

# The Double-Edged Sword: A Systematic Review of the Negative Effects of High Emotional Intelligence on Women Entrepreneur Success

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## Abstract:

### ➤ Purpose:

While Emotional Intelligence (EI) is widely praised as a critical competency for entrepreneurial success, this article argues that its utility is not gender-neutral. This review applies a gender lens to examine the implications under which high EI may generate unintended professional and psychological costs for women entrepreneurs.

### ➤ Design/Methodology/Approach:

A systematic review of peer-reviewed literature from 1990 to the present was conducted across major business, psychology, and sociology databases. Keywords included “emotional intelligence,” “women entrepreneurs,” “gender stereotypes,” “emotional labor,” “entrepreneurial success,” and “downsides of EI.”

### ➤ Findings:

A close reading of the literature suggests that high EI can, in practice, generate a set of interrelated challenges for women entrepreneurs. These challenges include intensified expectations to assume emotional caretaking roles, an increased burden of ongoing emotional regulation within the venture, and persistent internal tension between empathic orientations and norms of assertive entrepreneurial leadership.

### ➤ Originality/Value:

This article challenges the universally positive narrative surrounding EI in entrepreneurship. By applying a gendered lens, it contributes a critical perspective to the literature, highlighting that for women entrepreneurs, high EI can function as a double-edged sword, simultaneously enabling relationship-building while creating unique professional and personal costs. The review calls for a more nuanced understanding of EI and provides recommendations for future research, training, and support systems.

**Keywords:** Emotional Intelligence, Women Entrepreneurship, Gender Stereotypes, Emotional Labor, Entrepreneurial Success, Identity Strain.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is widely conceptualized as the ability to identify, interpret, and regulate emotional information in oneself and others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Within entrepreneurship research, EI is frequently associated with relational competencies such as team coordination, stakeholder negotiation, and customer insight, which are often linked to venture performance outcomes (Baron, 2008). As a result, EI has become a prominent focus within entrepreneurship education and leadership development initiatives.

However, much of this narrative implicitly assumes that EI operates similarly across genders, an assumption that warrants closer examination within entrepreneurial contexts. Social and professional expectations for men and women differ significantly, and the enactment of EI is deeply embedded within these gendered environments. For women entrepreneurs, the proficiency associated with high EI can, paradoxically, generate distinct challenges. This article systematically reviews the literature to argue that high EI may carry unintended challenges for women entrepreneurs, manifesting as constrained leadership effectiveness, increased emotional labor, and identity-related strain.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EI IN A GENDERED CONTEXT

The enactment of EI is embedded within broader social structures, particularly gender role expectations that associate women with communal attributes and men with agentic behaviors (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These normative expectations contribute to a persistent leadership dilemma for women, who may face competing evaluations depending on how closely their behavior aligns with or deviates from prescribed gender norms (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Women generally score higher than men in dimensions such as empathy and emotional awareness, reflecting socialization processes that encourage emotional attentiveness and relational orientation (Andrews, 2024; Kitsios et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2021). When women demonstrate high levels of EI, these behaviors are frequently interpreted through a communal lens rather than as deliberate leadership practices. Although such interpretations can support interpersonal harmony, they also tend to generate expectations that women will absorb relational and emotional responsibilities that are not equally imposed on male entrepreneurs exhibiting comparable emotional competencies.

## III. THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS: A TRIPARTITE MODEL

Integrating this literature suggests three interlocking patterns by which high EI could, in specific contexts, negatively impact women's entrepreneurial performance rather than improve it.

### ➤ *The "Caretaking Trap" and Role Encroachment*

Women entrepreneurs with high EI tend to be extremely sensitive to the emotions of workers, customers, and business partners. While this trait can increase trust and teamwork, it may also lead to role encroachment, where the entrepreneur is seen as the natural emotional caretaker of the business.

Research on the "office housework" and emotional labor literature suggests that women are expected to handle interpersonal conflict and maintain a positive emotional tone (Babcock et al., 2017). For women entrepreneurs, this kind of behind-the-scenes work can be cognitively taxing and time-consuming, shifting focus away from key areas such as financial management, business growth, and innovation. This can lead to entrepreneurial burnout and limit venture scalability, as the founder's emotional capacity becomes an informal organizational bottleneck.

### ➤ *The Emotional Labor Tax*

Emotional labor, as conceptualized by Hochschild (1983), can be defined as the deliberate management of one's expressions of emotion in order to live up to certain display rules that are socially or professionally approved. Women entrepreneurs with high EI are likely to experience this kind of labor. They are likely to feel the need to display positivity, repress frustration, and take in the emotional ups and downs

of others in order to create a positive atmosphere and live up to the gendered norms of professionalism.

Previous studies have found that similar displays of negative emotions have more serious implications for women leaders than for men (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). This study found that men who expressed anger at work were often rewarded or experienced status gains, whereas women who expressed anger were penalized in terms of perceived competence and status — demonstrating that negative emotional displays have more harmful consequences for women leaders than for men. This means that women entrepreneurs with high EI are likely to experience more self-monitoring and emotional regulation, which can be referred to as an "emotional labor tax." This sustained effort can contribute to emotional exhaustion, stress, and a sense of inauthenticity, commonly described as emotional dissonance.

### ➤ *Identity Strain and the Assertiveness Penalty*

The intrapersonal aspects of EI, such as self-awareness and self-regulation, can also lead to internal conflict. Women entrepreneurs may understand that in some situations, they need to be tough, decisive, or take actions that are not popular. However, taking such agentic stances can be in conflict with the communal expectations linked to gender and high EI.

Being assertive can put women leaders at risk of social punishment for violating norms, while being relationally oriented can impair perceptions of decisiveness or leadership legitimacy. This creates identity strain (Kreiner et al., 2006), as women face challenges in reconciling expectations related to empathy and leadership. This can lead to chronic stress, decision paralysis, and leadership practices that are viewed as inconsistent, ultimately impeding strategic progress.

## IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Cumulatively, the evidence reviewed in this section suggests that the correlation between EI and entrepreneurial success is far more complex for women than has been suggested by the prevailing discourses. The simplistic celebration of EI as a straightforward positive quality ignores the gendered contexts in which emotional skills are performed. For women entrepreneurs, high EI can enable relationship-building while also enticing excessive emotional demands and inner turmoil.

### ➤ *Theoretical Implications*

This analysis highlights the importance of developing more contingent theories of EI in the field of entrepreneurship that take gender as a moderating variable. Rather than encouraging the indiscriminate development of EI, future research should investigate the circumstances under which particular emotional competencies are advantageous or disadvantageous. This would enable a more refined understanding of the relationship between EI and structural and cultural constraints.

### ➤ Practical Implications

#### • For Educators and Coaches:

Entrepreneurship education should extend beyond EI skill development to include strategies for managing emotional boundaries, delegating emotional labor, and navigating gendered leadership expectations.

#### • For Investors and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems:

Mentors, accelerators, and investors should recognize how gendered interpretations of leadership behavior may influence evaluations of women entrepreneurs. Creating spaces for open discussion of these dynamics can help counteract implicit bias.

#### • For Women Entrepreneurs:

Developing strategic self-awareness involves recognizing not only the benefits of high EI but also its potential costs. Selectively deploying empathy while protecting cognitive and emotional resources may support both venture performance and personal well-being.

## V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This review integrates the existing literature to make the case that high levels of EI can have substantial and frequently overlooked costs for women entrepreneurs. These costs are realized through role encroachment, increased demands for emotional labor, and identity-related strain. Through the lens of these frequently overlooked consequences of EI, this review encourages a reevaluation of the assumptions that have been made about the construct.

Future studies should seek to examine the relationships outlined in this review through longitudinal and cross-cultural research. There are many questions that still need to be answered in terms of how the context of industry, culture, and identity influence the experience of EI for women entrepreneurs. Further research will continue to help to clarify the construct of EI as a contextualized and not universally positive entrepreneurial competency.

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