.

- At the same time, business success does not eliminate systemic barriers. Even long-established entrepreneurs remain excluded. As FE4, who has been in business for over 40 years, shared: *"I applied last year to [bank name]… they said, 'Oh, your application came in too late.'… [Another organisation] came out… said, 'With these nice playground equipment, you don't need [organisation name],' then they walked out."* Her experience illustrates how arbitrary assumptions and bureaucratic gatekeeping restrict access to support, regardless of business maturity or proven community value.

9. Gang Violence and Business Survival ↔ Business Growth and Sustainability

- Gang violence hinders business growth by disrupting daily operations, deterring customers, and forcing entrepreneurs to prioritise safety over expansion. As FE1 explained, *"There's no business at that time [violent outbreaks], because we, ourselves as a people living here, are so fearful you try and stay indoors… you don't want to be in the middle of something… it's so difficult for a normal person to be operating in a place like that, especially if this is your livelihood."* In these moments, maintaining operations is nearly impossible, and growth plans are paused to focus on survival.

- Growth strategies can, however, help entrepreneurs endure violence by funding security measures, diversifying services, or expanding beyond high-risk areas. As FE3 shared, *"I have many clients who come from Sandton… Durban… George… Vryburg."* By building a broader client base, she reduces reliance on local foot traffic, buffering her business against the instability of the area and enabling continued growth despite ongoing threats.

4.12. Chapter Conclusion

The findings reveal the resilience of FEs as they navigate persistent challenges while running their businesses in Westbury. Despite facing ongoing threats of violence, financial exclusion, and institutional neglect, they show remarkable perseverance, adaptability, and commitment to their businesses and communities.

The themes in this chapter illustrate how gang violence creates unsafe and unpredictable conditions, while financial and institutional barriers force many FEs to rely on informal networks and self-generated resources. Psychological resilience plays a crucial role in enabling them to endure these hardships, with faith, motivation, and self-belief emerging as

key drivers of persistence. Business sustainability is supported through strategic adaptations such as diversification, reinvestment, and long-term planning. However, the impact of FEs extends well beyond business ownership. They act as mentors, employers, and community anchors, contributing to Westbury's social and economic stability.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from Chapter 4 in relation to the study's research questions, literature, and theoretical framework. It explores how FEs in Westbury, a township in Johannesburg shaped by entrenched gang violence, experience, respond to, and persist through the intersecting challenges of structural exclusion, violence, and economic insecurity.

The discussion is structured around the three SRQs, which collectively build toward answering the PRQ:

What specific factors (i.e., social, economic, and psychological) contribute to the resilience of female entrepreneurs who continue their entrepreneurial pursuits despite operating in environments plagued by persistent violent conflict?

The SRQs are:

a) What are the challenges (i.e., economic, social, and psychological) that FEs operating in gang-controlled townships face?

b) How do FEs navigate and respond to these challenges in their day-to-day operations (i.e., through immediate, short-term coping mechanisms and reactive behaviours)?

c) What strategies and resilience mechanisms do FEs employ to sustain and grow their businesses, and to contribute to their communities (i.e., long-term strategies and resilience mechanisms)?

The findings are analysed through the integrated theoretical framework of IFET, RT, and IEOT, to illustrate the layered, intersectional nature of entrepreneurial resilience in violent and structurally marginalised settings.

5.2. Summary of Findings

The study identified five interrelated themes that reflect how FEs navigate business ownership amid persistent gang violence and structural exclusion.

1. **Gang Violence and Business Survival**

   This theme captures how entrenched gang violence disrupts business operations, deters customers, and generates persistent safety risks. It also reflects how FEs respond to these threats by adjusting trading hours, securing their premises, and, in some cases, contemplating relocation or closure. It addresses SRQ1 by identifying the economic and social challenges linked to violence and SRQ2 by showing the protective and adaptive responses FEs adopt.

2. **Barriers to Business Sustainability**

   This theme highlights structural and institutional challenges that extend beyond violence, including limited access to funding, inadequate government support, pricing pressures, and persistent discrimination. These systemic barriers left participants in vulnerable positions, often forcing them to rely on informal networks to stay operational. It addresses SRQ1 by highlighting the broader economic and institutional constraints that undermine business sustainability in gang-affected townships.

3. **Psychological Toll and Emotional Resilience**

   This theme explores the emotional toll of operating in a violent environment and the internal strengths FEs draw on to persist. Despite trauma, anxiety, and burnout, participants expressed strong self-belief, spiritual grounding, and passion for their work. These internal resources helped them cope and stay focused on sustaining their businesses. It addresses SRQ1 by showing the psychological impact of violence, and SRQ2 and SRQ3 by identifying faith, self-motivation, and emotional endurance as resilience mechanisms.

4. **Business Growth and Sustainability**

   This theme highlights the strategies FEs used to survive and grow their businesses, including diversifying income, reinvesting profits, building customer loyalty, and using digital tools. Despite persistent instability, many actively expanded their services, adapted their business models, and pursued long-term goals. It addresses SRQ3 by detailing the resilience strategies that supported business continuity and growth in a gang-affected setting.

5. **Social and Economic Community Impact**

   This theme shows how FEs actively contribute to their communities by creating jobs, mentoring others, and contributing to informal safety nets. Their businesses were deeply embedded in reciprocal relationships that provided both immediate support and

long-term resilience. It addresses SRQ2 by illustrating how FEs navigate adversity through relational and community-based practices, and SRQ3 by showing how community engagement serves as an ongoing strategy for business continuity and social impact.

Together, these themes reflect the layered nature of entrepreneurial resilience in gang-affected contexts, shaped by structural disadvantage, individual agency, adaptive strategies, and community embeddedness.

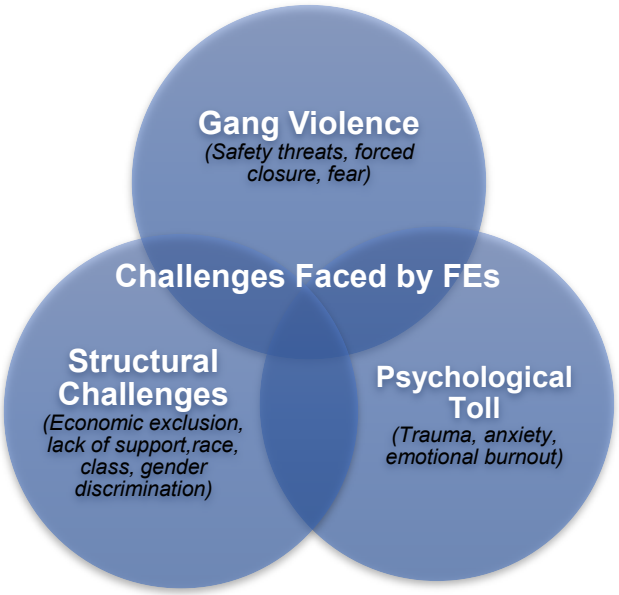
5.3. Discussion of Findings for SRQ1

What are the challenges (i.e. economic, social, and psychological) that FEs operating in gang-infested townships face?

This section addresses the first SRQ, focusing on the challenges faced by FEs. The discussion draws on three interrelated themes from the findings: (1) Gang Violence and Business Survival, (2) Barriers to Business Sustainability, and (3) Psychological Toll and Emotional Resilience. These themes are visually represented in Figure 22, which illustrates the layered and intersecting nature of these challenges.

As the figure demonstrates, gang violence, structural exclusion, and psychological strain are not isolated phenomena. Rather, they form a reinforcing system of constraint that shapes the lived experiences of FEs in high-risk settings. This discussion is grounded in IFET, which draws attention to how gender, race, class, and geography intensify exclusion, and in RT, which helps explain how women navigate and endure ongoing adversity.

Figure 23: Intersecting challenges faced by FEs



Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

5.3.1. The Impact of Gang Violence on Business Operations (Drawn from Theme 1: Gang Violence and Business Survival)

The data shows that for many FEs in Westbury, gang violence is not an occasional disruption but a constant ambient threat that reshapes how they operate. Participants described frequent shootings, territorial gang clashes in which their premises came under direct crossfire, and the psychological strain of needing to stay vigilant. These threats directly impacted business operations. It forced FEs to close early, avoid certain parts of the area, limit travel at night, and invest in costly security. Some lost customers who were too afraid to visit the area, while others, particularly those running education-related businesses, reported parents withdrawing children for safety reasons. Several women contemplated relocation or even shutting down altogether. As one participant shared, *"I spoke to my mom and said maybe a person shouldn't have a business because the last thing I want is to be shot dead"* (FE6). This reflects how safety concerns force entrepreneurs into survival mode, limiting their ability to trade consistently.

These findings mirror patterns in the literature on gang-dominated environments, where violence produces ongoing instability and operational insecurity (Applebaum & Mawby, 2018; Finch et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). Similar dynamics have been observed in the Western and Eastern Cape, where gangs operate with impunity, state presence is weak, and business owners live under constant threat (Dolley, 2023; van der Linde, 2020).

However, a key distinction lies in the nature of criminal activity. While extortion-related crimes rank among the highest in the Western and Eastern Cape (Dolley & Ellis, 2024; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022), none of the participants in this study reported experiencing extortion or protection-related demands. All ten women confirmed they had not encountered such practices. This finding aligns with Irish-Qhobosheane's (2024) research, which shows that extortion is not uniformly present in all ganglands. In Westbury, gangs tend to focus on controlling the drug trade, and where extortion does occur, it is typically directed at foreign-owned or newly established businesses (Irish-Qhobosheane's, 2024).

Viewed through the lens of IFET, these findings highlight how the burden of violence intersects with race, gender, and class-based exclusions. FEs are navigating not only physical threats but also the legacies of apartheid spatial planning, patriarchal norms, and systemic neglect. Their decision to persist under such conditions is not simply entrepreneurial; it is political. These women are survivalists in systems never designed for their inclusion. In the absence of state protection, they are forced to absorb the cost of their own safety and security. This is not merely about trading under threat, it is about surviving invisibility, abandonment, and the gendered expectation to remain resilient regardless.

Even the consideration of closing or relocating a business is not simply a pragmatic response to violence; it reflects constrained agency. It signals the cumulative pressure of persistent insecurity, emotional strain, and limited support. IFET highlights that such decisions must be understood in context, as reflections of structural exclusion rather than personal failure.

From an RT perspective, the women's responses, including adjusting operating hours, pausing services during violent outbreaks, and avoiding high-risk areas, demonstrate absorptive capacity (Duchek, 2020; Masten & Barnes, 2018). These are not always transformative strategies, but they represent intentional recalibration in the face of ongoing threat. As FE1 explained, *"There's no business at that time [during outbreaks] you try and stay indoors."*

Ultimately, gang violence does more than disrupt; it regulates. It dictates when, where, and how women can safely operate. Viewed through IFET, these dynamics are not only about safety but also about power, visibility, and legitimacy. From a RT perspective, the strategies women employ are not evidence of resilience as triumph, but resilience as necessity. Their businesses persist not in spite of violence, but within its architecture, sustained by ingenuity, caution, and refusal to disappear.

5.3.2. Barriers to Business Sustainability

Beyond violence, participants described systemic barriers that hindered business growth and sustainability. These included financial strain, lack of institutional support, delayed client payments, pressure to reduce prices, competitive tensions among women, and intersecting forms of marginalisation. Together, these factors show that business sustainability in Westbury is constrained not only by violence but also by entrenched structural exclusion.

A major challenge was accessing financial and institutional support. Despite following procedures, many participants reported being dismissed by government departments, overlooked by funders, and treated with condescension. As FE3 put it, *"I have reached out to government on numerous occasions..."* but was consistently given *"the run around."* Others shared similar frustrations, noting that support they were entitled to either never materialised or were arbitrarily denied.

These findings align with existing literature showing how women entrepreneurs, especially in township settings, are routinely excluded from finance, mentorship, markets, and formal visibility (Akhalwaya & Havenga, 2012; Moagi et al., 2021). Turok, (2018) argued that apartheid-era spatial legacies continue to marginalise township economies by disconnecting them from formal support systems.

From an IFET perspective, this exclusion is not incidental but systemic. It reflects the structural privileging of dominant race, gender, and class identities within financial and bureaucratic systems. Participants' accounts show how working-class women in racialised communities like Westbury are routinely overlooked, with their marginalisation embedded in the very institutions intended to promote inclusion.

Financial strain compounded these barriers. Participants described high operating costs, particularly for security, along with irregular payments and pricing pressure. As FE2 said, *"I've got 50 children, not all of them pay every month… we barely just making it."* FE1 added, *"Then it turns again to the game of the size, the prices, the haggling."* This financial instability made cash flow unpredictable and threatened their ability to stay afloat.

These findings align with literature on township enterprises, which are often characterised by cash flow volatility, weak consumer purchasing power, and limited working capital (Hloni & Zhou, 2023; Nambiar et al., 2020; Sitharam & Hoque, 2016). Moreover, women's work in these contexts is frequently undervalued, often perceived as informal, domestic, or supplementary.

These perceptions normalise inconsistent support and make it harder for women to be taken seriously (Althalathini & Al-Dajani, 2021).

RT helps explain the strategies women use to manage these constraints. Coping with non-payment, covering costs from personal funds, and drawing on internal motivation reflect absorptive resilience (Masten & Barnes, 2018), a survival-based approach that sustains continuity without changing underlying conditions.

Intra-community competition was another challenge. Instead of collaboration, participants described a climate of rivalry among women. FE6 remarked*, "Where there's a lot of Coloureds, there's fighting, and women are only fighting."* While a few women reported isolated acts of support, most felt competition outweighed collaboration. This tension reflects broader patterns in the literature, where scarcity in low-resource settings often foster fragmentation rather than collaboration (Hloni & Zhou, 2023; Sitharam & Hoque, 2016). Preisendörfer et al., (2014) similarly found that township entrepreneurs often work in low-trust environments with limited social capital and weak communal cohesion, which constrain the formation of supportive networks, especially among women.

Here, IFET again proves useful in showing that these dynamics are not interpersonal failures but structural outcomes. In the absence of support systems and under resources-scarce conditions, competition becomes a survival strategy. Rather than signaling a lack of entrepreneurial spirit, rivalry reflects the pressure women face to navigate exclusion on their own.

Gendered bias was another constraint. Several participants described being bargained with more aggressively than men or having their work dismissed as *"hobby businesses."* As FE1 noted, *"They'll come with tricks... if they don't succeed, they'll go to a man and pay even more."* Fields such as early childhood education and event planning were often devalued as natural extensions of care work rather than recognised as skilled enterprises.

These patterns reflect findings by Amalu and Okafor (2010), who noted that women are frequently marginalised across sectors, and by Stamarski and Son Hing (2015), who showed that female-dominated fields are often systematically devalued. IFET frames these dynamics within a broader gendered logic that determines whose entrepreneurship is taken seriously and whose is not.

Finally, racial, class-based and spatial inequalities also shaped perceptions of legitimacy. Several participants noted that businesses located in suburban areas were considered more credible, regardless of quality. As FE1 explained, *"You take that same business and put it in a suburban area... now you become someone in the game."* Others described being excluded from economic programmes targeting other communities or avoided by officials reluctant to engage with Westbury.

These insights align with Nqapela and Fakir (2017), who argued that townships were never designed to be centres of economic potential, a logic that continues to influence how they are perceived and treated by institutions. van der Linde (2020) and Thomas et al. (2020) similarly highlighted that townships remain economically and symbolically marginalised, reinforcing a perception gap in which businesses outside these areas are afforded more credibility and visibility, often regardless of quality.

Choosing to stay and run a business in Westbury despite these constraints is a form of resistance. RT shows that this is not just coping but reflects a place-based commitment to community and continuity in the face of systemic marginalisation.

Overall, sustaining a business in gang-affected townships like Westbury requires more than economic acumen. It demands daily negotiation with institutional neglect, gendered perceptions, and racial-spatial inequality. IFET reveals that entrepreneurship in this context is shaped by layered structural disadvantage. RT shows that their persistence is a form of resilience, but one that comes at a personal cost. These women persist not because the system supports them, but because they find ways to endure in its absence.

5.3.3. Psychological Toll of Entrepreneurship in Violent Contexts (Drawn from Theme 3: Psychological and Emotional Resilience)

While the physical and structural barriers in Westbury are overt, the psychological toll on FEs is just as severe but often invisible. Participants reported chronic emotional strain caused by persistent fear, trauma, and a constant state of alertness. This was not occasional stress, but sustained pressure embedded in daily business operations.

Several participants described experiencing anxiety, depression, and trauma-related symptoms. FE1 shared*: "...I've got… depression… anxiety and PTSD,"* while FE4 described reaching "breaking point" due to the ongoing strain. Others described persistent unease, like FE7: *"I do get anxious at night now... when I hear those shots it's like my stomach turns."*

These accounts reflect more than emotional exhaustion; they reveal the psychological cost of trying to function in an environment where violence is part of everyday life.

This psychological burden echoes global research on conflict-affected settings. The World Health Organization estimates that over 20 percent of people in such environments suffer from mental health conditions, particularly PTSD and depression (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006). World Bank (2016) similarly notes that prolonged exposure to violence undermines emotional and physical well-being, limiting participation in economic and social life.

The literature affirms that these burdens are disproportionately gendered. Women in conflict zones are more likely to experience psychological distress and often carry the added weight of care work, community responsibility, and economic survival (Murthy & Lakshminarayana 2006). In South African ganglands, this emotional landscape is shaped by both the threat of violence and the ongoing emotional labour of navigating instability (Thomas et al., 2020; Dolley 2023).

Scholars have referred to this persistent emotional strain as “ambient trauma,” where the fear of violence becomes embedded in daily life (Fisk, 2021). Participants described feeling emotionally disconnected, unable to get out of bed due to depression, or constantly on edge. These accounts show how structural violence affects more than safety; it erodes psychological rootedness and undermines a sense of belonging.

From an IFET perspective, these emotional burdens are not simply personal struggles; they are gendered and racialised outcomes of living and working in marginalised spaces. Mirchandani (1999) and Tomodi (2024) argued that women in such contexts are expected to remain emotionally composed while managing families, businesses, and community expectations. This demand for emotional endurance, especially when compounded by trauma, represents an often-overlooked form of labour. The effort to shield children, clients, and employees from fear or fatigue while maintaining a business is rarely acknowledged in mainstream entrepreneurial discourse.

These pressures are intensified by the lack of institutional mental health support. As noted in the literature, services are often inaccessible or entirely absent in gang-affected communities, leaving women to cope with trauma in isolation. In this way, the invisibility of psychological distress becomes another form of structural neglect, one that isolates women and adds to their already heavy burden.

The findings show that FEs in Westbury carry a significant psychological load alongside physical and economic threats. This toll is not incidental; it is systemic, shaped by structural violence, gendered expectations, and institutional neglect. Through IFET, this emotional labour is revealed as disproportionately borne by women. Literature on trauma and conflict further highlights that this strain is both profound and enduring, and central to sustaining entrepreneurship in violent environments.

5.3.4. Conclusion to SRQ1 Discussion

The challenges faced by FEs in Westbury are multidimensional and deeply rooted in systems of structural violence, institutional exclusion, and social fragmentation.

Economically, FEs face persistent barriers to funding, volatile cash flow due to irregular payments and price pressure, and high operating costs, particularly for safety and security. Their work is often undervalued, with limited access to formal markets and minimal recognition within mainstream entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Socially, they operate in fractured community landscapes marked by intra-group rivalry, limited support networks, and exclusion from public and private sector initiatives. Discrimination based on race, gender, and geography further undermines their legitimacy, as township-based businesses are often seen as less credible than those in suburban areas.

Psychologically, FEs endure chronic emotional strain, manifesting as anxiety, depression, and trauma, while continuing to work amid ambient violence and constant threat. These burdens are intensified by gendered expectations of emotional resilience and the lack of accessible mental health services.

These challenges are neither isolated nor incidental. IFET frames them as outcomes of intersecting oppressions involving gender, race, class, and spatial marginalisation. RT shows that while FEs display adaptability, their persistence comes at a cost. It reflects survival under conditions of systemic neglect and institutional failure.

In response to SRQ1, this study finds that FEs in gang-affected townships face a convergence of economic insecurity, social marginalisation, and psychological trauma. These challenges are not merely situational but structurally produced and sustained by overlapping systems of exclusion and violence.

5.4. Discussion of Findings for Secondary Research Question 2

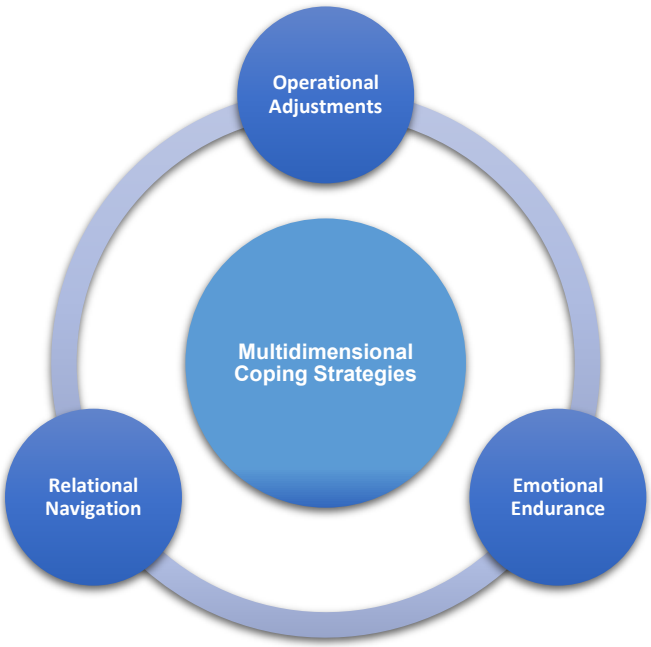
How do FEs navigate and overcome the challenges posed by gang violence in their day-to-day business operations?

Participants operate under constant threat from gang violence, compounded by systemic marginalisation and persistent emotional strain. Yet rather than withdrawing, they adopt a range of complex, resourceful, and often emotionally demanding strategies to keep their businesses running.

This discussion draws on three interlinked themes: Theme1 - Gang Violence and Business Survival, Theme3 - Psychological Toll and Emotional Resilience, and Theme5 - Social and Economic Community Impact. Each theme reflects a key dimension of how FEs navigate daily challenges. As shown in Figure 5.1, these dimensions include navigating risk spatially, enduring strain emotionally, and drawing strength relationally. Together they offer a layered understanding of everyday resilience in gang-affected environments.

The findings are interpreted through RT, particularly the concept of absorptive resilience, and IFET, which situates these coping strategies within gendered, racialised, and spatial systems of exclusion.

Figure 24: Multidimensional coping strategies of FEs



Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

5.4.1. Safety Measures and Operational Adjustments
(Drawn from Theme 1: Gang Violence & Business Survival)

In response to persistent gang violence, FEs in Westbury make immediate, tactical adjustments to reduce exposure to harm while maintaining business operations. These include altering trading hours, reinforcing security, and modifying business activities to avoid high-risk areas or times of day. Such actions are not isolated safety measures but patterned responses to structural violence in a context where institutional protection is absent.

Participants reported closing their businesses earlier than usual to avoid evening outbreaks of violence. This was supported by the researcher's observations: while daytime fieldwork was incident-free, community WhatsApp alerts frequently reported nighttime shootings. As FE6 explained, "…*my mom and I set a time, by 5 o'clock, we close… If you don't buy food here in the area by 6, it's bad."* Others adjusted their travel routes to avoid volatile hotspots or postponed errands during periods of heightened conflict. As FE7 shared, *"When the shooting is a lot, then I hesitate to go fetch it [equipment] that time of the night, that's why I have to go sleep by my daughter."*

These practices align with findings by Hendricks (2019), who describe how women in gang-controlled areas reduce visibility, adjust operating hours, and rotate locations to reduce risk. Naidoo (2024) further notes that these adaptations are deeply gendered. Women often limit mobility to protect themselves, highlighting how gendered insecurity restricts access to public space and economic participation.

While these adaptations serve as coping strategies, they also reflect responses to institutional absence. Participants spoke of bearing the cost of their own security: installing steel gates, surveillance systems, and hiring private armed response. These measures, also observed during fieldwork, divert already limited resources from business development and innovation. As Ayadurai and Sohail (2006) and Mohd-Nor and Ali (2022) observed, such trade-offs often increase the vulnerability of women-led businesses by raising costs and reinforcing self-reliance in the absence of state support.

Viewed through IFET, these adjustments are not neutral; they are gendered and racialised acts of survival. Choosing to close early or reinforce a business is shaped by spatial inequality, community responsibility, and long-standing exclusion from institutional protection. These are not the decisions of entrepreneurs operating with freedom, but of women navigating risk under constraint. They do not passively endure violence; they actively manage its impact using the

limited tools available. Their decisions reflect a form of care for themselves, their families, their community, and their clients, grounded in lived experience and social obligation.

From a RT perspective, these responses exemplify what Duchek (2020) defined as absorptive resilience, short-term, reactive adjustments that enable women to maintain operations under pressure. However, these adaptations should not be romanticised as innovation or abstract strength. As Burnard and Bhamra (2011) caution, absorptive responses often emerge in resource-scarce environments where no transformative alternative exists. In Westbury, the ability to withstand disruption does not signal institutional responsiveness, but its failure.

Taken together, these safety adaptations are not simply pragmatic, they represent the emotional, spatial, and financial costs of survival in violent, unsupported settings. While they demonstrate resilience, they also reveal the limited agency within which women operate. These responses should be recognised not as mere coping, but as deliberate, gendered strategies to preserve life and livelihood in the absence of institutional protection.

5.4.2. Managing Emotional Strain and Psychological Overload (Drawn from Theme 3: Psychological Toll and Emotional Resilience)

Beyond the visible risks of violence, FEs in Westbury face a more insidious burden: the emotional and psychological toll of operating in an environment marked by chronic violence, economic uncertainty, and institutional neglect. While the material costs of gang violence are visible, the emotional labour required to function in these conditions is often invisible, absorbed privately and carried in silence.

Participants described a range of coping strategies to manage this psychological strain, including medication, spiritual grounding, distraction, and mental compartmentalisation. FE1 offered one of the starkest accounts, describing her experience with depression, anxiety, and PTSD: *“I feel that I need and I've actually voiced to some of my family I need mental help, but I take a tablet that helps me… sometimes when it's too much.”* Despite this, she continues to run her business and support others. Her experience illustrates what RT describes as adaptive capacity: the ability to recalibrate and maintain purpose under prolonged stress (Masten & Barnes, 2018; Norris et al., 2008). However, as Panagioti et al. (2014) warn, such adaptations come at a cost; often resulting in burnout, emotional detachment, or long-term distress.

For others, endurance was maintained through habitual routines and psychological reframing. *“You get up in the morning and say, OK, I’m going, even though I’m scared, I’ll just*

put on a brave face" explained FE2. This daily mental rehearsal, along with intentional distraction such as Bible quizzes, noted by FE9, or supportive roles in family life, mentioned by FE10, served as low-intensity emotional coping strategies. These align with Murthy and Lakshminarayana's (2006) findings that, in conflict-affected settings, such practices support functional endurance even in the absence of therapeutic support.

Faith and spirituality emerged as key emotional anchors. Far from abstract, belief systems were enacted daily as stabilising tools. FE2 remarked, *"We just walk by faith here,"* and FE7 noted, *"We all continue to believe and pray that things will get better."* These expressions of faith functioned as immediate coping mechanisms, helping participants manage anxiety and regain emotional focus in volatile environments. This aligns with White et al. (2014) and Nikolaev et al. (2025), who describe faith as a "psychological safety net," serving as a source of meaning, direction, and internal stability amid uncertainty.

From the perspective of IFET, these emotional strategies are not merely personal; they are gendered and systemic. In the absence of institutional mental health support, women build their own infrastructures of care out of necessity. Routines, silence, and reframing become informal systems of psychological management. These responses reflect both internal strength and social obligation. As caregivers, business owners, and community members, the women contained their distress to maintain stability for others, not because they were unaffected, but because others relied on their composure.

This echoes findings from global contexts like Northeast Nigeria and Palestine, where women entrepreneurs suppress trauma to project stability in public-facing interactions. Mohd-Nor and Ali (2022) describe this as emotional compartmentalisation. While it preserves trust and continuity, it often exacerbates personal fatigue. In Westbury, the emotional weight of entrepreneurship is carried without formal recognition and managed in isolation.

These findings suggest that FEs cope with the psychological demands of violence and instability through a constellation of self-managed strategies like prayer, routine, inner dialogue, and quiet endurance. RT identifies these behaviours as adaptive responses to long-term stress. IFET adds that this emotional labour is deeply gendered, shaped by expectations to remain composed and emotionally available even during crisis. Their emotional endurance reflects not personal choice but constrained agency within an unsupported system.

5.4.3. Navigating Risk Through Social Networks
(Drawn from Theme 5: Social and Economic Community Impact)

In the absence of institutional protection or consistent external support, FEs in Westbury relied on immediate networks such as family, fellow entrepreneurs, faith communities, and trusted neighbours for daily support and guidance. These informal relationships offered more than emotional reassurance; they served as practical stabilisers that helped FEs manage operations, navigate risk, and stay grounded in environments marked by volatility and neglect.

For example, FE4 described how her parents not only encouraged her but also actively supported her in her business by building playground equipment from recycled materials. FE10 noted that clients would send check-in messages such as *"[ons dink van jou] we're thinking about you."* These small gestures created a sense of visibility and validation. FE9 cited her church as a vital emotional resource, while FE7 turned to her pastor for prayer and guidance during periods of intense distress.

These relationships were not peripheral; they were central to business continuity. Informal networks acted as stabilising mechanisms, risk buffers, and emotional safety nets embedded in daily life. Such networks have long been recognised in the literature as critical to entrepreneurial survival in resource-constrained or insecure environments. In conflict-affected settings, these patterns are well documented. In Palestine, for example, Althalathini et al. (2020) described how FEs depend on informal networks for childcare, credit, and safety. In Manenberg, South Africa, Thomas and Pascoe (2019) found that familial alliances and peer trust help women navigate gang-related threats.

From an RT perspective, these practices represent relational resilience, which is the capacity to draw strength from interpersonal connections during prolonged stress (Walsh, 2016). Unlike absorptive or adaptive resilience, which emphasise individual responses, relational resilience foregrounds survival as a collective process rooted in trust, shared knowledge, and mutual care (Masten & Barnes, 2018). These ties function as an informal infrastructure that, while unofficial and context-specific, is vital to sustaining both economic and social life.

IFET deepens this understanding by showing that these networks are not simply organic; they are shaped by gendered expectations. Women are expected to be emotionally available, to uplift others, to serve as social glue in a fraying context. In Westbury, FEs were not just business owners. They were community anchors, expected to offer reassurance, absorb emotional fallout, and provide stability beyond their enterprises. As Mirchandani (1999) and

Morokvasic (1991) argued, this form of relational labour is essential but systematically devalued, remaining unpaid, unrecognised, and emotionally taxing.

For the FEs in this study, community embeddedness was not a strategic choice but a necessity. In ganglands, trust is currency. Business referrals happen through word-of-mouth, visibility is regulated through familiarity, and personal safety often depends on being known and protected within one's immediate circle. This reflects the concept of embedded entrepreneurship (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013), which challenges individualistic models of enterprise by showing how women navigate risk and build resilience through collective care and mutual reciprocity.

Yet this embeddedness is not without cost. IFET notes that community reliance can reinforce the gendered expectation that women must remain strong and emotionally available, even while managing their own distress. These burdens, including caring for clients, shielding staff, and supporting families, constitute invisible labour that is unequally distributed and rarely acknowledged in mainstream entrepreneurship narratives.

Overall, the participants in this study demonstrated that resilience is not purely individual, it is communal, embodied, and maintained through informal ties forged in adversity. These relationships provide both operational and emotional support but form the scaffolding of economic survival in contexts where formal institutions have failed. Viewed through IFET and RT, these networks are not secondary; they are central to understanding how FEs endure, adapt, and hold communities together in the face of persistent instability.

5.4.4. Conclusion to SRQ2 Discussion

FEs in Westbury respond to the immediate challenges of gang violence through a combination of spatial, emotional, and relational coping strategies designed to preserve safety, functionality, and dignity in the face of persistent threats.

Spatially, they adapt their operations by adjusting business hours, avoiding high-risk areas, and investing in private security. These adaptions are not simply signs of flexibility but responses to gendered and racialised vulnerability in environments marked by state neglect.

Emotionally, they manage the psychological strain through internal coping strategies such as faith, habitual routines, emotional reframing, and, in some cases, medication. These strategies

allow them to function despite anxiety, trauma, and burnout, revealing a deeply gendered form of resilience shaped by social expectations to remain composed and supportive.

Relationally, they rely on informal support networks including family, clients, peers, pastors, and community members. These relationships provide emotional support, operational assistance, and a sense of safety, compensating for the institutional void. Community embeddedness becomes both a protective mechanism and a key source of resilience.

These strategies are neither temporary nor incidental. They are deliberate, patterned adaptions to structural neglect, showing how women navigate violent, unsupported environments through emotional labour and relational strength.

In response to SRQ2, this study finds that FEs in gang-affected communities sustain their businesses through layered coping mechanisms that are spatially adaptive, emotionally grounded, and socially embedded. This form of everyday resilience is reactive, gendered, and shaped by the failure of institutional support systems.

5.5. Discussion of Findings for Secondary Research Question 3

What strategies and resilience mechanisms do FEs employ to sustain and grow their businesses, and to contribute to their communities amid persistent gang violence?

FEs in Westbury do more than simply endure the constraints of gang violence and systemic marginalisation. They actively develop long-term strategies to sustain and grow their businesses while continuing to support their communities. Their approach to entrepreneurship is not solely economic; it is deeply relational, purpose-driven, and grounded in the daily realities of care, risk, and perseverance.

As shown in Figure 24, the findings identify five interconnected strategies that reflect this broader form of resilience: (1) Mission-Driven Commitment and Staff Retention, (2) Business Longevity and Continuity, (3) Business Adaptability and Financial Growth, (4) Strategic Positioning and Market Retention, and (5) Networking and External Support. Together, these strategies demonstrate that entrepreneurial resilience in gang-affected contexts is neither linear nor uniform. Instead, it is layered, iterative, and shaped by gendered, spatial, and institutional dynamics.

Figure 25: Strategic resilience mechanisms employed by FEs



Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

This section responds to SRQ3 and is structured around three interrelated themes: (1) Business Growth and Sustainability, (2) Psychological Toll and Emotional Resilience, and (3) Social and Economic Community Impact. Together, these themes reflect a layered form of resilience that blends strategic innovation, internal motivation, and community embeddedness. The findings are interpreted through RT, IEOT, and IFET.

5.5.1. Business Growth and Sustainability Strategies

5.5.1.1. Mission-Driven Commitment and Staff Retention

FEs in Westbury anchor their businesses in a deep sense of purpose and obligation, to their communities, their staff, and the mission their enterprises represent. This commitment is not driven solely by ambition or profit but by a desire for continuity and responsibility in a context marked by instability. As FE1 stated, *"While I'm here, it'll [the business] still continue"* speaking not of expansion or growth, but of unwavering perseverance. For others, like FE10, entrepreneurship involved extraordinary personal sacrifice: *"We would walk with the cake packed in pans… and then I would continue working until morning hours…"* she shared, fighting back tears. Her words, *"No, hey. That's like… it feels like… Non-negotiable… I don't think I will ever give up,"* reflect a deep emotional investment and refusal to quit.

This sense of commitment extended beyond personal survival. FE2's explained, *"I can't let my people go… I shoot myself in the foot, but I have to pay them,"* underscoring an ethic of care embedded in entrepreneurial practice. Their businesses are not just economic vehicles. They serve as support systems for others, and the decision to keep them going reflects both relational responsibility and financial necessity.

The persistence shown by Westbury's FEs aligns with what Yan et al. (2023) describe as continued entrepreneurial effort despite adversity. While much of the persistence literature emphasises internal traits like grit, self-efficacy, or passion, the findings here reveal a more relational dimension. These women persist not only to achieve business success but also to protect staff, uphold social responsibilities, and maintain community stability. This echoes the work of Brush (1992) and Cruz and Nordqvist (2012), who show that women's businesses often operate as networks of care and responsibility. In this context, persistence is not an individualistic pursuit; it is embedded in social bonds and shaped by a sense of obligation to others.

This contrasts sharply with traditional entrepreneurial models that prioritise autonomy, competition, and profit, as seen in the work of Shane and Venkataraman (2000) and Drucker (1985). Instead, Westbury's FEs reflect embedded and feminist approaches (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013), positioning entrepreneurship as a practice rooted in care and survival. In gang-affected environments, resilience is not about bouncing back or scaling up; it's about holding things together amid uncertainty, through embedded networks and collective strength.

Viewed through RT, this reflects both adaptive and relational resilience: FEs reorganise priorities not only to survive but to support those who depend on them. IFET further highlights how gendered expectations around care and emotional labour shape these decisions. In gang-affected contexts, resilience is not abstract but practiced through daily acts of responsibility and refusal to retreat.

5.5.1.2 Business Longevity and Continuity

The findings reveal that many FEs in Westbury view their businesses not only as sources of income but as long-term commitments. Several participants spoke of succession planning as a deliberate strategy to ensure continuity across generations. *"My mother started this business. And I'm also about to hand it over to my daughter,"* shared FE2, highlighting how legacy and familial responsibility are embedded in their entrepreneurial practice. Others described reinvestment in their businesses in modest but intentional ways. As FE10

explained, *“With whatever orders I had, I would take some money and buy something… that’s how the equipment phase started to grow.”*

This future-oriented approach aligns with literature on succession planning and intergenerational continuity, particularly in family-run businesses. Scholars such as Chua et al. (1999), Sharma et al. (2001), Ahrens et al. (2015), Rumanko et al. (2021), and Baltazar et al. (2023) argued that passing down businesses within families can enhance sustainability, preserve institutional knowledge, and strengthen emotional and economic resilience. Women-led enterprises, in particular, often approach succession as evolution rather than exit, anchoring business continuity in shared values and community-rooted responsibility.

In tandem, many FEs demonstrated a habit of reinvesting earnings into assets, despite financial constraints. This aligns with the findings of Houston (2024), who note that women are more likely than men to direct profits toward business sustainability and social well-being. In under-resourced contexts, such reinvestment is a form of anticipatory resilience, helping to build infrastructure and financial buffers to mitigate future shocks.

These strategies suggest that for many FEs, business ownership is not merely reactive but future-oriented. Business ownership was framed as a legacy, a source of stability, and a means of intergenerational empowerment. This long-term view was often rooted in collective identity and family responsibility rather than individual ambition.

Through a RT lens, these strategies reflect both adaptive and anticipatory capacities (Duchek, 2020), where women implement forward-looking strategies to protect the continuity of their businesses. Succession planning reflects a desire to preserve business identity beyond the founder, aligning with principles of long-term sustainability in resilience thinking (Masten & Barnes, 2018). From an IFET perspective, intergenerational planning and reinvestment are gendered acts of future-making. In contexts like Westbury, where state neglect and systemic exclusion prevail, these practices constitute forms of resistance; challenging marginalisation and crafting alternative, community-rooted paths to sustainability.

5.5.1.3. Business Adaptability and Financial Growth

Adaptability emerged as a key mechanism through which participants sustained their businesses and achieved incremental financial growth. They described diversifying income streams, tailoring products, and expanding their client base beyond local markets. FE1’s business evolved from small-scale catering to include cakes, event planning, and décor, while

FE4 supplemented preschool teaching with higher education instruction. Others, like FE3, purposefully expanded their reach beyond Westbury into other provinces, tapping into more stable markets.

These practices reflect strategic recalibration in response to instability. Rather than maintaining static operations, FEs actively adapted their offerings and clientele, using flexibility and foresight to buffer against volatility. This aligns with research that positions adaptability as essential for FEs operating in under-resourced and unpredictable contexts. Studies by Mutagwaba (2009) and Rawal (2023) highlight diversification as a key strategy for stabilising income in the absence of formal support. Similarly, Althalathini (2022) similarly shows that women in conflict-affected regions sustain and grow enterprises through iterative product development and market expansion. These examples demonstrate that adaptability is not merely a survival tactic, but a pathway to strategic financial advancement (Althalathini, 2022; Mutagwaba, 2009; Rawal, 2023).

The findings contribute to existing literature by showing that adaptability is not only tactical but embedded in lived experiences shaped by intersecting constraints. From a RT perspective, these strategies demonstrate adaptive resilience, with recalibrating internal operations and external strategies to maintain functionality and pursue growth in threatening conditions (Duchek, 2020; Masten & Barnes, 2018). Unlike absorptive strategies that aim to preserve routines, adaptive resilience requires innovation and reorganisation.

Through the lens of IEOT, this adaptability reflects proactiveness and innovation. Decisions to modify products, pricing, or markets are not accidental. They are strategic, grounded in practical knowledge of unstable environments and fluctuating demand. FEs are not simply reacting to change but creating it to remain viable.

IFET brings deeper insight into why and how these strategies emerge. The FEs' adaptability is shaped not just by market dynamics, but by gendered spatial restrictions, limited mobility, and institutional neglect. Innovation becomes a necessity in contexts where formal markets are unreliable, and consumer power is low. Their strategies reflect embedded agency, drawing on local knowledge and networks to navigate multiple vulnerabilities. Entrepreneurship here is not neutral; it is shaped by gender, race, and geography.

5.5.1.4. Strategic Positioning and Market Retention

Participants actively managed their visibility through relationship-based marketing, word-of-mouth referrals, and social media engagement. Without access to formal advertising channels, they relied on trust, community presence, and long-term client relationships. FE3 retained clients over a decade, while FE1 cultivated audiences across platforms such as TikTok, WhatsApp, and Instagram. These were not incidental actions; they were deliberate, context-sensitive strategies aimed at sustaining reputation and reach.

These findings align with Matusin et al. (2023) and Akpuokwe et al. (2024), who highlight the value of social media in precarious markets. It offers cost-effective marketing, consumer engagement, brand legitimacy, and expanded reach. Naseri and Karaduman (2018) and Shirkhodaei and Rastgoo-Deylami (2016) similarly emphasise that word-of-mouth remains a powerful and trusted marketing tool, especially in township contexts where trust, familiarity, and reputation often matter more than formal advertising.

From the point of RT, these visibility strategies reflect adaptive resilience. FEs' use of relational marketing and digital platforms shows their capacity to innovate within constraints. By leveraging trust-based networks, social media tools, and customer loyalty, they buffered their businesses against market instability and geographic limitations. While informal, their marketing efforts were intentional and responsive to both environmental threats and limited institutional support.

From the perspective of IEOT, these strategies demonstrate clear proactiveness and innovativeness. Participants like FE1, who intentionally curated multi-platform digital engagement, and FE6, who printed branded pamphlets for her hair product business, were not passively waiting for opportunity; they were actively creating and expanding it. The long-term relationships they build reflect a sustained focus on market positioning and differentiation, driven by personal reputation, customer trust, and proactive outreach rather than conventional performance metrics.

IFET adds another layer of understanding. The emphasis on relationships and community-based reputation reflects a gendered and spatialised business strategy. In settings where women's work is often dismissed as “informal” or “subsistence-based,” these entrepreneurs challenge that perception by building professional identities through available means, such as social capital, digital platforms, and relational integrity. Their visibility is not institutional but

rooted in community, and it carries weight in economies built on trust, consistency, and local embeddedness.

5.5.1.5. Networking and External Business Support

The findings reveal that participants do not passively wait for opportunities. They create them through intentional, relationship-driven networking. Whether through spontaneous social interactions, volunteering, or structured engagements, FEs sought out support, training, and new markets to sustain and grow their businesses. As FE10 explained, *"Networking became a natural thing... wherever I go, whoever I talk to, we continuously just network."* Similarly, FE1 shared that simply being "at the right place at the right time" during a casual event led to new client interest. These examples reflect networking as a reflective, continual process, woven into daily life and strategically used to pursue opportunity.

For many, these connections produced tangible outcomes. FE10's casual hug with a visitor at a youth centre led to a major corporate partnership. FE4 accessed training and workshops, while FE7 sought mentorship. These interactions highlight the diverse forms networking can take, spanning both informal community-based exchanges to more structured support channels.

Scholars like Singh and Basri (2024) and Chimombe (2025) highlight the strategic value of relational capital in female entrepreneurship, especially where formal infrastructure is limited. Similarly, Chimombe (2025) and Polori (2021) note that women often rely on relational and community-based networks to fill the gap left by inaccessible or exclusionary formal systems.

From a RT perspective, these networking strategies reflect relational resilience, which relates to the ability to endure and adapt through connection with others (Walsh, 2016). Instead of facing adversity alone, FEs built networks that buffered them against volatility and expanded their resources. Volunteering, mentorship, and coalition-building were deliberate strategies, not acts of desperation.

Viewed through IEOT, these actions also reflect proactiveness and risk-taking. Reaching out to potential mentors, navigating formal systems post-COVID, and turning casual interactions into business leads show an active, opportunity-seeking mindset. These women do not simply adapt; they initiate.

IFET adds further depth. These networking practices are gendered as women are expected to build and sustain relationships, yet such work is often dismissed as "soft" or "non-strategic." Mirchandani (1999) and Al-Dajani and Marlow (2013) argued that women's relational labour is not only vital to business success, but also a form of resistance, especially when institutional systems are exclusionary. FE4's experience illustrates this. Being asked *"Are you from Westbury or Eldos?"* in a funding meeting wasn't a benign question, it was a signal of racialised gatekeeping. The ability to "stand their ground" was both a political and entrepreneurial act.

Viewed holistically, these five strategies reflect a resilient, adaptive, and relational approach to business growth in gang-affected contexts. Westbury's FEs do not pursue resilience in the abstract; they practice it daily through care, adaptability, visibility, and strategic connection. Their growth strategies challenge dominant, individualised models of entrepreneurship by offering a community-rooted model that blends emotional labour, structural resistance, and strategic agency.

5.5.2. Emotional Resilience as a Long-Term Strategy
(Drawn from Theme 3: Psychological Toll and Emotional Resilience)

The findings reveal that FEs in Westbury not only cope with emotional hardship in the moment but also cultivate enduring internal frameworks that sustain their entrepreneurial journeys over time. While short-term coping strategies such as prayer and daily routines provide immediate relief (as discussed under SRQ2), this section focuses on how emotional and psychological resilience function as long-term strategic resources. Purpose, passion, identity, and faith emerged as core drivers that sustain their committed despite ongoing instability and limited institutional support.

5.5.2.1. Perseverance Through Adversity and Self-Belief

For many participants, their business was not merely a source of income, it was tied to identity, purpose, and long-term meaning. FE1 described her motivation as deeply internal, *"It takes a lot of push… and passion. If you don't have that, then this is not for you."* Likewise, FE7 stated, *"Even though the challenges… rocked my world, I just got back up."* These sentiments illustrate that psychological resilience is not solely reactive; it's proactive, deeply tied to how these women see themselves and their purpose.

This aligns with Brush (1992) and Cruz and Nordqvist (2012), who argued that women's entrepreneurship often arises from a relational and purpose-driven orientation. These

businesses are not simply economic ventures but are closely tied to self-worth, service, and collective wellbeing. Rather than withdrawing due to trauma, participants recommitted themselves to their work, drawing strength from the very act of continuing. Their emotional investment served as a strategic force for sustainability, particularly in the absence of institutional support.

5.5.2.2. Motivation for Self-Employment

Several participants did not stumble into entrepreneurship by chance; they chose it as a deliberate response to structural exclusion, job insecurity, and the desire for autonomy. *“I got retrenched… I’m committed to making it work because I want to be my own boss,”* said FE6. Others, like FE7, linked their decision to personal reflection and the urgency created by uncertain futures, *"I decided, you know what, life is so short and I'm never going to know if I don't try. I always wanted to do it [start a business]." (FE7)*

This mirrors literature showing that women in fragile contexts often pursue entrepreneurship as a form of economic self-determination in the face of exclusion (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013; De Vita et al., 2014; Khan et al., 2023). In this context, entrepreneurship is not a temporary solution but a purposeful, future-oriented strategy.

5.5.2.3. Resilience Rooted in Passion for Craft

Participants also drew strength from a deep passion for their work. *“You have to be born with a passion… it’s not really about the money”* said FE2. While FE3 preserved her first hairdressing doll as a reminder of her journey, embedding memory and meaning in her work.

This aligns with Solesvik et al. (2019), who described passion as a buffer against burnout and a source of long-term motivation. Al-Dajani et al. (2024) similarly note that women in conflict zones remain committed to entrepreneurship because of its emotional and symbolic value, not just its financial return.

5.5.2.4. Faith as a Strategic Anchor of Resilience

Faith was more than a source of momentary relief. It served as a long-term psychological and motivational anchor. Several participants viewed their businesses as part of a divine purpose, not just economic pursuits. FE5 expressed this conviction clearly, *“I will not allow things like gang violence to stop me... because it's God's plan for my life.”* Similarly, FE3 credited her

faith with helping her persist and *“gradually build up [her] clientele.”* These expressions reflected and active worldview that gave meaning to struggle and sustained their efforts over time.

Faith also shaped the culture of their businesses. Observational data from FE8 revealed how prayer was integrated into the daily routine, offering spiritual grounding for both the entrepreneur and the children in her care. For FE7, faith guided her perception of opportunity and risk, *“If it is for me, it will happen. If it's not, it's not for me.”*

Windham et al. (2005) and Panagioti et al. (2014) affirm that spirituality is a key internal source of resilience. It enables individuals to endure long-term adversity through meaning-making and emotional stability. In gang-affected contexts where trauma is chronic and support is limited, faith provides a framework for persistence and self-worth.

From a RT perspective, these strategies reflect both adaptive and transformative capacities. Unlike short-term adjustments, they help entrepreneurs reconstruct meaning and identity, building a psychological foundation for long-term continuity (Duchek, 2020; Masten & Barnes, 2018).

Through the lens of IEOT, participants demonstrated proactiveness, internal motivation, and a future-orientated mindset. Their sustained commitment reflects more than endurance; it reflects intentional efforts to maintain and grow their businesses through personal drive, passion, and perseverance.

IFET adds further nuance. These emotional strategies are gendered responses to exclusion. In the absence of formal support, women turn inward, drawing on care, faith, and emotional strength. Their long-term resilience is not entirely voluntary; it is shaped by institutional neglect and maintained through often unacknowledged labour.

Faith, therefore, is not just a coping tool. It acts as a strategic emotional scaffold, supporting continuity, purpose, and agency. These women sustain their businesses not only through economic strategies but through psychological resilience, spiritual anchoring, and gendered emotional labour. In a context defined by systemic failure, emotional strength becomes not just a means of survival, but a deliberate, long-term strategy.

5.5.3. Social & Economic Embeddedness as a Long-Term Resilience Strategy (Drawn from Theme 5: Social and Economic Community Impact, excluding 9.8.4)

FEs in Westbury do not operate in isolation from their communities; they are deeply embedded within them. This embeddedness is not incidental but a deliberate, long-term strategy that helps sustain their businesses and enables meaningful contributions to the broader community, even amid ongoing violence. By investing in others, offering mentorship, creating employment, and circulating opportunities within local networks, they actively shape neighbourhood economies and foster resilient social systems. Their community engagement reflects layered resilience rooted not only in business acumen but in care, reciprocity, and responsibility.

5.5.3.1. Serving and Supporting the Community

FEs routinely engaged in acts of care that extended beyond their core business functions. They offered food, clothing, physical space, and other forms of support to those around them. These were not acts of kindness but strategic efforts to build trust, loyalty, and social legitimacy, which in turn reinforced their businesses' sustainability.

FE2's soup kitchen and FE5's care for vulnerable children illustrates how entrepreneurship intersect with community welfare. FE4 opened her school premises for local gatherings and funerals, turning the business into a shared community hub.

These practices are consistent with findings by Kabagerayo et al. (2022) and Althalathini (2020), who show that FEs in conflict-affected settings often act as informal service providers and community anchors. Their enterprises fill critical gaps left by the state and contribute to alternative systems of support and stability. These socially embedded practices are not just compassionate gestures; they are strategic, long-term survival mechanisms.

5.5.3.2. Empowering Fellow Entrepreneurs

Support also extended to fellow entrepreneurs. Many participants invested time and resources in helping others formalise or expand their businesses. This included client referrals, compliance guidance, and mentorship. FE2, for instance, had assisted over 40 women in registering their businesses, while FE7 frequently passed along clients to peers.

Such actions reflect what the literature terms relational entrepreneurship, where mentorship and shared opportunities are key resilience strategies in low-resource environments (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013; De Vita et al., 2014). In marginalised settings, collaboration rather than competition becomes the foundation for survival. These FEs built informal ecosystems grounded in collective strength. In doing so, they challenge dominant entrepreneurial norms that reward individualism, offering instead a feminist model of shared success rooted in collective upliftment.

5.5.3.3. Community Empowerment Through Jobs and Outsourcing

Another form of embeddedness was the creation of local employment and the intentional use of community-based vendors. Several participants hired permanent staff, offered short-term work, and outsourced tasks to trusted locals. FE2 described "finding something for everybody to do" while FE1 relied on neighbourhood teams for event management, both reflecting a strategic commitment to supporting the local economy.

This resonates with IFET, which highlights how women's businesses often extend beyond individual goals and are shaped by relational obligations and care (Brush et al., 2009). These practices are not signs of overextension. They reflect a relational approach to business development by strengthening the community in order to strengthen the business.

In terms of RT, these actions demonstrate transformative resilience (Duchek, 2020; Masten & Barnes, 2018), where FEs actively reshape the social and economic landscape rather than simply adapt to instability. By creating jobs and circulating capital locally, they turn marginalisation into a platform for collective participation and survival.

Through IEOT, these practices show proactive decision-making and problem-solving. In the absence of formal employment or procurement systems, FEs build relational value systems anchored in trust, accountability, and local knowledge.

Theme five shows that participants do more than run businesses; they strengthen local economies. Their long-term strategies, including mentorship, care work, and local hiring, reflect embedded resilience. RT highlights these efforts as structural responses to risk. IFET shows how these practices draw on gendered roles and relational responsibility, turning social obligation into economic strategy. IEOT underscores the deliberate, innovative decisions made under constraint. In the absence of institutional support, FEs step in and redefine entrepreneurship as a community-rooted, future-focused strategy for survival and change.

5.5.4. Conclusion for SRQ3

The findings across all three themes confirm that FEs in Westbury employ a range of interlinked resilience mechanisms and long-term strategies shaped by the realities of gang-affected environments. They do not passively endure hardship; they respond with proactive, adaptive, and relational strategies that are deeply embedded in place, identity, and care.

To sustain their businesses, they remain commitment to their mission and staff, make personal sacrifices, and engage in intergenerational planning for continuity. They reinvest earnings, diversify income, adapt services to changing conditions, and strengthen visibility through social media and word-of-mouth marketing.

To grow their businesses, they expand their client base beyond the community of Westbury, pursue training, create new offerings, and proactively network to access opportunities. They demonstrate entrepreneurial orientation through innovation, proactiveness, and calculated risk-taking, even in the face of instability.

To contribute to their communities, FEs create jobs, support fellow entrepreneurs, offer mentorship, and provide essential goods and services, especially in areas where the state is absent. Many also engage in acts of care, such as feeding schemes, sharing business resources, and emotional support that strengthen social cohesion and local resilience.

These strategies are not short-term fixes, but sustained responses shaped by context and driven by necessity, obligation, and agency. Collectively, they show how FEs build and sustain their businesses while actively supporting their communities in environments marked by violence, exclusion, and neglect.

In response to SRQ3, this study finds that FEs in gang-affected areas sustain and grow their businesses while contributing to community resilience through layered strategies that combine economic adaptability, emotional strength, and social investment. Their responses go beyond survival. They are proactive, future-oriented, and reflect a form of resilience that is strategic, gendered, and structurally embedded.

5.6. Discussion of the PRQ

What specific factors (i.e., social, economic, and psychological) contribute to the resilience of female entrepreneurs who continue their entrepreneurial pursuits despite operating in environments plagued by persistent violent conflict?

The resilience of FEs in Westbury cannot be attributed to a single trait, behaviour, or theory. It emerges from a dynamic interplay of psychological, economic, and social factors, all shaped by the broader context of gang violence, institutional neglect, and structural exclusion. As shown in the findings from SRQ1, SRQ2, and SRQ3, resilience is not a fixed personal trait. It is an ongoing, context-responsive process of recalibration, resistance, and relational endurance.

As illustrated in Figure 22, this resilience is underpinned by three interconnected dimensions: Psychological Commitment and Internal Anchors (drawn from Theme 3: Psychological Toll and Emotional Resilience), Economic Adaptability and Strategic Innovation (from Theme 4: Business Growth and Sustainability), and Social Embeddedness and Relational Resilience (from Theme 5: Social and Economic Community Impact).

These dimensions reflect the longer-term strategies FEs employ to sustain their businesses and serve their communities. However, they are shaped by the conditions and short-term responses captured in Theme 1 (Gang Violence & Business Survival) and Theme 2 (Barriers to Business Sustainability). These themes highlight not only the persistent threats and constraints that FEs endure but also the tactical adjustments such as modifying operating hours, reinforcing safety measures, or weighing relocation that contribute to daily survival. Together, these themes show that the resilience of FEs is not static or innate but a relational, adaptive, and context-driven process of survival, care, and innovation.

Figure 26: Interconnected dimensions of FEs resilience



Note. Researcher's own work, 2024.

5.6.1. Psychological Commitment and Internal Anchors

The psychological dimension of resilience is central to how FEs endure prolonged adversity. Participants drew strength from emotional purpose, identity, and faith. Despite living and working in an environment where violence is pervasive and institutional support is minimal, they cultivated internal coping strategies that offer long-term psychological stability. Passion for their work, a strong sense of purpose, and the formation of business as a form of self-worth and divine calling all emerge as stabilising forces. These are not passive qualities, but strategic psychological resources that help sustain motivation in the face of trauma, fear, and burnout.

This mirrors findings in other conflict-affected contexts. Maharaj (2022) describes how South African women entrepreneurs anchor their work in purpose and community roles, while Osunmakinde et al. (2025) highlight prayer and meditation as central to social entrepreneurs' endurance. Walsh's (2016) concept of stabilising mechanisms is also reflected here, with participants maintaining meaning and identity despite chronic threat. However, unlike in Al Shanawani et al.'s (2024) Syrian context, where emotional resilience was often reinforced through peer support, Westbury FEs placed greater emphasis on internally cultivated anchors, reflecting both the personal burden of risk and limited formal support structures.

From RT, these internal frameworks represent both adaptive and transformative capacities. They are not merely tools for survival but mechanisms for rebuilding meaning in unstable conditions. IFET further reveals that this emotional labour is gendered and undervalued, rooted in unequal expectations that women must remain composed, responsible, and emotionally available even in crisis.

Ultimately, these internal commitments contribute to resilience by enabling long-term psychological stability, self-motivation, and the ability to continue entrepreneurship in the absence of institutional or mental health support.

5.6.2. Economic Adaptability and Strategic Innovation

While psychological strength provides internal grounding, FEs also display remarkable economic adaptability. Participants diversified income sources, tailored offerings to meet shifting demands, and expanded their reach beyond Westbury, often with limited resources. Reinvestment, succession planning, and use of digital marketing reflected a future-oriented mindset despite persistent constraints.

These behaviours echo Althalathini's (2022) observation that women in conflict zones sustain and grow businesses through strategic realignment and support Shah and Lala's (2023) findings that adaptive market repositioning is critical in volatile contexts. Similarly, Mutagwaba (2009) and Rawal (2023) identify diversification and service expansion as strategies for securing more reliable income sources. In contrast to entrepreneurs in Honduras and El Salvador, who avoided storefronts to minimise exposure to extortion (Hendricks, 2019), Westbury FEs maintained physical visibility but mitigated risk through pricing flexibility, product diversification, and digital marketing to counter declining customer bases and rising costs.

Viewed through IEOT, these practices reveal high levels of proactiveness, risk-taking, and innovation, even without formal support structures. Yet, this innovation is context-driven. FEs operate within a hostile system marked by unreliable clients, rising costs, financial exclusion, and systemic undervaluation of women's work.

From an IFET perspective, these economic strategies function not only as practical business decisions but as acts of resistance against systems never designed for their success. Here, resilience is less about scale or access to formal support and more about constant recalibration, strategic thinking, and rejection of exclusionary norms.

Ultimately, these behaviours address the PRQ by showing how economic resilience enables business continuity, future planning, and modest growth under conditions of ongoing threat.

5.6.3. Social Embeddedness and Relational Resilience

Beyond internal and economic strategies, the findings show that relational strength and social embeddedness are indispensable to FEs' resilience. These women rely on networks of trust, including family, clients, church members, and peers, to stabilise operations, manage risk, and share resources. These relationships were also reciprocal, many participants created jobs, outsourced locally, and provided mentorship or material support to others. In this way, their businesses became community assets, offering care, safety, and informal services.

This aligns with Maharaj's (2022) account of FEs in South African townships embedding their enterprises in reciprocal relationships, and with Al-Dajani et al.'s (2015) findings that women entrepreneurs in conflict-affected contexts build resilience through community trust and mutual support. Theron's (2015) work on relational resilience is echoed here, where connection and reciprocity buffer against instability. However, in contrast to Althalathini and Al-Dajani's (2021) Palestinian context, where networks also served as political advocacy platforms, Westbury FEs primarily leveraged networks for operational stability and protection rather than systemic reform.

RT frames these practices as relational resilience, where survival is built through connection, reciprocity, and mutual care. These practices also demonstrate transformative resilience, as FEs assume stabilising roles within collapsing civic and economic structures.

At the same time, community embeddedness comes with its own cost. IFET highlights how FEs are expected to shoulder emotional and social labour without recognition or institutional support. While these expectations are rooted in gendered norms, when navigated strategically, community rootedness can provide protection, build loyalty, and increase legitimacy in unstable environments.

In response to the PRQ, social embeddedness strengthens FE resilience by extending support, creating informal infrastructure, and transforming entrepreneurship into a collective, care-based endeavour.

In conclusion, the specific factors contributing to the resilience of FEs in Westbury are:

- **Psychological commitment**, rooted in purpose, faith, and identity (RT, IFET)

- **Economic adaptability,** built through strategic foresight and innovation within constrained environments (RT, IEOT, IFET)

- **Social embeddedness,** shaped by gendered responsibility and sustained through trust, care, and community support (RT, IFET)

These forms of resilience are not expressions of individual grit alone. They are relational, political, and deeply contextual. Through RT reveals how women adapt and transform under pressure. IEOT highlights intentional, future-focused decision-making, and IFET shows how resilience in this context is a collective response to structural abandonment shaped by inequality and sustained through care.

5.7. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has presented a detailed discussion of the study's findings, guided by the integrated theoretical framework comprising IFET, RT, and IEOT. Each of the three SRQs was analysed thematically, drawing on participant narratives and situating them within broader conceptual and empirical debates.

SRQ1 explored the economic, social, and psychological challenges faced by FEs in Westbury, including the threat of gang violence, financial insecurity, gendered exclusion, and emotional distress. SRQ2 examined the short-term coping mechanisms that FEs employ to survive in such an environment, including safety tactics, self-regulation, and reliance on relational support. SRQ3 moved beyond survival to consider how FEs implement long-term strategies for resilience and growth, such as adaptive business models, strategic networking, emotional anchoring, and community contribution.

Together, these three strands form a cohesive response to the PRQ, which asked what specific factors contribute to the resilience of FEs operating in environments plagued by persistent gang violence. The analysis demonstrates that resilience is not a singular trait, but a layered and dynamic process shaped by intersecting systems of gender, violence, and structural marginalisation. The integration of RT, IFET, and IEOT illustrates how entrepreneurial resilience emerges through the simultaneous negotiation of adversity, agency, and identity.

This chapter confirms that FEs in gang-affected spaces like Westbury are not merely surviving but actively reshaping their environments through tactical innovation, emotional endurance, and embedded relational support. Chapter 6 will build on these insights by outlining the theoretical and practical implications of the study and offering recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1. Introduction

This concluding chapter brings together the key insights from this study on the resilience of FEs operating in gang-affected townships, with a specific focus on Westbury, Johannesburg. The research was guided by a central aim: to understand how women sustain and grow their businesses amid chronic violence, systemic exclusion, and institutional neglect.

Anchored in RT, IFET, and IEOT, the study examined the multi-layered challenges these women face, the coping mechanisms they employ in their day-to-day operations, and the long-term strategies they develop to adapt, persist, and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

This chapter begins by summarising the main findings, followed by a reflection on the implications of the study for both policymakers and female entrepreneurship more broadly. It then outlines the study's limitations, and suggests areas for future research, before concluding with a final reflection on the significance of the research and its contribution to existing literature.

6.2. Summary of Findings

This study set out to answer the PRQ:

What specific factors (i.e., social, economic, and psychological) contribute to the resilience of female entrepreneurs who continue their entrepreneurial pursuits despite operating in environments plagued by persistent violent conflict?

To address this, three SRQs were explored:

1. What are the challenges (i.e., economic, social, and psychological) that FEs operating in gang-controlled townships face?

2. How do FEs navigate and respond to these challenges in their day-to-day operations (i.e., through immediate, short-term coping mechanisms and reactive behaviours)?

3. What strategies and resilience mechanisms do FEs employ to sustain and grow their businesses, and to contribute to their communities (i.e., long-term strategies and resilience mechanisms)?

The findings revealed the following:

- **Challenges are layered and structural**
  FEs in Westbury face intersecting and compounding barriers that extend beyond typical entrepreneurial difficulties. Gang violence is not a peripheral issue; it fundamentally reshapes the business landscape, influencing when women can operate, how they engage customers, and how they manage safety. These conditions are intensified by financial exclusion, gendered marginalisation, and sustained emotional strain. Together, they reveal a deeply unequal and neglected ecosystem.

- **Coping responses reflect constrained agency**
  In the face of daily threats, FEs adopt short-term survival strategies such as adjusting trading hours, avoiding dangerous routes, and funding their own security. They also rely on emotional coping mechanisms such as prayer, medication, spiritual reframing, and internal resolve to manage psychological stress. These actions represent absorptive resilience, as they are necessary adjustments made in the absence of institutional support.

- **Long-term strategies are deliberate and innovative**
  FEs display adaptive and transformative resilience through diversification, intergenerational planning, strategic market positioning, embedded community ties, and intentional networking. These are not merely survival tactics. They are purposeful redefinitions of entrepreneurship rooted in moral commitment, reciprocity, and social responsibility.

- **Emotional resilience is a driving force**
  Purpose, identity, and faith underpin long-term engagement. Entrepreneurship is viewed not only as a source of income but also as a path to legacy-building, care for others, and maintaining emotional and spiritual stability in a volatile context.

- **Community embeddedness is strategic**
  FEs cultivate and depend on strong local networks of support. They provide mentorship, share referrals, create jobs, and provide informal services in spaces where

the state is absent. Their embeddedness function as a form of relational infrastructure, critical to maintaining continuity and resilience.

Collectively, these findings challenge dominant narratives that either romanticise resilience or treat gang violence as background noise. Instead, they illustrate how resilience is actively constructed and practised by women navigating overlapping realities of threat, exclusion, and care.

6.3. Implications of the Research

The implications of the study are threefold: practical (for policymakers), grounded (for FEs), and theoretical (for academic frameworks concerned with entrepreneurship, resilience, and gendered exclusion). The lived experiences of FEs in Westbury demonstrate that resilience is not a fixed personal trait. It is a relational, embedded, and often emotionally demanding process shaped by systemic structural failures and persistent insecurity. For both policy and practice, the findings highlight the need for interventions that are context sensitive. Effective support must acknowledge not only the constraints these women face but also the ingenuity they demonstrate in navigating those constraints.

6.3.1. Implications for Policymakers

Policy frameworks aimed at supporting township entrepreneurship often treat gang violence as a background variable, one barrier among many. This study challenges that view. Gang violence is not a peripheral risk; it is a structural force that shapes space, time, emotional well-being, and visibility. When policy fails to account for this reality, it risks creating interventions that are irrelevant, inaccessible, or even harmful to those most affected.

The findings point to an urgent need for systemic interventions that go beyond entrepreneurial support to address the root causes of violence and exclusion in gang-affected communities. Without confronting the structural conditions that sustain gang control, such as state neglect, youth disempowerment, and criminal governance, entrepreneurship will remain precarious and unsupported.

Effective policy responses must begin with:

- **Direct government intervention to curb the proliferation and influence of gangs**, including targeted violence prevention, improved law enforcement accountability, and investment in youth-focused alternatives.

- **Public investment in spatial revitalisation**, aimed at transforming under-resourced areas into safe, thriving local economies through infrastructure development, service delivery, and inclusive urban planning.

- **Trust-building mechanisms between state and community**, designed to repair credibility gaps and restore faith in public institutions through participatory, community-led governance.

Once these foundations are in place, targeted entrepreneurial support becomes meaningful. Complementary interventions should include:

- **Safety-Responsive Economic Support** to offset costs related to security, infrastructure, and mobility.

- **Psychosocial services** embedded within entrepreneurial development programmes to support emotional and mental well-being.

- **Spatial inclusion initiatives** that challenge stigma attached to operating in gang-affected areas, opening up access to formal networks and opportunities.

- **Integrated Enterprise Development** offering access to finance, skills training, and market inclusion tailored to women in informal gang-affected township contexts.

More broadly, this research advocates for relational policy design, approaches that recognise entrepreneurs as community-embedded actors, whose survival depends on systems of care, responsibility, and recognition beyond business performance alone.

6.3.2. Implications for Female Entrepreneurs

This study offers both recognition and affirmation for the FEs who participated, as well as others navigating similar environments. It surfaces the emotional, strategic, and relational

labour that FEs perform, often without recognition, to sustain their businesses in contexts defined by violence and systemic neglect. By documenting these practices, the study contributes to a growing body of knowledge that validates lived experiences, offers practical insights, and builds solidarity among women operating in similarly hostile contexts.

Insights surfaced through this research include:

- **You are not alone** – Feelings of fear, emotional exhaustion, or exclusion are not personal failures but outcomes of structural inequality. This study reflects those realities and affirms that their struggles are shared and significant.

- **Everyday strategies are powerful and valid** – Tactics such as income diversification, informal networking, and emotional self-regulation are not improvised. They are intentional responses to exclusion and risk.

- **Care is not peripheral, it's a core strategy** – Acts of support, loyalty, and community engagement are part of doing business. They help sustain both entrepreneurs and the communities they serve.

- **Entrepreneurship in violent contexts is political** – Showing up, providing services, and supporting others is not only economic, but also a political act that challenges violence and systemic neglect.

6.3.3. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theoretical understandings of entrepreneurial resilience by deepening, extending, and, at times, challenging the core assumptions of the three frameworks underpinning the research:

- **IFET** offers a powerful framework for unpacking how gender, race, class, and place intersect to shape exclusionary conditions. This study reinforces IFET's core argument, that entrepreneurship is embedded within systems of inequality, and extends it by showing how entrepreneurship becomes a form of political resistance in ganglands. In Westbury, FEs are not simply responding to adversity; they are actively resisting spatial, institutional, and emotional marginalisation. The study also surfaces the emotional labour and care work embedded in entrepreneurial practice. These

findings call for a more expanded view of what constitutes entrepreneurial labour and success in feminised, conflict-ridden economies.

- **RT** provided a useful lens for understanding how FEs absorb, adapt to, and, in some cases, attempt to transform the violent and exclusionary environments in which they operate. The study affirms the value of RT's distinction between absorptive, adaptive, and transformative resilience, while also complicating this framework. Although absorptive and adaptive strategies were most common, several FEs demonstrated context-specific forms of transformative resilience. These included building intergenerational businesses, reshaping local economies through job creation and mentorship, and redefining entrepreneurship through care-based, community-rooted practices. However, systemic neglect and structural violence often foreclose opportunities for broader transformation. The study adds nuance by revealing that resilience, while often celebrated, can also be an exhausting, gendered necessity rather than an empowered choice.

- **IEOT** is often applied to measure proactiveness, innovation, and risk-taking in stable or growth-oriented contexts. This study challenges that framing by showing how these same traits are deployed not to scale or compete, but to survive. FEs in Westbury are highly proactive and innovative, but in ways shaped by danger, exclusion, and social responsibility. The theory's emphasis on autonomy and competitiveness is therefore tempered by this context, which demands relational embeddedness and cautious risk navigation. The study proposes that entrepreneurial orientation in conflict zones must be understood relationally and contextually, with survival and care positioned as strategic outcomes.

While this study does not offer a universal blueprint, it presents real, grounded examples of FEs who are building businesses, and holding communities together, amid conflict. These stories may serve as mirrors or guideposts for others navigating similar conditions. In doing so, the study affirms their agency, makes visible the cost of that agency, and calls for a broader ecosystem of solidarity and systemic reform to support their work. At the same time, it contributes to theory by showing how resilience, entrepreneurship, and innovation are shaped by violence, care, and exclusion, not just opportunity. By deepening and challenging key assumptions within RT, IFET, and IEOT, the study urges scholars to reimagine entrepreneurial resilience not as triumph, but as tenacity under constraint – and to centre context, care, and gender in future theorising.

6.4. Limitations

This study was conducted as a qualitative, interpretivist inquiry into the lived experiences of female entrepreneurs operating in a gang-affected township. Its goal was to provide in-depth, contextually grounded insights into how women navigate the intersecting realities of violence, systemic exclusion, and emotional strain. While the study generated rich data, several limitations should be acknowledged.

- **Scope and Scale**
  The research was conducted in Westbury, Johannesburg, and involved a relatively small sample. While participants' experiences were rich, diverse, and analytically generative, they do not represent the full spectrum of female entrepreneurial experience in ganglands across South Africa, or in other global conflict zones. The focus on place-specific depth is a strength, but also a limitation.

- **Access and Positionality**
  Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, access was negotiated with care, and the sample may reflect women who felt secure or motivated enough to share their stories. This may have inadvertently excluded more vulnerable or hidden voices. Additionally, while the researcher practiced reflexivity throughout, their positionality may have shaped what participants shared and how meaning was co-constructed and interpreted.

- **Temporal Limitations**
  Fieldwork was conducted over a two-month period, providing a rich but time-bound perspective. As such, the study captured a specific moment in participants' entrepreneurial journeys; and may not reflect how strategies or coping mechanisms evolve over time or in response to shifts in gang dynamics or policy landscapes.

- **Focus on Resilience**
  While the study centres resilience and strategy, it does so with critical awareness of the risk of romanticisation. Focusing on women's strength can unintentionally obscure the exhaustion, risk, and structural abandonment they endure. This tension was actively managed through IFET and a sustained emphasis on emotional and structural costs throughout the analysis.

This research prioritises depth over breadth. It does not claim universality, but it does claim relevance. It offers a grounded, theoretically informed account of what entrepreneurship looks like under violent and marginalised conditions. Its value lies in showing how resilience is not only constructed but also constrained un spaces that are often overlooked, misunderstood, or dismissed.

6.5. Recommendations for Further Research

This study has laid a foundation for understanding how FEs in gang-affected communities navigate persistent violence, systemic exclusion, and economic precarity. However, several areas remain underexplored or warrant deeper investigation. Future research could expand, refine, or challenge the insights offered here in the following ways:

- **Conduct Comparative Studies Across Gang-Affected Townships**
  While Westbury presents a compelling case, similar dynamics exist in areas like Eldorado Park, Manenberg, and Lavender Hill. Comparative studies could highlight how variations in gang structures, community cohesion, and state presence influence entrepreneurial responses and resilience strategies.

- **Undertake Longitudinal Research Tracking Business Continuity Over Time**
  A time-sensitive analysis could offer greater insight into how coping mechanisms evolve, whether adaptive strategies lead to business continuity or burnout, and how external shifts, such as gang dynamics or political changes, shape long-term viability.

- **Investigate the Experiences of Male and Gender-Diverse Entrepreneurs**
  This study focused FEs, but future research could explore how male and LGBTQI+ entrepreneurs navigate similar environments. This would offer a more intersectional understanding of how gendered power, risk, and exclusion operate in gang-controlled economies.

- **Explore the Mental Health Impacts of Chronic Exposure to Violence**
  The emotional toll surfaced in this study points to a critical need for trauma-informed research. Interdisciplinary studies could explore the psychological impact of sustained violence on entrepreneurs and investigate the effectiveness of community-based or culturally rooted mental health interventions that go beyond business-focused solutions.

- **Assess the Uptake of Research Evidence in Policy and Institutional Responsiveness**
  Future research could investigate whether state institutions or funders integrate insights from studies like this into policy, and what mechanisms (e.g., participatory policymaking, grassroots advocacy) could improve responsiveness to entrepreneurs in gang-affected environments.

- **Examine the Role of Youth Entrepreneurship in Gang-Affected Areas**
  With high rates of youth unemployment and vulnerability to gang recruitment, future research could focus on young entrepreneurs to explore how entrepreneurship can serve as a tool for prevention, resilience, and long-term community transformation.

Taken together, these directions point to the urgent need for a richer, more intersectional, and longitudinal research base, that not only documents how women survive but interrogates the structural conditions that make survival so difficult. Such inquiry is critical for moving beyond individualised resilience narratives and toward broader systems of recognition, inclusion, and systemic change that enables women to thrive, not just survive.

6.6. Chapter Conclusion

This study set out to explore a difficult and often overlooked question: How do FEs in gang-affected communities like Westbury not only survive, but continue to build, adapt, and care amid persistent violence and structural exclusion? The answer, as this research reveals, is layered and complex. These women are not merely running businesses; they are navigating power, protecting others, and sustaining enterprise in conditions most would consider untenable.

By examining the psychological, economic, and social dimensions of their experiences, this study has shown that the challenges FEs face are not incidental. They are structurally produced and sustained by systems of exclusion, neglect, and insecurity. At the same time, the strategies they employ are not accidental or improvised. They are purposeful, deeply relational, and grounded in lived realities. From adjusting trading hours and managing emotional strain to building trust-based networks and planning for intergenerational continuity, these women are actively redefining what resilience means in contexts of extreme instability.

Framed through RT, IEOT, and IFET, this study offers a multi-dimensional understanding of both the barriers and the resilience mechanisms shaping female entrepreneurship in

ganglands. It has shown that these strategies are not only about survival; they are acts of resistance, care, and community-building in response to systemic abandonment.

This inquiry began with a single reflection: an entrepreneur sharing how Westbury had changed her, how fear had reshaped her decisions, and how survival had come to meant carrying a weapon for safety. Her words, and the stories shared by participants, reflect more than data points or theoretical themes. They reveal the human cost of policy failure and structural inequality, and the depth of courage and endurance that sustains entrepreneurship in these communities.

This study reinforces that not all township environments are the same; and that generalisations obscure the distinct dynamics of conflict-affected communities like Westbury. As Buvinic et al. (2013) argue, violent conflict disproportionately impacts already marginalised groups; and for women in such contexts, the consequences are both gendered and compounding. Gang-controlled communities like Westbury should not be reduced to "high-crime zones" or framed only as urban poverty. They are conflict-affected systems with unique political, economic, and social dynamics. Mischaracterisation risks silencing both the challenges and agency of those who live and work within them.

This research was not only worthwhile; it was necessary. It amplifies voices often ignored, makes visible strategies often overlooked, and lays the groundwork for future research, policy reform, and collective action. While it does not offer simple solutions, it provides clarity, urgency, and a foundation for rethinking how female entrepreneurship is understood and supported in gang-affected contexts.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Consistency Matrix

Research Objective(s)	Literature Review	Research Questions	Source of Data	Type of Data	Analysis
Primary Research Objective: To identify, analyse, and understand the drivers (i.e. economic, social, and psychological) that contribute to the resilience of FEs operating in townships characterised by widespread gang violence, focusing on elucidating the mechanisms behind their persistence in such challenging circumstances. Secondary Research Objectives: a) To investigate and document the challenges (i.e. economic, social, and psychological) faced by FEs in gang-infested townships. b) To examine how they navigate and overcome challenges	Ahl, H., and Marlow, S. (2012) Al-thalathini, D., and Al-Dajani, H. (2021) Applebaum, A., and Mawby, B. (2018) Bernardo, C. (2020) Bhengu, C. (2023) Brush, C. G., de Bruin, A., and Welter, F. (2009) Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2021) Global Initiative (2022) Hendratmi, A., Agustina, T. S., Sukmaningrum, P. S., and Widayanti, M. A. (2022) Joseph, J., and Van Buren III, H. J. (2022) Maharaj, I. (2022) Mastercard (2022)	Primary Research Question: Given the complex and volatile nature of ganglands, what specific factors (i.e. social, economic and psychological) contribute to the resilience of FEs who continue their entrepreneurial pursuits despite operating in environments plagued by persistent violent conflict? Secondary Research Questions: a) What are the challenges (i.e. economic, social, and psychological) that FEs operating in gang-infested townships face? b) How do they navigate and overcome the challenges posed by gang violence in their day-to-	Semi-Structured Interviews, Participant Observation, Visual Documentation through Photography, Document Analysis, Key Informant Collaboration	Qualitative	Thematic analysis

posed by gang violence in their day-to-day business operations. c) To explore and assess the strategies and resilience mechanisms that they utilise to sustain, potentially grow their businesses, and actively contribute to their communities within ganglands.	Mohd-Nor, R., and Ali, A. B. (2022) Morris, C. (2019) Mudara, Z. J., and Mafini, C. (2022) Naudé, W., Amorós, E., and Brück, T. (2023) Orser, B. (2022) Steyn, L. (2023)	day business operations? c) What specific strategies and resilience mechanisms do they employ to sustain, potentially grow their businesses, and actively contribute to their communities in the face of adversity within gangland environments?			

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Dear Madam,

My name is Ilene Abrams, a Master's student in the Faculty of Commerce, Law & Management, Management Division at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Under the supervision of Dr. Robert Venter, I am conducting a research study titled **"Resilience in Ganglands: Strategies and Coping Mechanisms of Female Entrepreneurs in Westbury, Johannesburg, South Africa"** This study aims to understand the resilience of female entrepreneurs running SMMEs in environments affected by persistent gang violence.

I would like to invite you to participate in this research as I believe your input will help understand what drives female entrepreneurs' determination in these environments. If you agree, your participation will involve a one-hour interview and observation of your business operations, scheduled at your convenience during business hours between September and October at your business premises.

With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded, and photos will be taken without capturing identifying details of you or your business. All information collected, including your identity, will be kept confidential. The data may be used by other researchers with your consent, ensuring your anonymity and privacy.

Participation in this study is voluntary, unpaid, and at no cost to you. You have the right to withdraw at any time and can choose not to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. Discussions may touch on sensitive topics related to personal and business experiences in gang-affected areas. If you feel uneasy during the interview, we can pause or reschedule at your discretion. Should the need arise, you will be referred to Emthonjeni Centre on East Campus at Wits, where you can access counselling services free of charge. The clinic administrator can be contacted for bookings on 011 717 4513 or paballo.lepota@wits.ac.za.

The findings from this research will be compiled into a report, which will be available on the university library website. If you would like a summary of the report, I will be happy to provide one.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor using the contact details provided below. For any concerns about the ethical aspects of the study, you may contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) at +27 (0)11 717 1408 or via email at hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Thank you for considering participation in this important research.

Yours sincerely,



Ilene Abrams

Researcher:
Ilene Abrams
Email: 2775835@students.wits.ac.za
Phone: +27 82 521 4664

Supervisor:
Dr Robert Venter
Email: Robert.Venter@wits.ac.za
Phone: +27 (0)11 717 1888

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

" Resilience in Ganglands: Strategies and Coping Mechanisms of Female Entrepreneurs in Westbury, Johannesburg, South Africa"

Ilene Abrams

I, …….., agree to participate in this research project. I agree to the following: (Please circle the relevant options below)	
The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about	YES / NO
I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study	YES / NO
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded	YES / NO
I agree that photos can be taken of my place of business, as long as no identifiable markers or personal details are visible	YES / NO
I agree that photos can be taken of the products/services I sell, without revealing specific, identifiable details.	YES / NO
Female Entrepreneur: I agree to having photos taken of me at my business while I carry out my daily operations, provided that no personal details or identifiable features are shown	YES / NO
I consent to being observed while I carryout my business operations	YES/NO
Customer/Employee: I agree to having photos taken of me during my interactions in the business activities of the female entrepreneur, as long as no identifiable markers or personal details are visible	YES / NO
I agree that direct quotations from my interview may be used by the researcher in their research report	YES / NO
I agree that my participation will remain confidential (my name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in their research report)	YES / NO
I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on	YES / NO

…… (name of participant) ……..…….…… (signature)

…… (date)

…… (name of researcher) ……...…….…… (signature)

…… (date)

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

APPENDIX C:
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Date: _____ Interviewer: _____

Medium: In person ☐ Venue: _____

Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

INTRODUCTION

- Introduction of the interviewer and explanation of the interview's purpose.
- Explanation of the study and assurance of confidentiality.
- Obtaining consent to record the interview.

THEMES AND QUESTIONS

Themes	Questions
1. Background Information	– **Can you tell me about your business— When did it start and what products or services do you sell?** ▪ What did you do before starting this business, and how has that experience helped you? ▪ What motivated you to start your business?
2. Intersectional Perspectives on Female Entrepreneurship	– **Could you describe your experience as a female entrepreneur running a business in Westbury?** ▪ How do you think being a female entrepreneur affects the experiences, challenges, and opportunities you face compared to male entrepreneurs? Can you give examples? ▪ In what ways do you think race and class affect your experiences in this environment? Can you give examples?
3. Experience of operating in Ganglands	– **How does gang violence impact your business, how often does it happen and how have you managed during those times? Can you give examples?** ▪ What steps have you taken to protect your business from gang violence, and how well have they worked? ▪ Have you ever thought about giving up your business, and if so, what motivated you to keep going?
4. Understanding Resilience Factors: Social, Economic, and Psychological	– **How have people in your community, like family, friends, or local groups, influenced your resilience as an entrepreneur? Can you give examples?** ▪ How important are these relationships for your business? ▪ Are you part of any networks that help female entrepreneurs with challenges like gang violence? How have they supported you? – **What market related challenges (like access to finance or customer demands) have you faced that have impacted your ability to sustain and grow your business?** ▪ What strategies have you used to attract and retain customers?

	▪ Have you received any support (financial or other) from the government or NGOs? How did it help, and what other support would be useful for businesses like yours? – **What factors (e.g. personal motivation, coping strategies, mental health support) have contributed to your resilience?** ▪ How do you handle stress and manage your mental health working in a tough area like Westbury? What specific things do you do, and how well do they work? ▪ How do you deal with fear and concerns for your safety in this environment? ▪ How do you balance work and personal life?
5. Strategic Adaptation Strategies	– **What strategies have you used to keep your business going and growing in this tough environment? Can you share some examples?** ▪ How have you used available resources (local community support, partnerships with other businesses, or special programs and services) to sustain your business? – **Have you had to change how you run your business because of gang violence?** ▪ What new ideas or methods have you tried, like changing your products, services, or daily operations? How did they affect your business?
6. Impact of Entrepreneurial Activity	– How has your business benefited the community? Can you give examples of any positive impact?
CLOSING	
▪ Thanking the participant for their time. ▪ Asking if they have any questions or if there is anything they would like to add. ▪ Offer participants an opportunity to add anything they think is important. ▪ Reiterating the confidentiality and explaining how the data will be used.	

Appendix E: Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 Abrams

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H24/08/01**
PROJECT TITLE	Resilience in Ganglands: Strategies and Coping Mechanisms of Female Entrepreneurs in Westbury, Johannesburg, South Africa
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Ms I Abrams
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	Business Sciences/
DATE CONSIDERED	19 July 2024
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved Risk Level: Medium
EXPIRY DATE	12 September 2027

DATE 13 September 2024 **CHAIRPERSON** pp. J. Weimeyer
(Professor J Watermeyer)

cc: Supervisor : Dr R Venter

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **A SIGNED COPY** returned to the Secretary electronically. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. **I/we agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low Risk studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.**

Signature

29 / 09 / 2024
Date

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES