

Gendered Barriers and Opportunities in Entrepreneurship and Innovation

Alena Křížková, Marie Pospíšilová, Romana Marková Volejníčková and Markéta Švarcová
Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic

Alena.krizkova@soc.cas.cz

marie.pospisilova@soc.cas.cz

romana.volejnickova@soc.cas.cz

Marketa.svarcova@soc.cas.cz

Abstract: Understanding the gendered barriers and opportunities to entrepreneurship and innovation is crucial to developing effective solutions and strategies to overcome existing barriers. The theory of gendered innovation and the three strategic approaches to gender equality are used to investigate gendered barriers, opportunities and good practices for gender equality in entrepreneurship and innovation in EU countries. A total of 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed in 10 European countries with experts from the quadruple helix (academia, citizens, industry and government). Our findings suggest that the main barriers are related to the cultural and social environment in which men and women are gender stereotyped which is in line with existing research on the male norm in entrepreneurship and the important role of the cultural context. Building on the theory of three strategic approaches to gender equality we suggest focusing on culture in further theoretical development, research and policy recommendations to effectively reduce barriers and promote inclusive entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems.

Keywords: Gender in Entrepreneurship and Innovation; Strategic Approaches to Gender Equality; Gendered Barriers, Good Practices.

1. Introduction

While more women than men in the EU Member States now have tertiary education, their representation in entrepreneurship and innovation is characterised by systematic structural gender inequalities. In the EU Member States, women represented 47% of all entrepreneurs and 51% of all self-employed in the second quarter of 2024, while only 37% of entrepreneurs with employees were women (Eurostat). In science and innovation, women make up 48% of PhD graduates, but only 33% of researchers and only 25% of the self-employed among science, engineering and ICT professionals in EU Member States (European Commission 2021). Gender equality is a key European value, and gender diversity brings the necessary variety of perspectives and experiences to the small business, research and innovation ecosystems that drive the European economy. Gender inequality and the lack of gender diversity in these sectors are therefore systemic problems for the European market, society and culture that require systematic and complex solutions. Previous research has identified key challenges to gender equality in entrepreneurship and innovation in the very definition of entrepreneurship and innovation and in wider structural inequalities in the labour market. Entrepreneurship and innovation are still understood as individual activities, mostly carried out by individuals with masculine characteristics (Ahl 2006; Marlow, Martinez Dy 2018), whereas feminist research points to the need to focus on a broader context (household perspective) of entrepreneurship and to take an intersectional perspective on entrepreneurs (Romero, Valdez 2016). Furthermore, the definition of the products of entrepreneurship and innovation needs to move away from technical and economic to more social and 'real life' solutions to everyday challenges. Entrepreneurship also needs to be understood in the context of the availability of standard employment contracts, as well as the availability of work-care arrangements in the wider labour market, and attention should be paid to informal entrepreneurs and the division of work and care roles within enterprises and households involved in entrepreneurship and innovation (Marlow, Martinez Dy 2018). More and better data are needed.

With use of structural inequality, entrepreneurial agency and strategic approaches to gender equality theories and qualitative methodology of expert semi-structured interviews this paper asks what are the main barriers, opportunities and good practices for gender equality in entrepreneurship and innovation that experts identify in 10 EU countries. The main contribution of this paper is the finding that culture is the basis of gendered inequalities in entrepreneurship and demonstration that theoretically contextualised knowledge of gendered barriers and opportunities for entrepreneurship and innovation, as well as further theoretical development, is crucial to better conceptualise and propose solutions and strategies to overcome existing gendered barriers.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Entrepreneurial Agency, Positionality and Structural Inequality

Mainstream entrepreneurship theory ignores the social structures that shape entrepreneurial opportunities and portrays entrepreneurship as an individual activity based on agency and meritocracy. Based on this assumption, entrepreneurship is then seen as a viable means of overcoming disadvantage. However, access to resources is socially distributed, for example through family loans and inheritance (Martinez Dy, 2020). The entrepreneurship norm is dominated by well-educated, urbanised white Anglo-American or European males. Those who reflect the norm tend to have greater access to privileges such as elite education, managerial experience, personal wealth, powerful social networks and attributions of masculinity, all of which serve to enact entrepreneurial agency. Conversely, the further individuals and groups are from the norm - the less urban, white, male and wealthy - the more marginal they are (Ahl, 2006; Marlow, Martinez Dy, 2018). It is also assumed that social and financial disadvantage can be overcome through a combination of innovative opportunities and hard work, suggesting that entrepreneurship is characterised by the removal of constraints (Rindova et al. 2009). These expectations and attributions then lead to reduced access to resources and fewer opportunities, including in entrepreneurship. We therefore need to understand these widespread patterns of inequality, marginality and disadvantage as structural (Martinez Dy 2020).

Intersectionality theory has emerged as an approach to understanding the interaction of categories of inequality (Crenshaw 1993; Hancock 2016), such as race, gender, class and sexuality (Nash 2008), as opposed to separate analyses of women, ethnic minorities, etc. This approach captures the social location of an entrepreneur in a more complex way (Romero, Valdez 2016). Social location (Anthias 2013) and the context in which the entrepreneurial process is pursued give rise to the concept of social positionality (Essers, Benschop 2009; Marlow, Martinez Dy 2018). Anthias (2013) defines positionality as the space at the intersection of structure (social position/social effects) and agency (meaning and practice). Entrepreneurial agency is the result of the interaction of social structure (systems of relationships between social positions) and culture (belief and ideology systems - stereotypes, media images, etc.). Positionality emphasises these concepts and in particular access to resources as a result of the interaction of social structure and culture. Cultural context and intersectional perspectives are considered to be critically important elements of entrepreneurship research (Marlow, Martinez Dy 2018).

2.2 Theory of Gendered Innovations and Three Strategic Approaches to Gender Equality

How can gendered, intersectional and contextual inequalities be theoretically captured? Gendered Innovations is a transatlantic project developed jointly by Stanford University and the EU Commission/ GD Research. From the outset, the project, led by Londa Schiebinger (Schiebinger, Klinge eds. 2010), has been closely linked to Europe's overall ambitions as a global technology and innovation leader, and has addressed three strategic approaches taken by universities and research institutions over the past decades to create a gender-inclusive innovation and entrepreneurship strategy. The three strategic approaches identified by this project represent a shorthand for concepts, methods and strategies.

The first strategic approach, which focuses on increasing the participation of women and underrepresented groups in existing structures and on statistical underrepresentation, is called "fix the numbers". With its focus on individual-level strategies and education (Kabeer, Natalii 2013; Burkinshaw, White 2017), this approach has evolved into a "business feminism" model based on rational/economic arguments.

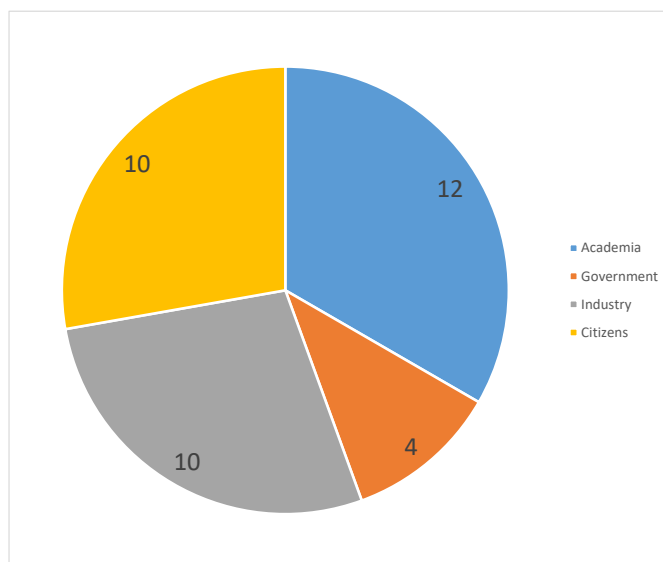
The second approach addresses structures that are unfriendly to women and families and calls for changes to institutions and services (Recalde, Vesterlund 2020). "Fix the Institutions" promotes inclusive equality in careers through structural change in organisations, through procedures such as gender quotas and gender equality plans. This approach values the social experiences of women and other groups and is linked to standpoint/societal feminism.

The third approach, which focuses on excellence in science and technology by integrating sex, gender and intersectional analysis into research, sees gender as a cultural construction. The "fix the knowledge" approach aims to promote the gender dimension in research evaluation and to improve knowledge through gender-disaggregated data and analysis and intersectional analysis.

3. Data and Methodology

Our analysis is based on 36 semi-structured interviews with experts in the area of entrepreneurship and innovation and women's support. The interviews were collected by 13 GILL¹ project partners, 1-5 interviews in each of the 10 consortium countries (Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Romania, Spain, United Kingdom) between April and June 2023. The experts represented all four areas of the quadruple helix (see Figure 1). Informed consent was obtained from all the participants, and the interviews were anonymised. The participants were recruited with use of the snowball technique used by interviewers and the average duration of the interviews was one hour. The interviews were conducted in the national language and common analysis templates were completed for each interview in English. The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide developed by the authors so that it could be adapted during the interviews based on the context and area of work and interest of the interviewee. The interview guide focused on barriers, opportunities and good practices for gender equality in entrepreneurship and innovation. The analysis used the 'structural reading' approach described by Erel (2007), which focuses on analysing the impact of social structures on people and institutions. During the analysis with use of uniform analytical templates for each interview, collected good practices were coded according to the three strategic approaches to gender equality outlined above. Our findings section is divided into two analytical parts: first, barriers and opportunities, and second, good practices, followed by conclusions and further research ideas.

Figure 1: The sample of the experts interviewed by quadruple helix areas.



4. Findings

4.1 Barriers and Opportunities

4.1.1 Barriers and Risks

The most important barriers mentioned by most experts were those related to culture, values and norms, especially those related to gendered norms. Thus, the main barriers were those related to gender stereotypes and expectations, behaviour expected of women and men, values expressed in language, unconscious biases used in different situations, etc. For example, many experts spoke about prejudice, gender-insensitive language, androcentrism - where masculine characteristics are seen as the norm against which women are measured. Some experts mentioned the intersectionality of personal characteristics - gender, race or ethnicity, education, etc. - which reinforces and multiplies the disadvantages women face in the labour market, in entrepreneurship, in innovation and in society at large, including in private life.

¹ Gendered Innovation Living Labs – GILL is an EU-funded project addressing gender and diversity blindness in the Living Lab discourse and practices. Funded by the European Union (GILL, 101094812) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under the UK government's Horizon Europe funding guarantee [grant number 10049511].

In particular, digital transformation experts described biases against women in male-dominated industries and the stereotype about women's lack of technical skills, such as engineering, or leadership; prejudices that can lead to discrimination in funding, hiring, partnerships and recognition. They also point to the fact that innovation developers are predominantly white men and that gender stereotypes are replicated in the development and use of digital technologies and AI. This is manifested in language, job descriptions that suit men, and a focus or narrow definition of innovation as only technical. As a result, the experts see low confidence in women entrepreneurs in ICT, under-representation of women in IT start-ups and, as a consequence, poorer access of women to finance to support their businesses and innovation.

Experts working in the field of business environment support, innovation, and support for women entrepreneurs, etc. mentioned in particular the male bias in entrepreneurship and innovation. They expressed that entrepreneurship is too focused on economic growth, financial gain, risk and competition, which are not values traditionally associated with femininity in our culture. This leads to comparisons where women's entrepreneurship, which often doesn't share these values, is perceived as inferior, less successful and less prestigious than men's. Other experts also mentioned unsystematic support for women's enterprises (e.g. start-ups) or a lack of support/promotion of women specifically in entrepreneurship and innovation. Furthermore, in relation to gender stereotypes and male bias in entrepreneurship and innovation, experts identified the problem that women (and even more so, for example, women with a migrant background) are often treated as exceptions to the rule. This happens informally, as they are often in a token position in various situations, or even formally, as various support mechanisms are designed for women only, perpetuating the stereotype that women need special support.

Another issue was the lack of gender sensitivity and willingness to address the issue of gender inequality at different levels. On the one hand, it was discussed as a lower gender sensitivity to structural causes of gender inequalities of men compared to women. On the other hand, less willingness to discuss gender equality was also noted, as some groups, such as students, expressed the feeling that the problem had already been widely discussed without significant progress.

In relation to the cultural and gendered setting of society and masculine bias, another important issue raised in the interviews was the role of socialisation in leading women to the false belief that they are incapable of learning/performing difficult tasks (e.g. being good at IT and other masculine fields). It was pointed out that from a very early age we are exposed to gender stereotypes, which are also embedded in social institutions, and we act and judge others according to them. Socialisation was often linked to the low percentage of women in typically male fields of study (IT, technology, science such as physics, mathematics, etc., the so-called STEM fields) and gender segregation, which is also reflected in the labour market in general.

Horizontal and vertical gender segregation was identified as another strong barrier, already present in the education system, but also significantly present in the labour market and in the economy. Women are disadvantaged not only in the areas in which they work and do business, but also because they are under-represented in decision-making and leadership positions (both at business and political level) and because important decisions are taken without taking into account women's life experiences. In general, gender segregation in the labour market and in business is underpinned by gender stereotypes, socialisation, women's isolation (in a highly masculinised environment) and women's lack of networks and access to men's clubs.

Some experts, specifically in the context of entrepreneurship, pointed to women's lower willingness to take risks (e.g. to consider loans). In particular, experts focusing on supporting women in male-dominated fields point to women's lower self-confidence and the fact that women often believe that they have no chance of succeeding in certain fields. In this context, experts discuss the lack of mentors and role models to show women that they can succeed in masculinised fields and that they have the knowledge and skills to do so.

Barriers related to policies to reconcile work and family life and the gender division of labour in the home were mentioned, in particular that women are expected to take on a greater share of caring responsibilities and therefore reduce their work activity; if they refuse, they are criticised for being bad mothers. It was also reflected that family and social policy frameworks, such as the conditions and support for maternity/parental/paternity leave, also affect the real life of families and can reproduce gender stereotypes. Discrimination against women with children in the labour market has also been described, particularly in access to typically male fields such as ICT.

Another important barrier is the lack of political will and commitment to promote gender equality and diversity. In particular, it was highlighted that the issue of gender equality is not perceived as a crucial issue for politicians.

Furthermore, where there are already efforts by political representatives and stakeholders to promote gender equality and diversity, change is too slow. The under-representation of women in politics was also identified as a problem.

Lack of support for women entrepreneurs and innovators, such as lack of infrastructure and support for women entering male-dominated fields and lack of inclusive programmes, as well as lack of support from their own families, were identified as important barriers by the experts interviewed. A related important barrier is the lack of access to finance, microfinance and other types of funding for women entrepreneurs and for different types of support organisations and projects. Almost all experts have experience with grant funding (often EU funding, national grant competitions, etc.) for projects and activities promoting gender equality. When they do find and successfully obtain funding for their activities, it is usually short-term funding, which makes it impossible to implement long-term activities after the end of the project and to sustain long-term support for specific gender equality issues.

The prevailing view among experts is still that the most important barriers are related to the cultural and social environment of society, where gender stereotypes prevail, and men and women are expected to perform different activities and have different levels of commitment in the family and at work/business. This also influences what actions, strategies or opportunities they see as important to strengthen gender equality and promote gender diversity.

4.1.2 Opportunities

The most frequently mentioned opportunity was the need for cultural change, for example through the use of female role models. There was also a strong call for gender awareness-raising at different levels (awareness-raising activities and campaigns, training programmes, etc.) and for different actors (workplace management, men and people working in different support and funding structures). Benefits have also been seen in promoting gender diversity at organisational level (companies, universities, etc.). Creating opportunities for under-represented groups to network, share experiences and talk openly about challenges, and increasing communication and sharing of results were called for by the experts representing citizens. These measures were seen by some experts as an opportunity for entrepreneurship and innovation, as an interviewee from the digital industry in Romania pointed out: "Having more women in this field also means that digital products will be better adapted to female markets and buyers".

Policies that directly promote the inclusion of women in innovation were another area where barriers could be removed. Policies have been proposed in different areas, such as gender quotas in political and economic decision-making. It is important to note that the level of debate on gender quotas varies between countries. While in many countries gender quotas are implemented in practice in politics and business, in Spain and the Czech Republic, for example, the debate on gender quotas still leads to tensions and discussions about compromising meritocracy. Other concrete measures mentioned were positive action, equality certificates, promotion of inclusive practices and gender mainstreaming in strategic and equality plans, etc. European gender equality policies are seen as a good starting point and a very useful tool for transforming the gender order in society and for change at national, company and local levels. For example, the requirement for all institutions applying for EU-funded projects to have a gender equality strategy has been highly valued as an impetus for change in many universities and research institutions. The inclusion of gender diversity in research teams and gender equality in the content of research as criteria for project evaluation is also an effective way of increasing the representation of women and attention to gender equality in innovation.

The experts interviewed supported emerging support systems for women entrepreneurs (e.g. mentoring programmes, networking, building women's self-esteem and an inclusive leadership model) at all stages of their entrepreneurial career, not just for start-ups. Digital skills were also identified as very important and an area where these measures would be very beneficial. Focusing on the younger generation and supporting them to start new ventures and innovations, supporting women to enter non-traditional fields of study and to start careers in STEM and ICT sectors through talent retention measures as well as the use of social media and role models were also identified by experts as valuable measures. In addition to networking and support for education and training, financial support was identified as an important development opportunity. Financial resources, such as micro-credits, targeted at women and other under-represented groups were called for by experts.

An important area of opportunity discussed was work-life balance and the need to normalise the model of women combining paid work and care, as well as men providing care.

The very definition of innovation was also discussed and challenged, again in relation to the cultural context. For a long time, innovation has been understood as more technical and taking place in the private sphere, whereas women predominate in public sector employment and innovation could also be non-technical, for example social.

4.2 Good Practices

It is possible to classify the good practices that were collected in the expert interviews into the three strategic approaches to gender equality that have been developed and used in previous research. However, it is important to recognise that all three levels of analysis are necessary and interrelated, as efforts to increase women's participation will not be successful without integrating methods of sex and gender analysis into knowledge production (Schiebinger, Klinge eds. 2010). Based on the 36 interviews collected, 41 good practices were identified and described, which can be grouped into the three strategic approaches defined above.

4.2.1 Fix the Numbers

There were 29 (out of 41) good practices that can be summarised in the category "Fix the numbers". These good practices mostly focus on training and empowerment of women in terms of supporting women's self-confidence, developing specific skills, especially those that will help them to succeed in business, providing a safe space for discussion and exchange of experiences, including between junior and senior entrepreneurs, etc. These good practices also focused on the representation of women, mostly in occupations or fields where women are underrepresented.

Good practises included these activities:

- Organising events, meetings, etc. of women (entrepreneurs, academics, women in IT, etc.) either with other women with similar life experiences or with women in senior positions who can provide advice on how to develop their careers. These meetings, therefore, include female role models as a method as well. The main objective of the events and meetings is to support and share knowledge for women while raising awareness of the successes and challenges women face in the specific field.
- Communication campaigns aimed at presenting women in leadership positions as role models to encourage other women to work in masculinised fields and in leadership positions.
- Competitions and training programmes focusing on providing women with specific skills to improve and expand their businesses.
- Some good practices focused on networking - not just the meeting, but targeted networking, e.g. between businesswomen and investors. One good practice focused on networking between immigrant women and potential employers.
- Specific projects at the company level or projects realized by NGOs aimed at increasing the number of women (who are under-represented), usually in masculinised fields, such as IT.

4.2.2 Fix the Institution

Another group included nine good practices (out of 41) focusing on changing structures/policies aiming at breaking down structural barriers in institutions, mainly workplaces. This type of fix focuses on institutions and organisations where changes should take place to promote gender equality (Recalde, Vesterlund 2020). Since 2010, the European Commission has moved towards promoting gender equality at the institutional level in funding projects, encouraging research organisations and universities to implement multi-annual action plans to address institutional barriers, such as recruitment, promotion and retention policies, management and research evaluation standards, and work-life balance policies. In line with this development, six of the nine good practices were identified by experts in the field of higher education, as the focus of the good practices was mainly on academic institutions setting up gender equality committees and developing gender equality strategies and plans.

Good practised included these activities:

- Gender equality plans, gender equality policies and quotas for the under-represented gender. These activities aim to increase the number of women in certain positions within the institutions, such as senior management, but also to increase gender diversity and strengthen gender equality in other areas of the organisations.

- Some good practices focused on a specific group, intending to identify their needs, design, and develop policies and other activities to support their better working conditions. An example is a good practice focusing on migrant women in agriculture in Italy, which also adopts an intersectional perspective.

The aim was also to improve working conditions and to motivate companies to employ, for example, women with caring responsibilities, thus adapting working conditions to this specific group of workers (and generally increasing the number of people in a vulnerable position on the labour market).

These good practices focus not only on improving the situation of a specific group but also on institutional change at the level of private companies or universities, e.g. a good practice focused on the creation of gender commissions or associations that identify essential issues in the promotion of gender equality and diversity and propose measures to address them. Within private companies, it may be a specific HR measure aimed at a particular group of workers (e.g. carers). At the level of cities and municipalities, good practices focus on identifying the needs of different groups living in a city according to their gender, age, health status or living situation, intending to meet these needs in the further development of the city.

4.2.3 Fix the Knowledge

Three good practices fall into the category of 'embedding knowledge' or 'gendered innovation', which promotes excellence in science and technology by integrating sex, gender and intersectional analysis into research. Two of the three practices were identified by experts from academia and one by an expert from the government. These specific and complex projects require many human and financial resources, as well as a significant knowledge base, and are therefore better suited to government and university actors.

Good practises analysed included:

- Two good practices focused on tackling male bias and promoting gender equality in grant competitions and application assessment procedures. National Foundations for applied research in Italy and Czechia encourage gender equality by requiring that submitted applications have a gender-balanced team, evaluating the impact of the project and its results on men/women and generally introducing gender equality as a criterion in the evaluation of research projects.
- The third good practice in this category is based in the UK at Coventry University, where research has focused on improving knowledge of health inequalities, particularly in preterm birth. The project uses an intersectional analysis, collecting data from various participants at the intersection of gender, race and ethnicity.

5. Conclusions and Further Research

The aim of this paper was to identify barriers, opportunities and good practices for gender equality in entrepreneurship and innovation from the perspective of experts from different areas of the quadruple helix. The prevailing view among the experts consulted in the ten countries of the GILL consortium is that the main barriers are related to the cultural and social environment in which men and women are stereotyped and expected to perform different activities and have different levels of commitment in the family and in the workplace. This also influences what actions, strategies or opportunities they see as important to strengthen gender equality and promote gender diversity. Gender stereotypical cultural beliefs and norms, masculine bias, gender segregation, lack of funding and microfinance, lack of policies to support work-life balance and lack of political will and empirical evidence to remove these barriers are the main problems identified by the experts. These findings are in line with previous research stressing the role of the male norm in entrepreneurship and the importance of the cultural context as well as access to resources, which is the result of social structures and culture (Marlow, Martinez Dy 2018; Martinez Dy 2020). The opportunities reflected in the interviews largely correspond to these barriers and highlight the role of key actors, such as the EU, in setting standards that can be further disseminated to national, local and organisational levels.

In terms of efforts to overcome existing barriers, projects focusing on fixing the number of women under-represented in certain fields and occupations and in management positions predominate. They mostly focus on individual skills of women, approach criticized in feminist literature (Ahl 2006; Marlow, Martinez Dy 2018). However, we also identified a group of good practices that aimed to fix the institutional structures of inequality, mostly in the academic and/or public sector, but also in some companies, aiming to make working conditions more compatible with caring responsibilities and to combat male and racial bias. Only three good practices focused on fixing knowledge by introducing gender-sensitive criteria in research.

Overall, the implementation of good practices depends on the cultural context of the society, the will of key actors to address these issues, and the financial and human resources available, which determine the sustainability of the activities implemented. Overcoming the culture-based barriers is the main challenge for achieving gender equality in entrepreneurship and innovation. For this, stable and sustainable institutional structure is important to support gender equality including sufficient human capacity and funding. Further objectives as well as future research should be focused on strengthening the institutional and knowledge fixes as well as focus on culture (Bullough, et al. 2022). The research presented here is limited in particular by the small sample of experts in each EU country. Further research should focus on the diversity of cultural contexts in individual countries or regions and better inform on cultural barriers and opportunities.

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