



UNVEILING THE PATH TO SUCCESS:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY
ON MIGRANT WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

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Abstract

Purpose. Building on the theoretical embeddedness construct, this study stresses the joint role that contextual and individual factors play in successful migrant women entrepreneurship, uncovering which factors can sustain migrant women entrepreneurship.

Design/methodology/approach. This paper conducts a multi-case study of a sample of 4 successful migrant women entrepreneurs.

Findings. Results show that when the context denotes resistance towards migrant women entrepreneurs, soft skills, especially “self-esteem” and “self-efficacy” can balance the negative effect of context. This mismatch between personal expectations and received stimulus from context produces a cognitive response that follows an individual perspective based on “self-investment”. Meanwhile, when the context is perceived as favorable to migrant women’s entrepreneurship development, individual factors seem to amplify the contextual factors, creating a centrifugal reaction. In this case, personal expectations and received stimuli from the context match and generate a cognitive response that follows a business perspective based on conceiving firm development strategies.

Practical and Social Implications. Findings can help migrant women entrepreneurs and practitioners (consultants and other entrepreneurs) identify the main factors that can sustain or inhibit entrepreneurial behaviors by anticipating possible concerns and issues and, above all, trying to remove potential context barriers. Moreover, findings also call into action policymakers to promote ad hoc entrepreneurship education programs to strengthen the individual level and contrast possible adverse effects due to hostile contexts.

Originality of the study. Previous studies have investigated the context and the individual levels separately, while this study argues that the two levels coexist and deserve to be jointly analyzed. Additionally, this study focuses on successful migrant women entrepreneurs, considered enlightening because they are embedded in multiple contexts: the country of origin and the host country. By uncovering how they perceive the context (friendly vs. hostile), results show different cognitive responses to overcome difficulties and achieve success.

1. Introduction

Scholarly interest in the field of women entrepreneurship is increasing (Langevang et al. 2015; Laguía et al., 2022), contributing to delineate a quite mature topic, albeit in need of further investigations (De Bruin et al., 2006; Azmat and Fujimoto, 2016; Chatterjee, Shepherd, and Wincent, 2022).

Carter and Marlow (2006) conducted a literature review on female entrepreneurship within the small business sector. Contrary to the perception that female entrepreneurship has been overlooked, they identified over 400 peer-reviewed academic papers and numerous popular articles on the subject. However, their findings underscored the imperative for a more profound comprehension of the intricate interplay between gender and enterprise, emphasizing the necessity for greater focus on theoretical dimensions. Similarly, Ahl (2006) advocates analyzing women's entrepreneurship through novel lenses and perspectives to encapsulate a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of its various facets. More recently, Paloni and Serafini (2018) questioned methodological issues concerning female entrepreneurship as an individual or collective phenomenon and as a social or natural variable.

In sum, theoretical and methodological approaches deserve more analysis to understand entrepreneurship in general and female entrepreneurship in particular deeply.

The literature is bifurcated into two primary perspectives: the individual standpoint, which examines personal traits and attitudes to identify differentiating characteristics between women entrepreneurs and their male counterparts, and the contextual standpoint, which argues that various contextual factors exert a significant influence on entrepreneurship, albeit in distinct ways for women and men.

Specifically, studies have focused on the micro-level (individual) analysis by identifying personal traits, attitudes, and characteristics that appear positively linked with entrepreneurial careers (Schlaegel and Koenig, 2014; Mitchelmore and Rowley, 2013; Hassan et al., 2020). These factors have been used to explain differences between men and women in undertaking entrepreneurial initiatives. In line with this perspective, women appear more reluctant to set up a new firm or continue a family business than their male counterparts (Anna et al., 2000; Nani and Mathwasa, 2023). Reasons could be retrieved in risk-aversion (Gimenez-Jimenez et al., 2022; Humbert and Brindley, 2015; Gupta et al., 2019), low levels of self-esteem (Goyal and Yadav, 2014), difficulties in receiving finance loans (Muravyev et al., 2009) and lack of self-confidence (Kumbhar, 2013; Kirkwood, 2009). Great attention has been paid to women entrepreneurs in developing countries, investigating the reasons that push women to become entrepreneurs (Lim and Enrick, 2013). Additionally, recent studies highlight that women assume

their individual choice to undertake or continue entrepreneurial initiatives considering the “family dimension” (Cesaroni and Paoloni, 2016).

Other studies focused on contextual rather than individual factors to explain drivers that stimulate or inhibit entrepreneurship and thus also women entrepreneurship (Essers, Doorewaard, and Benschop, 2013; De Vita, Mari, and Poggesi, 2014; Ratter, Dana, and Ramadani, 2017; Ogun-dana et al., 2021). Contextualizing entrepreneurship means challenging the decontextualized standard model, generally associated with high-growth, technology-driven, and venture capital-backed endeavors (Aldrich and Ruef 2018), considering other context-grounded entrepreneurship forms (Welter, 2011). Recently, Welter, Baker, and Wirsching (2019) identified three main waves of contextualizing in the entrepreneurship field: 1) challenging the standard model by exploring the why, what, and how of entrepreneurship; 2) considering subjective elements, the construction, and enactment of contexts; 3) broadening the domain of entrepreneurship research for deeper theorizing, by pointing to diversity in organizational forms, innovation, motivations, places, people, funding, development paths, and contributions to economy and society, considering that the context represents the source of entrepreneurship.

Thus, a general consensus is that contextual factors affect entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial intention, and behavior (Zahra et al., 2014). In line with this, scholars have challenged the topic by leveraging different theoretical perspectives that unfold a diverse tapestry of approaches, each offering interesting insights into the multifaceted nature of entrepreneurial activities. For example, ecologist theorists (see Hannan and Freeman, 1989) provide valuable perspectives on how environmental factors impact entrepreneurial activities by emphasizing competition, entrepreneurial density, and resource availability within a given context. Institutional Theory, as advanced by Scott (2005), extends the analysis to the broader institutional context, considering how cultural norms, laws, and regulations shape entrepreneurial behavior. This theory sheds light on the influence of formal and informal institutions on entrepreneurship.

In a large number of studies, following Granovetter’s suggestions (1985), scholars have demonstrated that contexts can stimulate, delineate, or inhibit entrepreneurship through their specific features, originating territories with unique entrepreneurial characteristics (Floris et al., 2020; Floris and Dettori, 2023). This phenomenon is at the origin of the embeddedness theory and refers to the intricate relational tangle of individual and organizational ties in a defined context (Dacin et al., 1999; Jack & Anderson, 2002) that affect personal life spheres, economic actions, and business activities (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Uzzi, 1997). This lens has been used to investigate women entrepreneurship as a result of the culture, policies, habits, and customs of a specific country (Henry and Lewis, 2023). In this

view, particular emphasis has been placed on investigating context-related factors that inhibit or sustain women entrepreneurship (Panda, 2018; Jamali, 2009).

Drawing on the embeddedness perspective (Granovetter, 1985), our study aligns with the viewpoint of Minniti and Naudè (2010), emphasizing that a comprehensive understanding of women's entrepreneurship requires a simultaneous examination of both individual and contextual dimensions. In this regard, the embeddedness perspective is the most compelling theoretical approach for several reasons. Unlike alternative approaches that often treat these levels in isolation, the embeddedness perspective facilitates a more holistic analysis, allowing us to unravel the intricate interplay between individual traits and contextual factors and providing a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of women's entrepreneurship that extends beyond simplistic dichotomies. This perspective enables us to explore how and why contextual and individual factors interact and influence each other, leading to a more nuanced and contextually grounded analysis. Simultaneously, this theoretical approach empowers us to heed Alvesson and Sandberg's (2011) call for a meaningful contribution to the discourse. We achieve this by introducing innovative research questions and challenging assumptions through a dialectical interrogation of diverse perspectives, explicitly focusing on migrant women's entrepreneurship, which needs to be analyzed under the lens of the multiple embeddedness perspective. Because migrant women entrepreneurs are influenced by multiple embeddedness explicating in different levels, that is, context - positive or negative factors that come from their context of provenience and of migration - and individual, we aim to answer the following research question: How and why do contextual and individual factors act in successful migrant women entrepreneurship?

To answer this question, we conducted a multi-case study (Eisenhardt, 1989) of a sample of 4 migrant women entrepreneurs. The findings provide interesting and enlightening insights and offer relevant contributions to the literature on migrant women entrepreneurship, highlighting the relevance of the interplay of contextual and individual factors - especially self-esteem and self-efficacy and the effect of this intertwining, that generates two different cognitive responses based on an individual and business perspective. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review (paragraphs 2.1, 2.2, 2.3). Section 3 addresses the methodology (paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2). In Section 4, the findings are detailed across three paragraphs, focusing on individual level (par. 4.1), context level (par. 4.2), and the interplay (par. 4.3). Section 5 delves into the discussion of results, explaining implications and contributions (par. 5.1) while highlighting limitations (par. 5.2). Lastly, Section 6 concludes the study by summarizing the main contribution and the paper's originality.

2. Literature review

2.1 *The individual and contextual perspectives of women entrepreneurship*

Women entrepreneurship is probably the fastest-growing category of entrepreneurship worldwide and its development has received increasing academic attention (Brush and Cooper, 2012; Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez and Sánchez-García, 2020). There is a strong agreement that women entrepreneurs contribute to entrepreneurial activity (Noguera et al., 2013) and socio-economic development (Hechavarria et al., 2019; Rae, 2015). However, women that decide to create or continue a business are less than their male counterparts (Elam et al., 2019), corroborating the stereotypical concept of “think entrepreneur-think male” (Laguía et al., 2022).

Research on women entrepreneurship primarily falls into two categories: the individual perspective, which analyzes the personal traits of effective entrepreneurs and examines the gender aspect of the entrepreneurship phenomenon, and the contextual perspective, which concentrates on the opportunities and obstacles arising from the environment in which firms operate, and entrepreneurs are situated.

Regarding the individual perspective, scholars have concentrated on identifying individuals’ key personal traits to be recognized as entrepreneurs. Specifically, at the individual level, scholars highlight the importance of well-defined soft skills as antecedents and psychological characteristics for achieving entrepreneurial success (Emami et al., 2022). Common psychological traits identified in various studies include the need for achievement (McClelland and Winter, 1969), locus of control (the ability to control events), and a propensity for risk-taking (Gartner, 1988). Furthermore, challenges for women in initiating and managing enterprises are suggested by several studies, with conflicting views on gender advantages. Psychological traits of women entrepreneurs are examined compared to those of men, along with exploring social backgrounds, education, and family influences (Langan-Fox and Roth, 1995; Caputo and Dolinsky, 1998). Women are reported to show limited interest in pursuing entrepreneurial careers (Shinnar et al., 2012) and display lower entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and ability to establish new firms (Allen et al., 2007).

Additionally, women are often less inclined to undertake self-employed activities (Verheul et al., 2012). Cesaroni and Paoloni (2016) further reveal that family plays a fundamental role in women’s individual entrepreneurial choices. The authors identify various types of family influence, including family as an obligation, where women are compelled to become entrepreneurs, shaping their career traits around family expectations; family as a support, providing encouragement, guidance, and emotional support, enhancing women’s resilience in their entrepreneurial endeavors; family

as an opportunity, where being part of a business family offers women a career path by fostering individual entrepreneurial pursuits; family as a form of generational continuity, experienced during family firm succession involving both successor and predecessor; and family as a form of sacrifice, where unmarried women entrepreneurs, grappling with conflicting job responsibilities, may opt to forgo having a family due to challenges in balancing work and personal life. This decision is not always voluntary, as women often feel compelled to avoid family responsibilities that are difficult to reconcile with their entrepreneurial pursuits. This predicament disproportionately affects women compared to men, who are generally less impacted by work-life balance issues.

Regarding the contextual perspective, scholars have primarily focused on understanding the factors contributing to differences between men and women in engaging in entrepreneurial initiatives. This emphasis on context arises from recognizing that “context is important for understanding when, how, and why entrepreneurship happens and who becomes involved” (Welter, 2011: 166). This is particularly true concerning the institutional context, encompassing political, economic, and cultural aspects (Shane, 2003). Specifically, regarding political and economic factors, regulatory conditions (Estrin and Mickiewicz, 2011); property rights, and access to economic and financial resources (Brush et al., 2009) appear to influence women entrepreneurial intentions mainly. However, culture has received particular attention because considered the most relevant factor able to inhibit or sustain entrepreneurship (Krueger et al., 2013) by driving entrepreneurial intentions and behavior (Shinnar et al., 2012; Thornton et al., 2011). Culture can be more or less supportive of entrepreneurship (Kibler et al., 2014), that is, more or less apt to promote and stimulate entrepreneurship. In this perspective, culture can generate both positive and negative effects, which may be perceived and experienced differently among members of society. A substantial body of literature has delved into the distinctions between women entrepreneurs and their male counterparts, revealing that women encounter more cultural barriers than men when pursuing entrepreneurial paths (Bullough et al., 2017; Jennings and Brush, 2013). This contributes to the well-established gender disparity in the entrepreneurial domain (Santos et al., 2016). Stereotypes and societal expectations regarding gender roles “are a significant source of these differences between women’s and men’s entrepreneurship” (Liñán et al., 2022: 1052). Such stereotypes link women with household activities, family care, and low-risk ventures (Floris and Dettori, 2021), shaping perceptions of women’s traits that may seem incompatible with entrepreneurial careers. Paoloni and Dumay (2015) recently developed the CAOS model of women entrepreneurs, by jointly considering personal characteristics, context, organizational and managerial aspects, and entrepreneurial motivation. The

authors found a prevalent reliance on networks marked by informal and enduring connections, emphasizing the importance of balancing work and family responsibilities and involving relatives and friends in the network. Women entrepreneurs, in other words, appear to pay particular attention to relational capital, especially in the start-up phase.

In this vein, it becomes evident that relations within the context, cultural norms and societal expectations play a significant role in shaping and defining individual factors, underscoring the influential impact of context on various aspects of individual entrepreneurial behavior.

In other words, women often avoid undertaking entrepreneurial initiatives due to what cultural norms delineate for them. However, entrepreneurial intent, for example, is a predictor of new business setting up and originates in self-esteem, that is, “the extent to which individuals believe in the ability to execute a behavior and what they believe is possible with the skills they possess” (Schlaegel and Koenig, 2014: 300). According to Sedikides and Gress (2003), self-esteem encompasses an individual’s subjective evaluation of their self-worth, feelings of self-respect, and self-confidence, along with the degree to which they harbor positive or negative opinions about themselves. Moreover, self-esteem is interconnected with personal convictions regarding one’s skills, abilities, and social interactions. Self-esteem is undoubtedly a social construct (Eagly et al., 2000) and a personal skill that can be built and improved over a lifetime (Creed et al., 2001; Nungsari et al., 2023), since childhood and adolescence (Floris et al., 2023; Floris and Pillitu, 2019).

Similarly, self-efficacy, as explained by Bandura (1977), pertains to individuals’ confidence in their capacity to achieve predetermined performance levels, thereby influencing events that impact their lives. These beliefs shape individuals’ emotions, thoughts, and self-motivation and influence their behavior. The multifaceted effects of self-efficacy beliefs are realized through four primary processes: cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes, generating also organizational effects.

This means that the individual level of analysis depends in part on the context, in particular culture and social norms, but it also depends on the perception individuals have of themselves independently of external expectations and on how much they believe in their own abilities and are willing to invest on emotional and material resources for self-improvement. This clearly emerges empirically because when women decide to start or continue a business they pursue successful results, also in non-supportive contexts (Mozumdar et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2022; Floris et al., 2020). For this reason, contextual and individual factors must be jointly analyzed to investigate in-depth women entrepreneurship phenomenon, especially when women are migrants and experience constraints and opportunities from multiple contexts.

2.2 Migrant women entrepreneurship

The surge in global migration has substantially fueled entrepreneurial self-employment (Edwards et al., 2006). Although extensively scrutinized in sociology, migration studies, and economic geography, entrepreneurship scholars have yet to thoroughly investigate this phenomenon, thus overlooking its inherent significance (Ram et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017), especially with reference to migrant women. Only recently has there been a heightened awareness of this research gap (Chreim et al., 2018), signaling a growing recognition of the need for further exploration.

In line with Sinkovics and Reuber (2021: 1), we conceptualize migrant entrepreneurship as the “entrepreneurial activity of foreign-born individuals in a country other than that of their birth”. Recent studies have found that migrant entrepreneurship is a source of social and economic development for both the country of origin and the host country (Kurvet-Käosaar et al., 2019). However, migrant entrepreneurs face challenging issues, especially when women (Bullough et al., 2019; Foss et al., 2019).

Scholars highlight that whether women entrepreneurs experience the “mental load”, that is, an extra burden of responsibility and sometimes a sense of guilt that women face in the household context (Crozier et al., 2004), this negative feeling tends to be heavier in context of migration (Lassalle and Shaw, 2021). Lassalle and Shaw (2021) argue that sometimes women migrants are trailing wives and follow their husbands or male partners into migration, giving up on their career ambition, and setting up their new venture to the background of the household’s migration and settlement priorities. “As trailing wives, women migrant entrepreneurs follow the lead migrants (their husbands) into migration and prioritize their household’s settlement, including children’s education and husband’s career, at the expense of their own career prospects, and subsequently, at the expense of their entrepreneurial activities. For these migrant female entrepreneurs, starting a business is a decision by default, a response to a lack of prioritization of their own careers within the migrant household.” (Lassalle and Shaw, 2021: 1506). At the same time, the authors have found that the context of migration augments the mental load of women migrant entrepreneurs. Like other women, female migrant entrepreneurs are in charge of their household’s domestic duties, but being abroad and far away from relatives, they are alone and cannot count on relatives’ help. This requires flexibility for household duties augmented by the migration context, limits the time and energy women migrant entrepreneurs can dedicate to their entrepreneurial activities, and restricts the scope of their business.

Other studies have identified as possible obstacles human capital, culture, family, institutional aspects, and social capital (Azmat, 2013), as well as access to capital, lack of local knowledge, culture, and language (Dhaliwal,

Scott, and Hussain 2010). In this scenario, migrant women entrepreneurs seem to be victims of a double disadvantage (Dhaliwal, Scott, and Hussain, 2010) or a triple disadvantage (Pio and Essers, 2014). Double disadvantage refers to the concerns stemming from being both migrants and women, while triple considers the case of migration from developing countries (Azmat, 2013). This last case worsens the condition of migrant female entrepreneurs, historically considered the most disadvantaged kind of entrepreneur (Raijman and Semyonov 1997), as they find it more challenging to adapt to the institutional framework, culture, and socio-economic context of developed countries (Drori, Honig, and Ginsberg, 2006; Azmat 2010).

Moreover, migrant women entrepreneurs who come from developing countries experience prejudice from their country of origin more than the host country because of deeply rooted, discriminatory cultural values, attitudes, practices, and the traditions of patriarchal culture (Amine and Staub 2009; Marlow and McAdam 2012)

Indeed, as highlighted by Vershinina et al. (2019), who delved into transnational family businesses, transnational spaces can empower women to identify previously inaccessible opportunities due to the structural constraints of their home countries and the entrenched family businesses. By exercising their agency, transnational migrant women can prioritize their entrepreneurial aspirations without jeopardizing their family ties. In this perspective, the embeddedness perspective lens appears to be the most suitable to investigate the phenomenon.

2.3. Migrant women entrepreneurship through the lens of the embeddedness perspective

There is a broad consensus that firms do not act in isolation (Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2022). Firms' behaviors, strategies, access to resources, and opportunities are firmly related to the environment in which they are embedded (Jack & Anderson, 2002). As actors within networks, to quote Granovetter (1985: 487), firms "do not behave or decide as atoms outside a social context, nor do they adhere slavishly to a script written for them by the particular intersection of social categories that they happen to occupy. Their attempts at purposive actions are instead embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations". As such, actors such as firms and their economic activities must be analyzed considering the frame of social relations, culture, social structures, local institutions, routines, and customs in which actors operate (Granovetter, 1985). This condition represents the essence of the embeddedness perspective, which refers to the intricate relational tangle of individual and organizational ties in a defined environment or context (Jack & Anderson, 2002) that affect personal life spheres, economic actions, and business activities (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Uzzi, 1997).

Studies on immigrant entrepreneurship that do not focus on gender emphasize the concept of “mixed embeddedness” to highlight the significance of exploring the interplay between the immigrant entrepreneur, the meso-level opportunity structure, and the macro-level institutional framework, underscoring the need to comprehend both the host country and the native context when examining immigrant entrepreneurship (Chreim et al., 2018).

Under the lens of this perspective, migrant women entrepreneurship deserves to be investigated by understanding how, to what extent, and through which main factors context affects its development and dynamic. At the same time, because migrant women entrepreneurs are influenced by factors from the country of origin and the host country, the embeddedness perspective becomes more complex, shifting into multiple embeddedness (Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2022) that helps to interpret the phenomenon and allowing us to understand the effects of the contexts and the individual level through their intertwined ties. In other words, our understanding of migrant women entrepreneurship needs to consider the multiple contexts and the social structures in which migrant women entrepreneurs are embedded (Welter, 2011; Zahra et al., 2014). Recently, in their literature review on female immigrant entrepreneurs, Chreim et al. (2018) built on the mixed embeddedness perspective, arguing that a comprehensive understanding of immigrant entrepreneurship arises when considering the entrepreneurs’ resources and their integration into the social network of immigrants, as well as their embeddedness in the politico-institutional and socio-economic environment of the host country. This approach encompasses both actors (the migrant entrepreneurs) and the socio-cultural, economic, and political structures shaping the host country and co-ethnic context within which these actors operate. The embeddedness perspective emerges as a suitable way to investigate the topic. Scholars argue that migrant women prefer and find an inclusive and culturally diverse environment, which positively impacts immigrant entrepreneurship (Lidola, 2014). The acceptance and overall encouragement of female immigrant entrepreneurs are shaped by the gender role ideologies and value systems prevalent in the host country (De Vita et al., 2014). On the opposite side, in many contexts, subtle hindrances to the advancement of female immigrant entrepreneurs exist, often arising from biases within the host country population towards conspicuous manifestations of diversity (Pio, 2014). Concerning the context characteristics, migrant women also shape their entrepreneurial orientation and intention (Verduijn and Essers, 2013).

Thus, in light of the multiple embeddedness perspective, this study refers to two main levels - the context (including origin and host countries) and the individual - trying to elucidate how and why contextual and individual factors act in successful migrant women entrepreneurship.

3. Methodology

3.1 *Research design and sample*

Given the unexplored topic, a qualitative methodology for this research was chosen and executed using a multicase approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). The qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this study because the joint observation of the contextual and individual level of analysis of migrant women entrepreneurship requires an in-depth analysis able to penetrate interviewees' resistance. Moreover, using case studies allows for an analysis of real, unique phenomena, that of observing a particular scenario and its interactions within the boundaries of the context wherein they develop and act (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2008). Such studies represent a form of qualified investigation aimed at seeking the 'meaning' of reality in the experiential lives of people and organizations (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Patton, 1990; Yin, 2008). A comparison of case studies is particularly useful in this research study to understand mechanisms through which the intertwined individual and contextual factors act and produce effects in different ways. The choice of women entrepreneurs aligns with Patton's (1990) recommendation that the 'logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research (Patton, 1990). In detail, our selection focused on migrant women entrepreneurs embodying the following traits: (1) serving as both the owner and manager of successful micro and small businesses and (2) establishing their firms in Sardinia. Two primary considerations guided this choice. Firstly, the homogeneity of the Sardinian context, encompassing institutional, cultural, and historical elements, provided a conducive environment for meaningful cross-case comparisons. This was further facilitated by the author's profound knowledge of the context. Secondly, opting for face-to-face interviews was driven by the recognition that it is the most suitable method for acquiring pertinent, sensitive, and confidential information, leveraging the authors' intimate familiarity with the specific nuances of the context. Concerning the reference to "successful" micro and small firms, we considered what was suggested by Toledo-López et al. (2012). Based on prior studies, the authors conceptualize success as a multifaceted achievement beyond financial metrics. Success, as outlined by these authors, encompasses economic gains and attaining non-financial objectives. These include customer satisfaction, adherence to cultural values and traditions, autonomy, creative expression, and a positive impact on the broader community. Adhering to this viewpoint, we reached out to women entrepreneurs who primarily defined their success in terms of non-financial results.

The selection of micro and small enterprises was influenced by the recognition that these types of firms embody the contextual reality (Nichter and Goldmark, 2009) and require exceptional resilience to navigate the distinctive challenges inherent in smaller-scale businesses. Through personal contacts, we approached the first migrant female entrepreneur and then proceeded through snowball sampling, asking our informants to suggest other entrepreneurs with the defined characteristics. This way, we involved four migrant women entrepreneurs to obtain their availability, presenting the study's objective. The sample was adequate and additional cases provided no further knowledge, thus reaching saturation (Suddaby, 2006). Moreover, the sample agrees with Eisenhardt's suggestions (1989, p. 545): ' while there is no ideal number of cases, a number between 4 and 10 cases usually works well'. Table 1 describes the main characteristics of the selected migrant women entrepreneurs and their firms.

Table.1 Sample and details

#	Origin	Age	Education level	Marital status	Child.	Firm activity	Foundation	Length of interview (in minutes)
1	Mexico	41	Master Degree	married	2	image consulting, personal branding	2021	42.31
2	Cuba	46	Master Degree.	single	-	educational services, languages, interpreting	2014	39.41
3	Romania	47	Master Degree	married	-	fixtures, construction	2015	42.14
4	Kirghizstan	46	Master Degree	single	-	catering	2016	39.04

Source: author's elaboration.

3.2 Data collection and data analysis

Our study mainly relied on primary (interviews) and secondary data sources (archives, personal documents, websites, and others). Primary data consisted of four in-depth interviews with migrant women entrepre-

neurs. All interviews helped us understand whether and how context (of origin and host) exerts its influence and how they perceive it as supportive or not. Contemporarily, interviews allowed us to investigate whether and how individual factors interrelate with contextual factors. Each migrant informant was interviewed alone to avoid mutual influence that could have invalidated the sincerity of the accounts. The in-depth interviews were personally conducted, using the native language of the informants and then translated into English. This linguistic approach was facilitated by one author's proficiency in the language, ensuring a nuanced and culturally sensitive interaction. , An interview protocol (Legard et al., 2003) designed to obtain information related to the research question was followed. To define the interview protocol, we conducted a pre-study with a sample of 10 individuals, distinct from the final sample, to assess the proposed questions' effectiveness and gain insights into their meaningful interpretation. These ten individuals were identified among the authors' contacts, with the characteristic of not knowing the topic under study, to simplify the questions as much as possible and avoid using academic terminologies. Thanks to this choice, some questions were changed to improve their comprehensibility. The final list of items (refer to Appendix A) intentionally omitted technical terminology from academic literature. The goal was to encourage interviewees to openly and organically share their experiences and personal perspectives, encompassing the entire lifecycle of the firm rather than fixating on specific moments in the life of women's businesses. We used open-ended questions (Eisenhardt, 1989), prompting the informants to provide additional details when their descriptions were brief or when novel strands of narrative emerged. In our thorough investigation, we examined two distinct levels – the individual and the contextual – drawing insights from Johannisson (2010) and Oosterbeek et al. (2010) in relation to the individual level. We concentrated on individual entrepreneurial skills, encompassing facets like self-esteem, self-efficacy, perseverance, autonomy, proactivity, and creativity. Regarding the contextual level, we referenced Noguera et al. (2013) and primarily focused on socio-cultural factors, particularly emphasizing perceived capabilities and opportunities.

All interviews (averaging 40 minutes), conducted from November 2022 to April 2023, were recorded and transcribed into 50 double-spaced pages, mostly within 24 hours. Ethical aspects were considered and respected throughout the study, including having all participants sign a written consent form. The interview procedures were clearly expressed to the respondents before the interviews were conducted. Anonymity was guaranteed to the informants and their firms to encourage openness. Moreover, authorization was obtained from participants to gather data, transcribe interviews and use the collected information for scientific and academic purposes.

We analyzed data using an inductive approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt et al., 2016). In the first step, we reviewed the primary and secondary data independently, highlighting the material reflecting migrant women entrepreneurs' perceptions of contextual factors. Then, we examined single cases, creating chronologically structured descriptions of each of the four firms with all relevant information. These documents comprised 10 pages per interviewee (a total of 40 pages) and provided a neatly arranged overview of each case. In this step, considering that the interviewees' responses were the most important source of information, two independent coders first read through the interviews and additional materials. Subsequently, they scanned them for emergent themes that appeared important to answer our research question (Reay & Zhang, 2014). In the second step, we followed the recommendations of Eisenhardt (1989) and conducted a cross-case analysis to identify common patterns and contradictions across the sample (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We iterated amongst case pairs to sharpen similarities and differences and form tentative relationships between constructs.

Furthermore, we shifted between empirical evidence and theory. As the theoretical framework grew more explicit, we compared it further with the literature to highlight similarities with and differences from prior research, strengthening internal validity and refining constructs and relationships (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Following this process, we surprisingly noted that the four interviewees experienced the intertwining between context and individual level in different ways. In the third step, we interpreted the data, achieving a strong match between the cases and emergent theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006; Eisenhardt, 1989). When the process was complete, we developed our emergent theoretical framework (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) grounded on analyzed data that suggested the emergence of two different responses that we labeled "individual perspective" and "business perspective".

4. Findings

Analyzing data, we noted that migrant female entrepreneurs paid attention to common themes, showing similarities and differences in how they express their individual levels, perceive contextual factors, and formulate their responses to difficulties.

In the following, we introduce the individual and contextual levels separately, and finally, we concentrate on their intertwined relationships.

4.1. *The individual level of analysis*

At the individual level, the prevalent themes of “self-esteem” and “self-efficacy” encompass various entrepreneurial skills, with autonomy being a notable component of self-esteem. This signifies that autonomy, reflecting the capacity for independent decision-making, is embedded within an individual’s sense of worth. Conversely, perseverance, proactivity, and creativity are integrated into self-efficacy, highlighting their dependence on a person’s belief in their capabilities. In summary, autonomy contributes to self-esteem, as emerges from the following quotes, emphasizing the importance of self-directed decisions, while perseverance, proactivity, and creativity thrive within the self-efficacy framework, emphasizing confidence in one’s entrepreneurial abilities.

“The awareness that I can help other women in my job excites me” (Case 1);

“I take pride in my abilities and contributions, knowing that my skills make a meaningful impact on my team’s success and uplift those around me.” (Case 1)

“When we see that our customers grow and grow, we feel even more joy and pride, because we realize that what we did, we did really well.” (Case 2);

“Celebrating the success of our clients is not just a testament to our proficiency but a source of pride. Witnessing their growth reinforces my belief in the value we bring, boosting my self-esteem and conviction in the impact of our endeavors.” (Case 3)

“Respect, listening, and relationship with clients and employees are the foundation of my work: it has always been greatly appreciated” (Case 3);

“I had clear ideas on my business idea: I knew what I wanted and also that it would take time to reach my goals” (Case 4).

The selected quotes highlight that the four migrant women entrepreneurs possess a quite high level of self-esteem and this helps them to achieve success in their entrepreneurial initiatives.

Concerning self-efficacy, which sounds to include perseverance, proactivity, and creativity, the migrant women entrepreneurs have sustained that:

“When the pandemic broke out, I thought, I had to do something, I couldn’t stay and do nothing. So, I started my entrepreneurial journey...” (Case 1);

“I’ve learned that true success stems from the unwavering belief in my capacity to learn, adapt, and conquer any endeavor I undertake.” (Case 2)

“There aren’t many jobs here, but I didn’t want to start from scratch, considering the sacrifice I made for my professional training” (Case 2);

“I have worked hard for my company: without expectations, but with the awareness of having given the best of me” (Case 3);

“In the face of challenges, my belief in my own capabilities fuels my determination to overcome obstacles and carve out success.” (Case 3)

“It was a long time before I could start my business: for years I did two jobs to get the necessary permits, but I never abandoned my dream” (Case 4)

“I approach each task with the confidence that my skills and knowledge will guide me to triumph, turning challenges into stepping stones for achievement.” (Case 4)

What emerges is the ability of the interviewees to rely on their own strengths to overcome the difficulties they encounter during their business activity. Result orientation and determination to achieve defined and ambitious goals, which we refer to as self-efficacy are very important factors in the success of these migrant entrepreneurs.

4.2. The context level of analysis

Referring to the context level, we noted two different perceptions, neutral or positive, and hostile, in terms of perceived opportunities and capabilities.

In the following, we selected interesting quotes highlighting how context is experienced as neutral or positive and, on the opposite side, when perceived as negative.

Concerning the first case, migrant women entrepreneurs told that:

“At first people consider my field of activity very superficial, but, when they see everything underneath, they rely completely and advise me to their acquaintances. That makes me very happy.” (Case 1)

“Here I am very well-liked; It’s nice to see your professionalism recognized, especially by the most distrustful customers.” (Case 2);

“In such a positive context, I’ve had the opportunity to grow my business in ways I never imagined. Diversity has been the key to my success here.” (Case 2)

“The support of the operators and the inhabitants of the area in which I operate has been very valuable, for me; if there is no acceptance, it is not possible to realize your enterprise. You may have golden hands, but without it, you can’t grow.” (Case 4)

“As a migrant entrepreneur, I’ve found a context that embraced my entrepreneurial vision with openness and support. The growth of my business has been made possible by this inclusive community.” (Case 4)

When the context is perceived as neutral or even welcoming and therefore positive, the interviewees perceive a sort of security and serenity in their activity and do not report particular issues.

Concerning the second case, the migrant woman entrepreneur that reported this negative feeling, expressed that:

“Here in Sardinia doing business is not very easy: there is a lot of distrust towards foreign entrepreneurs and especially Romanians.” (Case 3)

“I feel this island is hostile; there are numerous barriers, and the scarcity of available resources creates a challenging environment for growing my business.” (Case 3)

“In this adverse context, bringing my entrepreneurial venture to the forefront is challenging.” (Case 3)

In this case, the hostility of the context is experienced with concern by the woman who, despite having a successful entrepreneurial activity, is nonetheless worried about its future.

4.3. *The interplay between individual and context levels*

Carrying out our cross-case analysis and, thus, jointly analyzing the two levels, we noted that the interplay between individual and context levels generates two different responses based on an “individual perspective” and on a “business perspective”.

Specifically, when the context is perceived as hostile (only in one case), the individual level enhances its relevance by stimulating a response based on an “individual perspective” necessary to face the context’s negative challenges. This means that the migrant women entrepreneur, experiencing negative feelings from the context, builds her success by investing efforts and resources in the achievement of personal high skills, knowledge, and abilities. In other words, the response is a sort of “self-investment”, as emerges from the following meaningful quotes:

“I still have language problems and customers often correct me. I do my best to improve: I read a lot and I even tried to attend Italian courses, even if it is not easy to organize with working hours.” (Case 3)

“Sometimes customers think I’m trying to cheat them because I’m Romanian, but I try my best to learn everything about my job, so there’s nothing a client can ask me that I don’t know about. It’s very challenging, but if you don’t do that, it doesn’t work.” (Case 3)

“(…) in this adverse context, I refused to let it break my spirit. Instead, it became a driving force, compelling me to improve myself by honing my skills and capabilities, determined to prove my true value.” (Case 3)

Conversely, when the context is perceived as neutral or positive, the individual level tends to reinforce the context level by stimulating a response based on a “business perspective”. This means that migrant women entrepreneurs can focus on delineating and conceiving deliberate strategies to improve their entrepreneurial activity, discovering and spotting new business opportunities.

The following quotes can better explain the concept.

“I am very happy with the context in which I operate and how this has conditioned my initial entrepreneurial idea: leaving my comfort zone has allowed me to improve my professional competitiveness and to open up to new and even more stimulating markets.” (Case 1)

“The context appreciation allowed my self-esteem to soar, and the favorable conditions empowered me to invest in my business. This allowed me to seamlessly meet the evolving needs of increasingly discerning customers.” (Case 1)

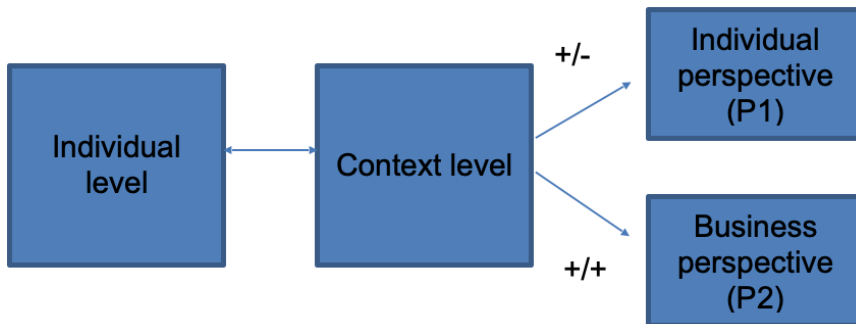
“I have a dream to keep growing and stay here because this is my only home now. Our goal is to buy the place where we are now renting and open a branch in a larger town.” (Case 2)

“People here are wonderful, but if I worked in another region, I think things would be better for my restaurant. I’d love to expand, but I don’t do long-term programs right now.” (Case 4)

“With a steadfast determination to expand my business, I aspire to transcend the island boundaries and reach new horizons. My vision extends beyond local borders, fueled by a relentless commitment to grow and make a meaningful impact on a global scale.” (Case 4)

Figure 1 summarizes the concepts:

Fig.1 The interpretive model



Source: author’s elaboration

As a result of our data interpretation, it is possible to suggest the following propositions:

P1. When the individual level is strong, and the perception of the context is negative, migrant women entrepreneurs tend to formulate a cognitive response based on an individual perspective

P2. When the individual level is strong, and the perception of the context is neutral or positive, migrant women entrepreneurs tend to formulate a cognitive response based on a business perspective

5. Discussions

This study, grounded in the embeddedness perspective with a specific focus on multiple embeddedness, delves into the coexistence of individual and contextual factors in the success of migrant women entrepreneurship. By employing a multi-case approach with a sample of four migrant female entrepreneurs, our analysis highlights the crucial role of self-esteem and self-efficacy at the individual level in achieving success. In contrast, other investigated entrepreneurial skills, such as perseverance, autonomy, proactivity, and creativity, did not emerge individually but manifested within self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Despite the importance of individual factors, the context level introduces a dichotomy, with perceptions ranging from neutrality or positivity to hostility, both in terms of perceived capabilities and opportunities. The intricate interplay between these levels demonstrates that when the individual level is robust and well-structured, particularly when migrant women entrepreneurs exhibit high levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, the significance of the context level diminishes, even in the face of perceived hostility.

In instances where the context is perceived as hostile, our findings show a distinctive cognitive response characterized by an individual perspective. This involves a focus on enhancing personal skills and knowledge to garner external approval, thereby mitigating potential negative effects arising from the unfavorable context—a phenomenon termed “internal empowerment.” Conversely, when both the individual and contextual levels are favorable, migrant women entrepreneurs shift their cognitive response toward a business perspective. In this scenario, they allocate resources to explore, identify, and capitalize on business opportunities, concentrating on the formulation of development strategies. This dual-level analysis offers a nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between individual and contextual factors, shedding light on the diverse cognitive responses and adaptive strategies employed by successful migrant women entrepreneurs.

5.1. *Implications and contributions*

The findings of our study show insightful scholarly and practical contributions, the study significantly enriches the literature in three critical dimensions for scholars.

First, we departed from Ahl’s (2006) framework by examining women’s entrepreneurship through novel lenses, particularly focusing on the context of migrant women’s entrepreneurship amidst the increasing global

migration trend. This was prompted by a recognized gap in the existing literature, especially within entrepreneurship studies (Ram et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Chreim et al., 2018). Consequently, our study actively contributes to the ongoing discourse in this field.

Additionally, following the suggestions of Minniti and Naudè (2010), this paper delved into the intricate interplay between individual and contextual dimensions. Specifically, we elucidate a nuanced understanding of migrant women's entrepreneurship by investigating the pivotal role of self-esteem and self-efficacy in countering negative perceived contextual factors. This outcome extends Johannisson's (2010) and Oosterbeek et al. (2010) findings regarding entrepreneurial skills. Our study reveals that, in our sample, self-esteem encompasses autonomy, while self-efficacy encompasses perseverance, proactivity, and creativity, none of which emerge as distinct entrepreneurial skills. This revelation contributes to a more profound comprehension of the multifaceted influences shaping entrepreneurial endeavors.

Secondly, our study builds upon the findings of Noguera et al. (2013), revealing that two distinct cognitive responses emerge when examining perceived contextual opportunities and capabilities in conjunction with the individual level. On the one hand, an individual perspective surfaces, fueled by self-investment, particularly evident in hostile contexts where individual factors actively counteract negative contextual effects, specifically those related to negatively perceived opportunities. On the other hand, a business perspective takes form, marked by intentional, strategic actions. This becomes particularly pronounced in neutral or friendly contexts where individual factors collaboratively amplify positive contextual effects, perceived positively in terms of both capabilities and opportunities. This dual perspective enhances the granularity of our understanding of how entrepreneurial decisions and behaviors unfold across diverse environments.

Thirdly, our intentional decision to position our study within the framework of mixed embeddedness holds significant importance. This perspective, aligned with prior studies (Chreim, 2018; Livola, 2014; De Vita et al., 2014), and currently undervalued in entrepreneurship studies, enables us to examine female immigrant entrepreneurship comprehensively and opens avenues to enrich the discourse in this research domain. By delving into the intricate interplay of entrepreneurial actors and their integration into social networks, along with the politico-institutional and socio-economic fabric of the host country, our aim is to offer a more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in female immigrant entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, we assert that the mixed embeddedness perspective provides a unique lens for researchers to explore the multifaceted dimensions of this phenomenon. It enriches our study and encourages further explora-

tion into the dynamic interactions between immigrant entrepreneurs and their socio-cultural contexts. This approach calls upon scholars to embrace the depth and richness that mixed embeddedness can bring to the forefront of discussions on female immigrant entrepreneurship.

From a practical standpoint, our findings hold the potential to catalyze transformative shifts within the entrepreneurial landscape. Migrant women entrepreneurs, practitioners, consultants, and their peers stand to benefit not only from practical solutions but also from the opportunity to redefine and elevate their entrepreneurial strategies.

By proactively engaging with the identified key factors, these individuals can position themselves as innovators and change-makers, fostering resilience and adaptability in the face of challenges. This proactive approach dismantles existing barriers and sets the stage for pioneering solutions that contribute to a more dynamic and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

For policymakers, the study presents a compelling argument for strategic investment in tailored entrepreneurship education programs. Such programs have the power to not only uplift the individual capabilities of migrant women entrepreneurs but also to shape a broader narrative of empowerment and inclusivity. By championing these initiatives, policymakers can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of entrepreneurship, reinforcing their commitment to social and economic progress.

Ultimately, the study's call to action addresses immediate concerns and fosters a paradigm shift in how we perceive and support migrant women entrepreneurs. The collective implementation of these recommendations has the potential to create a ripple effect, positively influencing the entrepreneurial landscape on both individual and systemic levels. This vision aligns with a future where diverse voices, talents, and perspectives converge to create a truly thriving and inclusive entrepreneurial environment.

5.2. Limitations

This study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing successful entrepreneurship among migrant women. However, it is important to acknowledge and address several limitations that may impact our findings. These limitations should be viewed as a suitable starting point for new studies, allowing for a contemporary exploration and refinement of the research in this field.

Firstly, the limited sample size represents a significant constraint. While our findings provide valuable insights, the generalizability of these conclusions is inherently limited by the relatively small sample. Future studies with more extensive and more diverse samples can enhance the external validity of our findings, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the factors at play in migrant women entrepreneurship.

Secondly, a notable limitation lies in omitting an analysis of the effects of company size. While comprehensive in many aspects, our study neglects to explore the potential impacts that variations in company size can have on the identified factors influencing migrant women entrepreneurship. Incorporating company size as a variable in future research endeavors would provide a more nuanced understanding of how the identified factors interact within businesses of different magnitudes.

Thirdly, the intentional regional focus of our sample, a choice made by the authors, may affect the generalizability of our conclusions to broader contexts. Cultural, economic, and social nuances unique to this particular region may influence entrepreneurial dynamics differently from other locations. Therefore, caution is warranted when extending our results to migrant women entrepreneurs in diverse regional or cultural settings.

Furthermore, future research endeavors could explore the development of measurable indexes and indicators to assess the validity and reliability of the suggested propositions. This approach would not only strengthen the empirical foundation of our study but also contribute to establishing standardized metrics for evaluating similar phenomena in diverse contexts.

Additionally, we recommend that subsequent studies consider adopting a longitudinal approach within the same sample to investigate the potential influence of time on the identified factors. Examining these dynamics over an extended period would provide valuable insights into the temporal evolution of the factors influencing successful migrant women entrepreneurship. In summary, while our study offers a valuable starting point, these limitations underscore the need for continued exploration and refinement in future research efforts.

6. Conclusions

In seeking to unravel the factors underpinning successful entrepreneurship among migrant women, this study has illuminated the intricate interplay between individual and contextual elements, giving rise to distinct cognitive responses characterized by both an 'individual perspective' and a 'business perspective.' Notably, our exploration delves into the realm of female entrepreneurship through a micro-economic and corporate lens, a departure from the more commonplace discourse that predominantly frames the issue within the context of inclusion. Our focus extends beyond the broader debate surrounding inclusion to a nuanced examination of the peculiarities within business models, as exemplified by the case at hand.

A key strength of this study lies in its novelty within the landscape of business economics literature. The investigation navigates through un-

charted territories, shedding light on aspects of migrant women entrepreneurship that have received scant attention in scholarly discourse. By bringing these nuances to the forefront, our findings enrich and expand existing knowledge, paving the way for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

Beyond its scholarly implications, the insights gleaned from our research hold practical significance. The conclusions drawn herein carry the potential to inform and guide policymakers at a supranational level. By embracing a micro-economic and corporate logic in the discourse on female entrepreneurship, policymakers can develop targeted strategies that not only foster the full inclusion of migrants within communities but also address the social challenges stemming from inadequate inclusion. In doing so, these findings offer a valuable resource for shaping policies that promote economic empowerment, social cohesion, and the overall well-being of migrant women entrepreneurs.

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Appendix A – The interview protocol

Part I – Demographic details

Name and Surname
Country of Origin
Age
Educational Background
Marital Status
Children
Company
Sector
Year of Foundation
Revenue

Part II – Introduction

Can you express your personal experience in the business realm?
What are the main motivations that lead to starting your business?
Please explain the company's story (how it started, why, your initial intentions, satisfactions, disappointments, interesting and significant anecdotes, etc.)

Part III – Individual level

Reflecting on your journey, what personal qualities or skills do you think have been crucial for your success?

Self-esteem

How do you perceive your own abilities and effectiveness in running your business?

Autonomy

How confident are you in making decisions and handling tasks independently without needing constant guidance in your business?

Proactivity

Can you share how you take the lead and make things happen in your business, especially when faced with new opportunities or challenges?

Self-efficacy

How confident do you generally feel in your ability to navigate and succeed in the various aspects of your business?

Perseverance

Can you share a story where your perseverance or determination played a significant role in overcoming a challenge?

Creativity

In your business, how self-assured do you feel when it comes to thinking creatively and finding unique solutions to various challenges?

Part IV – Contextual level

Do you believe that your country of origin has influenced your entrepreneurial choice?

Do you think the context in which you operate influences your way of doing business?

Thinking about the environment in which your business operates, what aspects of the community or culture have influenced your approach?

Perceived opportunities

How do you perceive the opportunities available for entrepreneurs like yourself in your community?

Can you share any experiences where you felt supported (or unsupported) by the socio-cultural environment in your business endeavors?

Perceived capabilities

When considering your business and the community, how do you see the relationship between your capabilities and the opportunities you believe exist?

Part V – Main Challenges and Future Vision

Is there anything else you want to share regarding your journey as an entrepreneur or the factors influencing your business?

Do you believe there are challenges in your role as an entrepreneur? If yes, how do you deal with them?

How do you see your company in 5 years?

How do you see yourself in 5 years?