

Pursuing entrepreneurial opportunities is not a choice: the interplay between gender norms, contextual embeddedness, and (in) equality mechanisms in entrepreneurial contexts

Gendered
contexts

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Abstract

Purpose – All entrepreneurs interact simultaneously with multiple entrepreneurial contexts throughout their entrepreneurial journey. This conceptual paper has two central aims: (1) it synthesises the current literature on gender and entrepreneurship, and (2) it increases our understanding of how gender norms, contextual embeddedness and (in)equality mechanisms interact within contexts. Illustrative contexts that are discussed include entrepreneurship education, business networks and finance.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual paper draws upon extant literature to develop its proposed conceptual framework. It provides suggestions for systemic policy interventions as well as pointing to promising paths for future research.

Findings – A literature-generated conceptual framework is developed to explain and address the systemic barriers faced by opportunity-driven women as they engage in entrepreneurial contexts. This conceptual framework visualises the interplay between gender norms, contextual embeddedness and inequality

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mechanisms to explain systemic disparities. An extra dimension is integrated in the framework to account for the power of agency within women and with others, whereby agency, either individually or collectively, may disrupt and subvert the current interplay with inequality mechanisms.

Originality/value – This work advances understanding of the underrepresentation of women entrepreneurs. The paper offers a conceptual framework that provides policymakers with a useful tool to understand how to intervene and increase contextual embeddedness for all entrepreneurs. Additionally, this paper suggests moving beyond “fixing” women entrepreneurs and points towards disrupting systemic disparities to accomplish this contextual embeddedness for all entrepreneurs. By doing so, this research adds to academic knowledge on the construction and reconstruction of gender in the field of entrepreneurship.

Keywords Gender norms, Contextual embeddedness, Inequality mechanisms, Entrepreneurial contexts

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurial initiatives by women have received substantial attention from both academics and practitioners over the past decade (Ahl, 2005, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Brush *et al.*, 2019; Foss *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2016, 2021; Yousafzai *et al.*, 2019). Recent policy measures, driven by the *Europe 2020 Strategy* and *The Missing Entrepreneurs 2021*, aim to foster entrepreneurship within the European Union (EU) member states irrespective of gender, age, place of birth, or other personal characteristics (e.g. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] and European Commission, 2021). One relevant target group, in this respect, are opportunity-driven entrepreneurs which refers to (co-)founders and/or owner-managers of innovative and scalable ventures (Carree *et al.*, 2007), such as tech start-ups and academic spin-offs. These entrepreneurs are generally well equipped with the necessary human capital for innovation and value creation (Brush *et al.*, 2003) and they operate in complex environments that require access to a variety of resources, some of which are not readily available in the market, necessitating interactions with others.

Amidst calls for context-sensitive entrepreneurship research (Henry *et al.*, 2021; Korsgaard *et al.*, 2022; Wigren-Kristoferson *et al.*, 2022; Welter, 2020), our research addresses the question: *How do women entrepreneurs become embedded across multiple entrepreneurial contexts?*

Policy measures and data underscore the untapped potential in women’s entrepreneurial activities (Ughetto *et al.*, 2020; OECD and European Commission, 2021) revealing a predominantly male-dominated field of opportunity-driven entrepreneurship (Dileo and García-Pereiro, 2018). Recent reports reveal that in Europe female founders constitute approximately 15% of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Startup Genome Report, 2021). Acknowledging the transformative potential of women’s entrepreneurship, governments actively encourage women’s opportunity-driven entrepreneurship by lowering barriers, and strengthening business environments (OECD and European Commission, 2021).

Policies generally aim to stimulate women’s interest in entrepreneurship, thereby boosting women’s entrepreneurial intentions and activity. However, these policies often contain gendered assumptions that fail to address existing inequalities (Berglund *et al.*, 2018; Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Marlow, 2020) and may inadvertently perpetuate them in new forms, masking them under the guise of choice, agency, and possibility.

Two feminist perspectives shed light on why women’s entrepreneurial potential remains largely untapped. From a *liberal feminist perspective*, systemic discrimination and bias limit women’s access to resources, opportunities, and support in the business world (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Neergaard *et al.*, 2011; Coleman *et al.*, 2019). Gendered bias regarding women’s roles and abilities can discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurial ventures and restrict their access to networks and mentorship opportunities. Liberal feminist policies aim to level the playing field for women entrepreneurs, enabling them to build skills and networks for instance through, e.g. mentorship programmes (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Neergaard *et al.*, 2011) and by removing systemic barriers and ensuring equal access to resources and opportunities

through, for instance, equal pay laws anti-discrimination measures and family-friendly work policies (Foss *et al.*, 2019).

Post-modern feminists, such as Coleman *et al.* (2019) critique these approaches, arguing that they reinforce gendered structures and biases by comparing women to male entrepreneurs and by portraying women as lacking in entrepreneurial abilities relative to men (Ahl, 2006; Henry *et al.*, 2016). By perpetuating the male-dominant entrepreneurial discourse, women are described as failed or reluctant entrepreneurial subjects who need “fixing” by specific policy interventions, effectively individualising the problem within women themselves (Coleman *et al.*, 2019, Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Foss *et al.*, 2019). From a *post-modern feminist perspective*, the cultural construction of gender marginalises women in the professional world (Foss *et al.*, 2019). Gender is viewed as a socially constructed identity shaped by the cultural and historical context in which it is embedded (Ahl, 2006; Foss *et al.*, 2019). Research shows that this *postmodern feminist perspective* is fruitful in revealing how gender discrimination is achieved (Neergaard *et al.*, 2011). Policies inspired by this perspective aim to amend gendered social practices that construct and maintain privilege (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Coleman *et al.*, 2019). Such initiatives challenge gender stereotypes and simultaneously promote alternative models of entrepreneurship that prioritise collaboration, community building, and inclusion (Ratten, 2016; Hechavarría and Ingram, 2019).

Both perspectives acknowledge the systemic barriers women face in entrepreneurship and offer distinct insights for policymakers. Policymakers have considered measures from both feminist perspectives in attempting to dismantle cultural and structural barriers that impede women’s entrepreneurship. In this contribution, we explore the role of policymaking, not only in removing barriers but also in promoting important drivers for women entrepreneurs to succeed. Specifically, this paper seeks to gain insight into the gendered experiences of women entrepreneurs and builds new knowledge on multiple context embeddedness in opportunity-focused entrepreneurship that can inform policy and create more inclusive ecosystems to enhance women’s entrepreneurship. To this end, we adopt both the post-modern and the liberal feminist perspective. Whilst we recognise that not all women want to be or must be entrepreneurs (Marlow, 2020), we argue that all who decide to do so, should be able to do so equally across genders.

Following Welter (2020) and Jack and Anderson (2002), we argue that context plays a crucial role in shaping opportunities and outcomes for women entrepreneurs. In management research, context refers to the “circumstances, conditions, situations, or environments that are external to the respective phenomenon and enable or constrain it” (Welter, 2011, p. 167). Entrepreneurs engage in multiple contexts throughout their entrepreneurial journeys and these contexts influence their identities, circumstances, choices, and experiences (Chasserio *et al.*, 2014; Wang, 2018). As explained by Jack and Anderson (2002), embedding is the mechanism whereby an entrepreneur becomes part of the local structure or context, enabling or constraining them to access available support and resources.

Furthermore, in line with Welter’s (2020) idea of “doing context”, entrepreneurs not only adapt to context but also affect and shape it. Different contexts offer different, but often complementary, sets of opportunities necessary for success, and entrepreneurs need to embed themselves in and act within multiple contexts. This notion is supported by previous studies on mixed embeddedness of ethnic or immigrant entrepreneurs (i.e. Kloosterman *et al.*, 1999), social entrepreneurs (Kistruck and Beamish, 2010; Smith and Stevens, 2010) as well as entrepreneurship in emerging economies (Welter, 2020; Roos, 2019; Yousafzai *et al.*, 2019). Each of these contexts calls upon a different part of the entrepreneur’s identity, whilst offering different circumstances, choices, and entrepreneurial experiences (Chasserio *et al.*, 2014; Wang, 2018; Högberg and Mitchell, 2022).

The significance of contextual embeddedness in entrepreneurship has been widely discussed in the literature (i.e. Jack and Andersson, 2002). Nonetheless, scant attention has been

paid to how entrepreneurs, particularly women, establish and navigate their embeddedness within multiple contexts and how these dynamics affects their success in venture creation (Welter, 2020; Roos, 2019; Yousafzai *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, existing embeddedness approaches in entrepreneurship research have inadequately captured the dynamic interplay between agency and structure and the interdependencies between them (i.e. Tatli *et al.*, 2014).

Consequently, it remains unclear how policy makers can design and implement measures that foster more supportive environments for women entrepreneurs across multiple contexts and throughout their entrepreneurial journey. We argue, therefore, that a thorough examination of the interrelationship between gender and embeddedness in diverse entrepreneurial contexts is essential for shaping informed and impactful policies that promote women's inclusive entrepreneurship (Henry *et al.*, 2021).

Whilst we recognise that work is required in many other contexts as well, our paper focuses on three contexts – entrepreneurship education, business networks and the financial context. Entrepreneurship education equips women with knowledge and skills, entrepreneurial networks provide the opportunities for practical application, and improved access to finance ensures that they have the necessary resources to bring their entrepreneurial aspirations to life. From a liberal feminist viewpoint, entrepreneurship education fosters equal opportunities for women in entrepreneurship, whilst networks are viewed as mechanisms to remove barriers to women's participation. In terms of access to finance, liberal feminism advocates for economic and financial equality by dismantling systemic obstacles that have historically limited women's access to capital. From a post-modern feminist perspective, entrepreneurship education serves to deconstruct traditional gender roles and reshape narratives by integrating gender studies into curricula. It also celebrates diversity and inclusion within entrepreneurial networks, particularly women-only networks, where collective agency is exercised to challenge the male-dominated entrepreneurial landscape. Finally, in the context of access to finance, post-modern feminism calls for the challenging of power structures and systemic barriers, aiming to promote equity in financing.

We propose a conceptual framework that illuminates how gender inequality mechanisms within these three entrepreneurial contexts are affected by structure and agency. This framework helps policymakers in understanding gender-related contextual variations and promotes systemic change for improved integration. It also guides future research on women's entrepreneurship and the underrepresentation of women in opportunity-driven ventures.

In doing so, our paper contributes to three streams of literature: First we contribute to the liberal and post-modern literature on women's entrepreneurship by exploring how gender norms and inequality mechanisms shape contextual embeddedness, resulting in systemic inequality. We propose innovative policy measures to address these systemic gender disparities and create a more inclusive entrepreneurial environment. Second, our paper contributes to post-modern feminist critiques by challenging the conventional narrative that portrays women as unsuccessful entrepreneurs in need of "fixing". We advocate with policymakers for a deeper transformation of the entrepreneurial landscape, aligning with other scholars to disrupt the existing hegemony and address systemic disparities across various entrepreneurial contexts. Finally, we contribute to the literature on gender and entrepreneurship by shifting the research perspective from an exclusive focus on women to a systemic view. We advocate for raising awareness about agency-driven perspectives to disrupt gendered inequalities, offering a universal strategy that benefits all genders.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. First, the theoretical background critically analyses the concepts of entrepreneurial embeddedness, inequality mechanisms, and entrepreneurial contexts. The conceptual framework then illustrates the interplay between gender, contextual embeddedness, and inequality mechanisms in three entrepreneurial contexts. We conclude by highlighting our study's contribution and by

proposing a list of policy interventions for improving policy in gender inclusive entrepreneurship and propose an agenda for future research.

Gendered
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2. Theoretical background

Entrepreneurship is considered key for innovation and economic growth and contributes to increasing social wellbeing (Zahra *et al.*, 2014). Entrepreneurship is defined here as the pursuit of opportunities, regardless of the resources currently under control, to create social and economic value for the initiator, the market in which they operate, and the community in which they are embedded (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Stevenson *et al.*, 1989; Morrison, 2006; Zahra *et al.*, 2014). Context plays a crucial role in determining how entrepreneurship unfolds (Welter, 2020). In seeking to understand how context affects women entrepreneurs' embeddedness in their business environments, Welter (2011) introduced a typology of contexts, distinguishing between "who", "where" and "when" dimensions. In this paper, the "who" refers to opportunity-driven women entrepreneurs who are often motivated by a desire for autonomy, financial independence, and the ability to make a positive impact in their community. Their focus is on growth and innovation, as well as a willingness to take risks and embrace change (Brush *et al.*, 2003). In many cases, these women entrepreneurs face unique challenges that can limit their ability to start and grow a successful venture. The "where" includes business, social, spatial and institutional contexts (Welter, 2011). In this paper, the "where" are contexts that contain resources to bring entrepreneurial aspirations to life from a European perspective. The "when" in Welter's typology includes the historical and temporal dimensions (2011). In this paper, only the temporal dimension is incorporated, excluding the historical dimension.

In conclude, the contexts for women entrepreneurs are shaped by numerous factors, including cultural norms, economic conditions, and access to resources, such as funding, mentorship, and networks (Brush *et al.*, 2019). To show the interaction between these numerous factors, we introduce three illustrative contexts. This is, of course, whilst recognising other contexts might be equally relevant. These illustrative contexts are entrepreneurship education, business networks and access to finance (Coleman *et al.*, 2019). The term "illustrative context" is used to exemplify the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in different aspects of their entrepreneurial journey, by acknowledging that these areas are not separable from the broader entrepreneurial context. These contexts can also be linked to liberal feminist perspectives by promoting equal opportunities and economic parity for women in entrepreneurship whilst also being aligned with post-modern feminist perspectives by challenging and deconstructing traditional gender norms.

2.1 The three contexts

The first selected illustrative context is entrepreneurship education (EE), which plays a crucial role in increasing entrepreneurial activity (Petridou *et al.*, 2009). The European Commission (as well as most national governments across Europe) has created comprehensive policy frameworks for EE and is promoting the development, implementation and scale up in EE in higher education through subsidy schemes. Despite a rapid increase in the numbers of EE-programmes across Europe (European Commission, 2006), studies show that male students account for most participants. There is also ample evidence that male students benefit most from EE in terms of developing entrepreneurial self-efficacy and motivation (Brüne and Lutz, 2020). No specific policies have been devoted to making female students more enthusiastic to participate in EE or to ensure they derive benefit in equal ways to their male counterparts. Stimulating entrepreneurial behaviour is important and EE holds the potential to bolster individual agency by fostering greater

entrepreneurial intentions amongst aspiring and nascent entrepreneurs. With women comprising approximately half of all students in higher education, it is important to understand how EE as a context can have an impact on women's entrepreneurial pipeline and how policy can support this.

The second selected illustrative context is business networks. Business networks (particularly member-based networks) are crucial for stimulating entrepreneurship (Elfring and Hulsink, 2003; Ajumobi and Kyobe, 2022). Within this context, individual agency comes into play as women entrepreneurs engage in network support that encourage building business relationships to identify, develop, or act upon opportunities, to share information and to seek potential business partners (Abbas *et al.*, 2019). They form a gateway to partnerships, resources, and even to assignments or orders. Women-only business networks are a recent but increasingly widespread policy response to the underrepresentation of women in most existing business networks (McAdam *et al.*, 2019), emphasising the role of women's collective agency. For instance, the public policy approaches of the EU are focused on interventions that aim to support women entrepreneurs by establishing women-only networks. These gendered networks provide tailored content to address both self-efficacy and women's confidence, and help to remove structural and contextual obstacles that hinder women's success in entrepreneurship (Dodd and Keles, 2014). However, most business networks (including both women-only and mixed-gender networks) operate independently from policy making and fail to overcome structural barriers in mixed business networks.

The third selected context we use to illustrate the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs relates to access to finance. Entrepreneurial policy and access to financial capital are key elements in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Hechavarría and Ingram, 2019). The availability of financial capital represents a critical aspect in starting and running a venture, and venture capital can significantly promote the open innovation of ventures (Foss *et al.*, 2019). It is therefore a vital resource in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly for opportunity focused entrepreneurship (Hechavarría and Ingram, 2019). Individual agency is reflected in the actions taken by women entrepreneurs in seeking and utilising financial resources. Access to financial resources increases the entrepreneurial intentions of students (Aragon-Sanchez *et al.*, 2017), whilst under-capitalisation in the early stages of a venture can negatively impact its scale and lead to long-term underperformance (Brush *et al.*, 2018). Access to finance is one of the most popular research topics in women's entrepreneurship (Henry *et al.*, 2016), because challenging equal access to financial capital for women entrepreneurs is crucial if the number of women entrepreneurs is to increase. Policymaking to close the gender gap in business financing has led to various approaches and initiatives that promote gender equality in entrepreneurship, including government funding programme and women-only capital investments (Coleman *et al.*, 2019). These collective agency efforts, such as women-only investment funds, aim to bridge the gender gap by providing support and resources to women entrepreneurs. However, these specific policies fail to consider the need to also address systemic gender bias in protocols, investment or program delivery criteria (Coleman *et al.*, 2019) and do not truly attempt to provide equal access to financial means by solving the identified systemic inequalities. In the next section, we focus on the (in) equality mechanisms that interplay with gender to shed light on why entrepreneurs are differently embedded in contexts.

2.2 (In)equality mechanisms

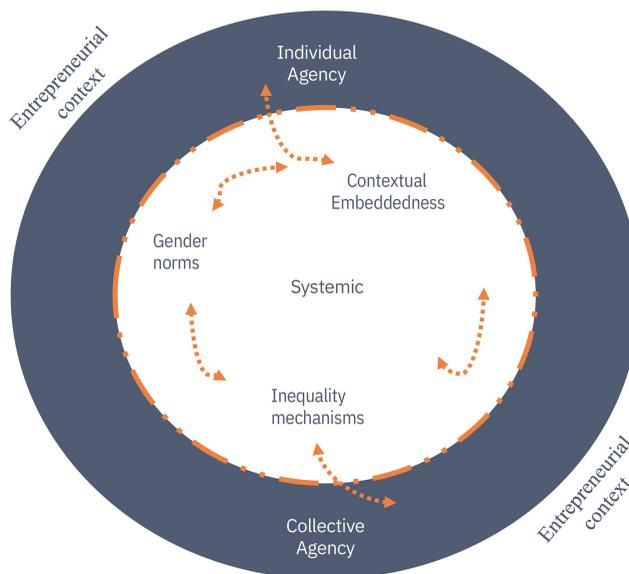
Whilst "doing" context (Welter, 2011), women entrepreneurs encounter numerous inequality mechanisms that impede their ability to become fully embedded. These mechanisms have been linked to structures and agency within the context (O'Brien *et al.*, 2019) and they have potential to illuminate the actions (and lack thereof) of women entrepreneurs. To date, when

focusing on gender, research has emphasised the negative or inequality mechanisms, particularly stereotypes, biases, and social (un)safety. However, other mechanisms, like role modelling (Bosma *et al.*, 2012; Laguía *et al.*, 2022), may act as positive mechanisms. When reconsidered in multiple contexts, they may help us explain differences in the contextual embeddedness of women entrepreneurs.

Gender stereotypes are presumptions about how women and men should behave (Ellemer, 2018), for instance suggesting that women are not “real” entrepreneurs or that women must behave like men to become successful. Several studies have indicated that the “think entrepreneur – think male” paradigm remains dominant (Gupta *et al.*, 2009, 2019; Gupta and Turban, 2012; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Balachandra *et al.*, 2019; Laguía *et al.*, 2022). Here, masculine traits like risk-taking are required for “true” entrepreneurship, with successful entrepreneurs perceived as more (stereotypically masculine) task-oriented than (stereotypically feminine) relationship-oriented (Laguía *et al.*, 2019, 2022; Gupta *et al.*, 2009; Adamus *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, there is a significant challenge for women entrepreneurs to manage the effect(s) of gender bias(es) and/or gender stereotypes on their entrepreneurial activities. If women act differently from the expectations of others, there is a disconnect in the evaluator’s mind (Tonoyan and Strohmeier, 2021). For instance, women entrepreneurs tend to be judged by stricter standards when applying for funding and are more likely to be disliked and ignored when in a leadership position (Tonoyan and Strohmeier, 2021; Eagly *et al.*, 2020). Such gender biases and stereotypes affect women’s entry into entrepreneurship and negatively interfere with the positive effects of drivers of entrepreneurial intentions and activities, such as entrepreneurial self-efficacy or early entrepreneurial exposure (Barnir, 2020; Gupta *et al.*, 2009). The persistence of stereotypes, biases, and lack of social safety in the business environment have led to what Acker (2006) calls “inequality regimes”, otherwise described as the loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities. These “inequality regimes”, in turn, cause systematic disparities between entrepreneurs in terms of power or control over goals, resources, and outcomes, or they may affect the level of embeddedness of the entrepreneur. The aim of this paper is to increase our understanding of how gender norms, contextual embeddedness, and (in)equality mechanisms interact within the contexts of education, business networks and finance. To do so, we introduce a gendered contextual framework that illustrates the interplay between individual and collective agency and systemic elements, such as gender norms and (in)equality mechanisms. Through this framework, we aim to shed light on the complex interconnections between (individual and collective) agency and systemic factors, with a particular focus on the practical application of this framework within the three contexts.

2.3 Gendered contextual framework

Most entrepreneurial success (or failure) is not solely due to choices or personal efforts (agency), but an outcome of systemic disparities present within a context (systemic level). Therefore, there is an extra dimension integrated in our framework to account for the power of agency *within women* and *with others*, whereby agency either individually or collectively may disrupt and subvert the current interplay with inequality mechanisms. Our conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates, therefore, how the dynamics between individual and collective agency and systemic elements (i.e. gender norms, inequality mechanisms, and embeddedness) interplay within different entrepreneurial contexts. Furthermore, we selected three different examples of illustrative entrepreneurial contexts (i.e. entrepreneurship education, business networks, and finance) to highlight the application and implications of the conceptual framework. In our analysis we will first focus on the central part of Figure 1 by describing the dynamics of systemic elements. After that we shift our attention outwards to examine the interplay between agency and various elements at a systemic level.



Source(s): Figure created by authors

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the dynamics between agency and systemic elements within entrepreneurial contexts

The central part of [Figure 1](#) depicts the interplay between the systemic elements of gender norms, (in)equality mechanisms, and contextual embeddedness. A key systemic outcome of gender-based disparity is that women are less likely to become entrepreneurs when they are exposed to gender biases and stereotypes about who is the typical entrepreneur. The (in) equality mechanisms and gender-normative roles affect women in several ways and offer one explanation for the skewed sex ratios in entrepreneurship. Women are not only affected through systemic disadvantage but also because gender norms are often internalised at an individual level. Systemic gender norms and (in)equality mechanisms also affect how others (stakeholders, other founders, venture capitalists) perceive female founders and how female founders perceive themselves, resulting in internalised perceptions of gender norms amongst all actors.

One easy policy intervention that contests these systemic disparities is to create awareness of and increase knowledge about these gendered issues within EE. This could be accomplished by promoting a different narrative to describe who can be an entrepreneur and what the needed skills are. The replication of stereotypical images of entrepreneurs should be minimised, and new narratives created as counterpoints to the norm of a white, heroic male entrepreneur. Three types of (women) entrepreneurs who already contest the norm-based narratives are: (1) women who build high-growth, high-impact ventures ([Laguía et al., 2022](#)), (2) women who have commercially successful ventures ([Sarpong et al., 2022](#)), and (3) male entrepreneurs who display feminine-stereotyped behaviours ([Balachandra et al., 2019](#)).

Since entrepreneurs “do context”, entrepreneurs not only adapt to context but also affect and shape it ([Welter, 2011](#)). Entrepreneurs do this by coping with, navigating through and trying to overcome systemic disparities using either individual agency, forms of collective agency, or both. As such, the outer part of [Figure 1](#) visualises how agency (individual and collective) interacts with different elements at the systemic level which were presented in the inner part. Entrepreneurs can reinforce or challenge inequality mechanisms applying strategies involving confrontation, conformation, or adherence ([West and Zimmerman, 1987](#)) –

in other words, by using (or not) their agency to overcome these negative mechanisms. For instance, contextual embeddedness can be mediated through an incubator programme that supports an entrepreneur early in their entrepreneurial journey (Meister and Mauer, 2019). Additionally, Sarpong *et al.* (2022) also highlight how successful women entrepreneurs in high-growth entrepreneurship use their individual agency to influence difficult-to-navigate contexts to become successful in their career. A further act of individual agency is to challenge the dissonance (misfit) between women entrepreneurs and the normative entrepreneurial identity by framing identity through heroic self-description, exploiting professionalism, and enacting new roles that alter the perception of what is socially legitimate for an entrepreneur (Ojediran *et al.*, 2022).

It is also important to build power collectively. Collective agency can play an important part in disrupting systemic disparities and subverting gender norms in entrepreneurial contexts. Entrepreneurs can shape the industry and societal norms through “bottom-up” processes. They enact a higher level of embeddedness through this collective agency that may lead to the rise of alternative spaces or networks in which people collectively define goals in accordance with their own values, collectively increase consciousness and voice, and act as a group to achieve goals (Fernandez-Wulff, 2019). This collective agency is worked out in organised social groups using media and/or involvement in political issues of interest. A key example of collective agency is the rise of women-only business network initiatives that organise women’s voices and experiences as entrepreneurs to address the gendered context of entrepreneurship. This is one example of how building power with others can be executed.

In the next sections, we explore, within EE, business networks, and finance contexts how this conceptual framework functions and how people reinforce or challenge the inequality mechanisms through their (individual and/or collective) actions of conformation, confrontation, and adherence.

3. Entrepreneurship education context

Research insights have demonstrated that EE offered in institutes of higher education (HEIs) affords different outcomes for female students, who report poorer learning (Ferreras-Garcia *et al.*, 2021) and lower entrepreneurial intentions (Wilson *et al.*, 2007), and who are less likely to start their own venture as adults (Dabic *et al.*, 2012; Johansen, 2015). We now apply our conceptual framework (see Figure 1) in this context of EE in HEIs to explain the different affordances for students.

Entrepreneurship as a profession is positioned in educational contexts as meritocratic and open to all (Jones, 2015). However, “think entrepreneur – think male” gender norms are portrayed in EE (Jones and Warhuus, 2018). These gender norms (see Figure 1) educate students that masculinity outperforms femininity (Ahl and Marlow, 2012), despite there being no objective criteria that make a person suitable to become an entrepreneur (Thébaud, 2010). Gender norms are apparent in recruitment materials, which generally only depict male fictive students (Korhonen *et al.*, 2012; Jones, 2015), unless education programs specifically target women-only groups, in which case, women are shown (Jones and Warhuus, 2018). This partially explains the underrepresentation of women in EE in terms of enrolment (Hägg *et al.*, 2022), pointing to an extreme case of lack of contextual embedding. At the beginning of the entrepreneurial journey, a homophily effect (the tendency of individuals to associate mostly with those who are similar to themselves) is created from these unbalanced numbers (McPherson *et al.*, 2001) and affect female students’ opportunities to build network ties, with a further impact on embeddedness. This “think entrepreneur – think male” gender norm is also portrayed within educational texts (Fältholm *et al.*, 2010), indirectly implying that female students may not measure up, understand the opportunities that entrepreneurship offers, or possess the necessary confidence and knowledge compared to their male counterparts (Jones,

2015). This is seriously concerning since it negatively interferes with the positive effects of drivers of entrepreneurial intention and activity, such as entrepreneurial self-efficacy or early entrepreneurial exposure (Barnir, 2020; Gupta *et al.*, 2009). It also perpetuates (hidden) barriers, such as educators who evaluate female students' competences as inherently less suitable for entrepreneurship (Thébaud, 2010).

One way to increase interest in entrepreneurship is to provide different types of role models (Bettinger and Long, 2005; Laguía *et al.*, 2022) in promotional and educational texts and in various life settings, creating a learning context with a more representative group of educators, guest lecturers, and representation from diverse sectors. The early image of a "lack of fit" generated by gender stereotypes provides an argument for women-only EE classes taught by women entrepreneurs, practitioners, and guest speakers (Gupta *et al.*, 2009). Whilst this is an example of how collective agency can be used to empower female students, the approach does little to disrupt current systemic disparities and still "others" those who attend. We argue that greater awareness is needed around who teaches entrepreneurial programmes. For example, women educators (especially those of colour) tend to include diversity in course materials to a greater extent than their male colleagues, which is relevant as women students express less interest when masculine language forms or (sketched) images are used (Laird, 2011).

More female students may be attracted to entrepreneurship if they are fully considered and included in entrepreneurial programmes right from the beginning (whilst at university), and when entrepreneurial norms and potential barriers to entrepreneurship are considered (Hentschel *et al.*, 2018). In this way, educators can create a gender-sensitive learning environment where the importance of neutral and feminine characteristics for entrepreneurs are equally stressed and the awareness of gender bias in entrepreneurial contexts is increased. The latter could be accomplished by developing pedagogical interventions in which students consider how (implicit and explicit) gender bias affects the performance ratings of entrepreneurial ventures (Michaelis *et al.*, 2022). One example of such a pedagogical intervention is an in-class experiment that presents a learning innovation to enable classroom-based conversations about bias in the domain of entrepreneurship (Michaelis *et al.*, 2022). The experiment provides students with an applied understanding of gender bias and the analytical thinking skills required to recognise it. This exercise not only increases awareness of systemic disparities in EE, but may also awaken a form of collective agency, creating power with others, to overcome the inequality mechanisms. To increase the impact of entrepreneurship programmes in general, content on gender equality or gender-specific constraints must be included to increase the power within all students, educating them about bias and stereotypes in the entrepreneurial business environment. This could be done by portraying examples of women entrepreneurs who have built high-growth, high-impact ventures. Successful women entrepreneurs who serve as role models will disrupt the "think entrepreneur – think male" gender norm and help increase entrepreneurial motivation, intention, self-efficacy, and recognition of opportunities (Laguía *et al.*, 2022; Bosma *et al.*, 2012). Intervening in these systemic elements can create an educational context that affords female students more contextual embeddedness and leaves them with more relevant network ties, as well as improving the preparatory elements of intentions and motivations.

4. Business network context

Business networks often provide a point of entry to the entrepreneurial business environment and are amongst the most important assets that an entrepreneur can possess. Networking provides access to power, information, knowledge, and capital, and links to other networks (Elfring and Hulsink, 2003). Many women join networks for the benefits they provide (Ajumobi and Kyobe, 2022), such as training, business resources, and funding. Paradoxically,

business networks may preserve systemic disparities when these networks (mixed, men-only, or women-only) fail to reconnect and embed all entrepreneurs into the broader business industry. This section discusses the inequality mechanisms (see [Figure 1](#)) that operate when women enter different business networks, and how these networks afford women entrepreneurs access to entrepreneurial resources.

Mixed business networking (paid and/or membership-based) may be less effective for female members because they experience gender barriers, unmet needs, low credibility, and low social capital and benefits ([McAdam et al., 2019](#); [Williams and McGregor, 2021](#); [Woodwark et al., 2021](#); [Ferreira et al., 2022](#)). Gender bias and stereotypes may block access for women entrepreneurs, preventing embedding. In many business networks, members are predominantly white men ([Greguletz et al., 2019](#)), with women entrepreneurs frequently forming an underrepresented subgroup of members. In such networks, homophily ([McPherson et al., 2001](#)) drives inequality mechanisms where men might view women as less attractive business partners and act to thwart women's attempts to become embedded. This can result in more superficial business conversations, with some men being less open (or more reluctant) to engage with women, thus preventing interaction. Women are also less likely to be admitted to certain mixed business networks ([Moletta et al., 2021](#)), where male entrepreneurs tend to invite other male contacts from their networks to events or appointments, effecting a cycle of exclusion. Consequently, females may have less useful business connections and gendered access to new and relevant business information.

However, this minority position has the potential to be a place of power by making women stand out for "being different" by learning to "not belong" ([Kubberød et al., 2021](#)). In this position, individual agency could be used as a lever to reduce systemic disparities. For women entrepreneurs in this minority position, being embedded in business networks means access to resources. This is a successful path for women entrepreneurs to challenge systemic disparities from an embedded position in these networks ([Aggestam and Wigren-Kristoferson, 2017](#); [Roos, 2019](#)). "Being different" could however also reinforce systemic disparities by disqualifying other women entrepreneurs in the same network as potential business partners – so-called "queen bee behaviour" ([Ellemers, 2018](#); [Johnson and Mathur-Helm, 2011](#)). According to [Ellemers \(2018\)](#), queen bees assume a "strategy to avoid being held back by gender stereotypes, causing them to put down other women who make different life choices" (p. 291). This behaviour creates an even more unsafe networking environment for those being "othered" by all entrepreneurs. In response to these unsafe experiences, women-only network initiatives flourish and organise women's voices to address the gendered context of entrepreneurship. However, caution must be exercised in expecting women entrepreneurs to drive change through exercising individual agency to overcome systemic bias in networks, as this may promote the expectation that women continue to adapt or "fix" themselves to gain access to the necessary resources. Within networking, collective agency has the potential to disrupt systemic disparities and change women entrepreneurs' access to resources, potentially causing structural change.

It is likely that women entrepreneurs may not obtain sufficient resources and ideas when networking solely in women-only business networks, possibly limiting entrepreneurial opportunities ([McAdam et al., 2019](#)). Membership in a women-only business network is not, *per se*, a vital step towards the creation of entrepreneurial opportunities. It provides a soft landing for early-stage women entrepreneurs in the entrepreneurial industry, which includes peer support to overcome gender disparities and learn about the sector. This situation is especially relevant in sectors where women entrepreneurs routinely experience bias and stereotypes, most typically in traditionally male-dominated sectors. These women's business networks help improve social capital and self-confidence ([McAdam et al., 2019](#)), and create social safety for nascent entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, however, business networks of underrepresented groups are insufficiently instructive ([Woodwark et al., 2021](#)). Contrary to

the expectations raised by earlier research, women-only business networks may be negative influences that create gendered niches and perpetuate gender inequality through marginalisation (Harrison *et al.*, 2020; Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018). Generally, women-only business networks can be a fruitful intervention if they integrate their members with others in the business environment, but this form of collective agency does not disrupt the (experienced) disparities within mixed business networks.

Paradoxically, all business networks (mixed, men-only or women-only) preserve gender gaps when they fail to embed their entrepreneurs in the broader entrepreneurial environment. Woodwark *et al.* (2021) suggest that women entrepreneurs engage in mixed-gender business networks to obtain additional resources. Therefore, policy interventions that aim to disrupt systemic disparities should focus on increasing the level of embeddedness of women entrepreneurs, regardless of the type of networks to which they belong. This means that women should be able to pursue entrepreneurship on their own terms. This makes business networks a more attractive option again for all entrepreneurs.

5. Financial context

Access to finance and investment involves uncertainties and obstacles for women entrepreneurs (Brush and Cooper, 2012; Alesina *et al.*, 2013), and research clearly shows that investors are gender-biased in their funding decisions (Kleinert and Mochkabadi, 2021; Kanze *et al.*, 2020; Malmström *et al.*, 2018; Voitkane *et al.*, 2019; Lins and Lutz, 2016). Women entrepreneurs are financed at a lower level and by different means than their male counterparts (Jennings and Brush, 2013). This funding imbalance is especially noteworthy amongst venture capitalists (Malmström *et al.*, 2018; Voitkane *et al.*, 2019). Using our conceptual framework (see Figure 1), we identify insights into how these mechanisms interplay to begin to explain the gender gap in access to finance for women entrepreneurs.

Various scholars suggest that fewer women entrepreneurs apply for funding in the form of debt capital (Fielden *et al.*, 2003) and that women who do apply, tend to seek lower rates than men (Poczter and Shapsis, 2018). Maden (2015) shows that most women entrepreneurs seek financial support in traditional ways (i.e. governmental and nongovernmental support mechanisms and banks). Family members and business partners are other sources of financial support that are often accessed by women entrepreneurs, and these informal networks may also provide moral support (Maden, 2015). This appears to be an individual response to the gendered funding gap, where women continue their funding paths by different means, using a form of individual agency to cope with, navigate through and try to overcome inequality mechanisms (see Figure 1).

One underlying assumption for the funding and investment disparity is that women fail to achieve the normative standards of a successful business – full-time activity with the aim of creating employment and maximising economic returns. In contrast to male-owned ventures, women-owned businesses are more likely to be described as “underperforming” in terms of growth and profit generation, and women are more likely to have their firms referred to as a “hobby”, “lifestyle”, or “mumpreneurship” (Lewis *et al.*, 2022; Besamusca, 2020). The evaluation of entrepreneurial opportunities involves a subjective judgement by one person (e.g. a venture capitalist or angel investor) about another person (e.g. the founder of a start-up). Subtle discrimination based on gender norms, stereotypes and biases often leads to an inefficient allocation of capital (Ughetto *et al.*, 2020) in a predominantly male-dominated financial sector (Alesina *et al.*, 2013). Gender biases are likely to occur because of the resource providers’ (e.g. venture capitalists) gendered perceptions of opportunity-driven women entrepreneurs (Tonoyan and Strohmeier, 2021). These resource providers assume that women entrepreneurs are less competent and less agentic than equivalent male entrepreneurs leading similar ventures. Such biases are difficult to overcome, especially through individual

agency. Based on the assumption that venture capitalists favour entrepreneurs of their own sex, policy solutions have included the involvement of more female venture capitalists. Globally, no region exists in which the percentage of women investors exceeds that of men. In Europe the lowest percentage of women investors is found (2.6%; [Elam et al., 2019](#)) although their numbers are gradually increasing ([Brush et al., 2018](#)). Notably, compared to men, female venture capitalists evaluate women entrepreneurs more critically ([Voitkane et al., 2019](#)), showing that the skewed sex ratio in venture capitalism cannot explain the systemic disparities in access to financial equity.

Investor decisions may be partly driven by observations of gender-stereotypical behaviours, and result in biased associations with that entrepreneur's business competency. Research shows that investors may be gender-biased against any display of feminine-stereotyped behaviours by entrepreneurs of any gender ([Balachandra et al., 2019](#)). This raises issues of legitimacy for women in their entrepreneurial engagements and embedding. However, [Howell and Ramana \(2019\)](#) find that exposure to a higher number of venture capitalist judges increases male participants' chances of founding a venture-capital-backed start-up much more so than amongst female participants. Their suggested explanation is that male participants more often proactively reach out to venture capital judges, resulting in differences in levels of contextualised embedding ([Howell and Ramana, 2019](#)). The degree and nature of embeddedness determines which investors may be able to pitch to, and the funding you secure in turn affects how you build your network ([Hallen, 2008](#)). This stresses the relevance of business networking and points to potential collective agency facilitating unbiased networking to disrupt these systemic gender gaps funding access. Another way to increase the contextual embeddedness of women entrepreneurs is to apply a collective agency approach that increases the use of women-only funds. For women entrepreneurs, the rise in women-only funds, to assure access to venture capital and to realise the untapped potential of women entrepreneurs, is flourishing as a policy response.

Combining all the elements within our conceptual framework in [Figure 1](#), we conclude that (in)equality mechanisms effect the contextual embeddedness of women entrepreneurs in several ways: (1) women do not have the right connections in the financial market to back their venture during different stages of their journey; (2) they cannot build these connections because they are not welcomed in the business networks where most of these connections are made; (3) they may be judged more harshly than equivalent male entrepreneurs by both male and female investors; and (4) the policies, norms and criteria themselves are gendered towards a "think entrepreneurs – think male paradigm" with EE tending to reinforce inequality mechanisms.

6. Discussion

This paper is positioned at the intersection of entrepreneurship scholarship on gender and entrepreneurial business environments ([Achtenhagen and Welter, 2003](#); [Neumeyer et al., 2019](#); [Foss et al., 2019](#); [McAdam et al., 2019](#)), a field of research that has gained traction in recent years ([Brush et al., 2019](#); [Welter, 2020](#); [Henry et al., 2021](#)).

Entrepreneurship, in general, is an embedded process, therefore the contextual embeddedness across various contexts is extremely relevant for all entrepreneurs. Contexts neither enable nor constrain entrepreneurship, but the gendering within contexts (actions, narratives, stereotyping) constrain women entrepreneurs' embeddedness ([Welter, 2020](#)). This paper has proposed a conceptual framework for how structures, agency and contexts are interconnected and illuminates the operations of some gender inequality mechanisms within three entrepreneurial contexts. We aimed to address the call by [Tatli et al. \(2014\)](#) to capture the dynamism in agency and structure, as well as the interdependencies between them. In our focus on opportunity-driven women entrepreneurs, we have assumed

that intrinsic motivation and cognitive ability are not lacking in this group. This conceptual paper provides three contributions to gender and entrepreneurship research and further identifies promising and novel directions for policy to address the structural inequalities embedded within entrepreneurial contexts.

First, we build on literature from both the liberal and the post-modern feminist perspective on women entrepreneurship to theorise how contextual embeddedness is influenced by gender norms and inequality mechanisms leading to systemic inequity. We propose new policy interventions to disrupt these systemic gender disparities to make the entire entrepreneurial business environment more accessible for all (nascent) entrepreneurs. Structural change that moves away from “fixing” women and towards embedding all nascent entrepreneurs is a step forward; moreover, better embedding entrepreneurs within multiple diverse contexts allows resources to be leveraged more effectively by (women) entrepreneurs (Welter, 2020; Wigren-Kristoferson *et al.*, 2022). This conceptual framework provides policy makers with a useful tool to understand gendered contextual discrepancies and demonstrates how systemic changes can increase embeddedness.

Second, it is important to subvert and nudge persistent gender bias in entrepreneurship, with the aim of more equitable economic policy development (Ahl and Nelson, 2015). In this narrative, women are described as failed or reluctant entrepreneurs who need “fixing” through policy interventions (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Foss *et al.*, 2019). We contribute to emerging post-modern feminist critiques on the value of entrepreneurship for women generally. As Marlow (2020) describes it, “feminist critique is directed towards the emphasis upon finding routes to let women ‘into’ this field of activity (on an equal basis with men) without challenging its hegemonic roots” (p. 5). It could be suggested that individual strategies cannot address structural subordination. Therefore, our conceptual framework and the suggested policy interventions are in line with other scholars (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Welter, 2020) and go beyond this notion of “fixing” women and towards disrupting and subverting the current hegemony using the power of both individual and collective agency, and by first identifying and then suggesting changes in the systemic disparities present in multiple entrepreneurial contexts.

Third, we advance the literature on gender and entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow, 2012, 2021; Marlow, 2020; Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018) by switching the research perspective to a systemic view. This paper moves beyond a by-women, for-women and about-women perspective to call for entrepreneurial business environments to include awareness-raising about the agentic perspectives that have the potential to disrupt gendered inequality mechanisms. Such an approach can provide a more universal strategy that may benefit women through generating more equal entrepreneurial contexts, and benefit men who also may suffer from rigid gendered norms. Support for this approach is found in entrepreneurship research from many scholars (Ahl, 2006; Jones, 2014, 2015; Jones and Warhuus, 2018; Marlow, 2020; Ahl and Marlow, 2021). The paper further considers not only the ability of individual agency to disrupt these patterns, but also the possibility of collective agency to lead to structural changes that are overdue and necessary so that entrepreneurship norms enable equal contextual embedding.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

Improving the level of contextual embeddedness can assist all entrepreneurs in increasing their access to necessary resources to identify and take advantage of business opportunities, effectively improving on the open-to-all assumptions. Opportunity-driven women entrepreneurs are the minority amongst (potential and) nascent entrepreneurs and are far less likely to perceive themselves (and be perceived) as potential entrepreneurs. Until this changes, and women become embedded and belong within various entrepreneurial contexts, the gendered divide is likely to continue throughout the entrepreneurship pipeline. Some

potential paths of action (individual and collective) to change the inequality mechanisms (stereotypes, biases and social safety) have been addressed through our deep reading of existing the literature. In addition, [Table 1](#) outlines opportunities for policy interventions to improve contextual embeddedness for women entrepreneurs. Improvements in this area will require processes of “un-othering” and embedding that disrupt current stereotypes, biases

Systemic interventions

- Stimulate programs targeted at different stakeholders that increase knowledge about and create awareness of inequality issues (throughout the entrepreneurship pipeline)
- Develop policy that promotes a change in narratives used to describe who is an entrepreneur and what are the necessary entrepreneurial skills. For instance, promoting language that highlights the potential of women entrepreneurs and the missed opportunity for investors who overlook them, can help to reframe the issue and encourage more investment in opportunity driven women entrepreneurs
- Encourage all actors in entrepreneurial contexts to minimise the replication of stereotypical images of entrepreneurs (portray more women – and men – entrepreneurs contesting the norms). For instance, providing education and training on the structural barriers and how they positively impact different contexts can create awareness and understanding
- Develop gender-sensitive learning environments (within support programs like incubator/accelerator programs and in higher educational contexts). That means providing education and training to raise awareness and understanding on the importance of inclusion in investment. Examples might include offering workshops on unconscious bias or providing case studies on successful investment in women entrepreneurs
- Stimulate policy that promotes and rewards more preferred behaviours (rather than obstructing them). So, offer incentives to organisations (for instance media recognition) who actively promote and encourage changes to the systemic norms
- Develop policy that makes different stakeholders accountable. Holding organisations accountable for their role in perpetuating or addressing the gender gap in investment can encourage action(s). For example, publicly reporting on the gender diversity of investment portfolios and setting goals for improvement
- Make different networks the default option for (all) entrepreneurs, by automatically enrolling them in relevant programs or by providing easy-to-access resources after subscription to the chamber of commerce f. It is important that these networks are inclusive and provide education and training on the structural barriers and how they impact different contexts for entrepreneurs

Individual agency interventions

- Develop programs that help women entrepreneurs challenge the dissonance between their own individual identity and their entrepreneurial identity increasing their legitimacy as entrepreneurs. This can be done by mentorship programs connecting more experienced entrepreneurs to early-stage entrepreneurs
- Stimulate specific programs that introduce (early-stage) women entrepreneurs to incubators, accelerator programs, and relevant network ties, including investment networks. Even offer incentives (recognition, awards, funding opportunities) to those who participate actively in networking or mentorship activities to increase their motivation to take part in it

Collective agency interventions

- Generate policies and programs that support the rise of alternative spaces or networks in which people collectively define goals in accordance with their own values, collectively increase consciousness and voice, and act as a group to achieve goals. Develop programs and training that introduce different types of role models to increase interest in areas with gender underrepresentation, such as entrepreneurship. For instance, using role models as social proof can attract women. The highlighting of successful alumni that have gone through an entrepreneurship education course or incubator program can serve as social proof for other women to apply
- Encourage investment funds that address the status quo in access to venture capital for “other” entrepreneurs (for instance, women, people of colour, minorities, etc.)
- Design and implement nudges to influence people’s everyday choices and behaviours, stimulating a more equal entrepreneurial context. For instance, creating new norms that can help to shift attitudes and behaviours. This may be accomplished by seeking out diverse perspectives and experiences when making business decisions

Source(s): Table created by authors

Table 1.
Suggestions for policy interventions increasing the embeddedness of women entrepreneurs

and the lack of safety that remain in the three entrepreneurial contexts considered in this paper, and most likely in other entrepreneurial contexts as well.

By considering the actions of inequality mechanisms, the proposed conceptual framework has generated suggestions for workable policy interventions to move away from the “fixing” of women entrepreneurs and towards disrupting systemic disparities by engaging collective and individual agency. These suggestions are presented in [Table 1](#). They include systemic intervention suggestions, as well as areas of action around individual and collective agency.

8. Limitations and future research

We acknowledge that this conceptual framework must be further tested, expanded, and improved in future research. However, the positioning of this framework provides some direction for research on women’s entrepreneurship, and highlights where policy interventions may already begin to fix entrepreneurial systems. The framework provides suggestions to drive future relevant research, and [Table 2](#) presents a proposed future research agenda. Exploring the conceptual framework suggests avenues for further research on entrepreneurial context(s) in general and specifically, for the three contexts considered here, as well as placing emphasis on the mechanisms that affect the embeddedness of women, with a focus on social safety, gender bias and gender stereotypes.

Beyond the recommendations from [Table 1](#) and the future research suggestions from [Table 2](#), entrepreneurs need to be embedded in multiple illustrative contexts ([Welter, 2020](#); [Aggestam and Wigren-Kristoferson, 2017](#); [Chasserio et al., 2014](#); [Wang et al., 2019](#)). Therefore, we acknowledge that there are other contexts equally important where entrepreneurs need to increase their contextual embeddedness, including government spending, family (support in reconciling business and family life), labour markets and media ([Martínez-Rodríguez et al.,](#)

Entrepreneurial context

- To what extent do entrepreneurial contexts encourage or obstruct women’s entrepreneurship in terms of start-up, expansion, scalability, and embedding?
- How do entrepreneurial contexts help women entrepreneurs overcome barriers?
- How do women entrepreneurs influence entrepreneurial contexts?

Financial market, business networking, entrepreneurship education

- How can education address the financial resourcing of business to better suit women entrepreneurs’ needs?
- What are the impacts of women support programs (with role models) on the entrepreneurial behaviour of women?
- What effects do network connections, relationships, and work placement have on women entrepreneurs in ecosystems?
- To what extent does the networking behaviour of women entrepreneurs affect their broader ecosystem engagements with external actors?
- What is the role of social capital in shaping (financial) strategies of women entrepreneurs?
- What is the contribution of social capital to women’s entrepreneurial processes?
- What role does gender play in entrepreneurial education?
- How can higher education institutions assist in overcoming barriers for women entrepreneurs?
- What is the impact of education on the entrepreneurial intent of students or the general population?
- How do (early-stage) women entrepreneurs develop social bonds in different business networks?

Social safety, gender bias, gender stereotypes

- To what extent do the interactions of women entrepreneurs with role models affect their view of the normative entrepreneur?
- How can nudges influence gender bias in creating more neutral entrepreneurial contexts?
- What is the role of central actors in creating equal access to resources for all entrepreneurs?
- How do we generate socially safe contexts within and across entrepreneurial environments?

Table 2.

Research avenues to increase the level of embeddedness of women entrepreneurs

Source(s): Table created by authors

2022). All these contexts have potential to enhance, hinder or limit opportunities for women entrepreneurs. However, this is not the scope of this framework. Namely, individual differences are not considered because they provide little understanding why some entrepreneurs overcome the mechanisms more strongly than other. Furthermore, not all women are equal and future studies might compare and contrast how factors like support of and responsibilities towards family, socio-economic status and personal preferences might impact upon the mechanisms described in our framework. Additionally, the scope of this paper is a group of women entrepreneurs that have already chosen to be(come) an entrepreneur (pulled factor), we acknowledge that both push and pull factors can differ in context since it is seldom one factor that brings people to entrepreneurship (Dawson and Henley, 2012). Future studies might explore the influence of push and pull factors on contextual embeddedness and consider other types of entrepreneurship, aside from opportunity-driven entrepreneurship. Whilst we expect that the mechanisms described in our framework can be either generalised, or at least translated to these additional contexts, future studies may want to test this assumption empirically. We also acknowledge that, due to different regulatory frameworks, economic development and cultural norms and practices, country differences are likely to affect the outcomes of the conceptual framework. We stress, though, that all contexts and countries are not static in their nature, meaning that the outcomes of the framework can differ per individual when the mechanisms are at play. Even though country-as-context is not considered in this conceptual paper, it is assumed that the mechanisms work in different countries. However, some mechanisms may operate more strongly based on contextual and/or individual differences. Future research could identify how the mechanisms overlap or differ per country (Solomon *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, how also other factors like geography, history and demography of a country potentially influence both the character and experience of contexts. Moreover, future research can provide an understanding of why some entrepreneurs survive the mechanisms and others do not. However, these individual differences are beyond the scope of this paper.

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