

# Advancing gender inclusivity: moving entrepreneurial ecosystems onto new paths

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Drawing on a constructionist-poststructuralist feminist perspective, this paper aims to extend thinking on the evolution of entrepreneurial ecosystems by exploring how gendered entrepreneurial ecosystems can become more inclusive.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper contends path dependency of entrepreneurial ecosystems, maintains embedded gender bias (and biases against disadvantaged or unconventional entrepreneur groups) and builds an argument for path creation to de-bias entrepreneurial ecosystems. A metaphorical descriptor of entrepreneurial ecosystems is probed as contributing to the gendered entrepreneurial ecosystem discourse. Three propositions, namely on path creation, transformative agency and appropriate metaphors, are derived from the extant literature and an illustrative example employed to interrogate these propositions.

**Findings** – We advance path creation via transformative agency as a means for moving towards inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. We provide an alternative metaphor to springboard change to the gendered scholarly discourse on entrepreneurial ecosystems. Our illustrative example lends support to our propositions.

**Originality/value** – This paper helps lay a foundation for new thinking on change towards inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. It provides a powerful argument for broadening the mainstream path dependence view of entrepreneurial ecosystems. It is unique in suggesting a constructionist-poststructuralist feminist standpoint to challenge the dominant discourse on entrepreneurial ecosystems.

**Keywords** Entrepreneurial ecosystem, Feminist theory, Path creation, Gender, Agency, Metaphor

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Introduction

The entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) is now a popular concept in the scholarly, practitioner and policy discourse on entrepreneurship. Although there is no universally accepted definition, an EE generally refers to “the benefits and resources produced by a cohesive, typically regional, community of entrepreneurs and their supporters that help . . . ventures form, survive and expand” (Spigel and Harrison, 2018, p. 152). Implicit in the discourse on EEs is the assumption that within the EE community, all entrepreneurs have equal access to resources, participation and support. However, this assumption does not hold true.

While “entrepreneurial ecosystems, owing to the strong voice of policy makers, appear only to produce winners” (Hakala *et al.*, 2020, p. 11), they are not a level playing field. The identities, positioning and roles of women, other unconventional entrepreneurs and disadvantaged groups of entrepreneurs within the EE, can be biased against them, resulting in inequities in access to resources and support, and limitations in participation and belonging (Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Cohen *et al.*, 2016; Pickernell *et al.*, 2022; Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018). There is a gender divide in EEs (Motoyama *et al.*, 2021).

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The predominance of neoliberal thinking in relation to women's entrepreneurship (Berglund *et al.*, 2018; Birkner, 2020) has led to the widely held belief that EEs are gender neutral. This is exacerbated by inherent assumptions from past regional development theories that have influenced EE theory that any firm or individual involved in economic production can join the value chain and benefit from the entrepreneurial resources in the region (Motoyama *et al.*, 2021). A poststructural feminist perspective argues that such normative beliefs and assumptions are flawed and have failed to coherently analyse the role and impact of gender in EEs. Despite comprising forty-two per cent of the global entrepreneurial workforce (GEM, 2023), women can be disadvantaged at the institutional, organisational and individual levels of EEs (Brush *et al.*, 2019; Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2021). For instance, incubators are often an integral part of the support system encompassed within EEs and are expected to serve all participants equitably, regardless of gender. Nevertheless, as Reyes and Neergaard (2023) show with technology incubators, gendered conditions can intensify and create a "triple masculinity trap" (p. 80). Moreover, the gendering and the stereotypical masculinisation of entrepreneurship (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018; Martiarena, 2022; Marlow and Swail, 2014) carries through to EEs, albeit usually covertly and unintentionally. Despite gender stereotyping showing signs of change (Bullough *et al.*, 2022; Charlesworth and Banaji, 2022), the strong association of masculine characteristics with entrepreneurship persists, and accordingly hinders gender equity in EEs.

Recent studies have begun to question the gender neutrality assumption of EEs. They argue that different configurations in social capital and the ways of networking of male and female entrepreneurs are a major reason for the gender divide in ecosystems (Harrison *et al.*, 2024; McAdam *et al.*, 2019; Neumeyer *et al.*, 2019; Motoyama *et al.*, 2021). However, as Ozkazanc-Pan (2022) warns, uncritical acceptance of the social capital deficiency thesis with its implied solution for mitigating such disadvantage resting on the exercise of individual agency, is unsound. It ignores the underlying social structure constraints. EEs are "contested communities" and improving inclusivity in EEs requires action by all stakeholders to change underlying structural inequities (Swail, 2022; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2022). Gender-neutral EEs are critical for regional recovery in the post-Covid-19 era (Foss and Henry, 2021).

Despite the burgeoning scholarly literature on EEs, there remain significant gaps in the understanding of this complex and under-theorised phenomenon (Wurth *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to mitigate this gap in understanding. In particular, Roundy (2016) aptly points out, "social construction of entrepreneurial ecosystems, and particularly the discourse involved in their creation, evolution and promotion, has not been examined" (p. 232). As such, the facets our paper probe centre on the social construction of EEs and their evolution toward greater gender inclusivity. Hence, we address the question: *How can EEs become more gender inclusive?*<sup>2</sup>

To build our answer to this question, we develop propositions informed by the scholarly literature. Our primary contention is that EEs need to navigate to new paths to evolve toward greater inclusivity. For an underpinning theoretical framing for our EE path creation standpoint, we draw on a constructionist-poststructuralist feminist perspective. While we do acknowledge the call for greater emphasis to be placed on the micro dynamics of EEs (Roundy and Lyons, 2023), and the value of investigating the endogenous processes at work in EEs such as the intricacies of women's networking (McAdam *et al.*, 2019; Woodwark *et al.*, 2021), the focus of our paper is on theorising at the systemic level of EEs. Understanding the complexity of an EE implies moving beyond the reasons and actions of individual entrepreneurs to understanding the behaviour of the system (Fredin and Lidén, 2020).

Following this introduction, we explore the scholarly discourse on evolutionary path dependence of EEs to springboard our first proposition on path creation toward inclusivity. Next, we explore the path creation-agency nexus to build our second proposition on multi-actor

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transformative agency as the driver of path creation. Thereafter, we interrogate the metaphorical discourse of EEs to lead up to our third proposition on the need for appropriate metaphors to contribute to changing the gendered EE discourse in the move toward inclusivity. The subsequent section sets out a constructionist-poststructuralist feminist perspective to underpin our discussion. We follow on with two examples. The first, succinctly offers our alternative analogy, a flock of flying geese, to encapsulate the notion of the need for inclusive language and descriptors. The second, comprises a detailed account of a global community, Coralus, that is creating a new path for EE gender inclusivity. We use Coralus as an example to validate our three propositions as well as affirm the appropriateness of the constructionist-poststructuralist feminist perspective that underpins our conceptual reflections. Lastly, we offer concluding observations and signpost some future research directions.

## **Towards inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems**

### *From path dependence to path creation*

The scholarly literature has paid only limited attention to understanding the important topic of the evolution of EEs (Cho *et al.*, 2022). Much of this small corpus of literature centres on the path-dependent evolutionary trajectory of EEs. Path-dependent evolution of EEs on the basis of life-cycle stages models has been the received wisdom in much of the scholarly literature on EEs (e.g. Mack and Mayer, 2016; Brown and Mason, 2017). Although the complex adaptive system of EEs has also been drawn attention to highlight the movement characteristic of the life-cycle stages model, it is a less appropriate representation of the evolution of EEs (Adams, 2021; Auerswald and Dani, 2017; Fredin and Lidén, 2020; Roundy *et al.*, 2018); path dependency within a life-cycle framework remains the dominant model.

More recently, the temporal evolution of EEs has been shown to be a non-linear process depending on region-specificities, particularly the interaction of regulatory and finance/funding factors of a region, as for example in Vienna, Austria (Radinger-Peer *et al.*, 2018). Decomposition of an EE into interrelated smaller subecosystems, with sequences and phases of the subecosystems explored through a case study of Montpellier's EE, has also been used to illustrate a "whirlwind model" for variations in EE paths (Cloutier and Messegem, 2022). Haarhaus *et al.* (2020) study EE evolution by examining the non-linear dynamics of EEs using a complex adaptive systems approach, chaos theory and the development of Singapore's EE to illustrate their ideas. Cantner *et al.* (2021), in their dynamic EE life-cycle model, take a novel perspective to elaborate that an EE in the "decline phase" can transition towards what they label "a business ecosystem", with both being subsets of a regional economic ecosystem. However, despite such recent refinements in the literature that underscore non-linearity and unpredictability in the movement of an EE, the system retains its general movement along a given trajectory.

Nevertheless, the validity of extant life-cycle frameworks for the study of the evolutionary dynamics of EEs is now being emphatically questioned (Cho *et al.*, 2022). In their plea for more holistic study of EEs, Abootorabi *et al.* (2021) assert that it is imprudent to indiscriminately follow standard models and methods to examine the evolution of EEs. Brown *et al.* (2023, p. 393) assert, EEs "are messy and complex entanglements replete with discontinuous junctures, disequilibria and ruptures where temporal development is definitely not on some preordained sequential trajectory" – path dependency is not inevitable.

Echoing Brown *et al.* (2023), we assert that EEs must evolve on to new paths and need to shift to a new evolutionary trajectory. As elaborated in the earlier section, EEs are not gender neutral. EEs can be biased against women, as well as other unconventional entrepreneurs and disadvantaged groups of entrepreneurs (Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Cohen *et al.*, 2016; Pickernell *et al.*, 2022; Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018; Motoyama *et al.*, 2021). Path creation is necessary to break free from such embedded biases and move toward inclusive EEs. Therefore we propose:

*Catalysing path creation*

In this subsection, eschewing EE path-dependency, we engage with the notion of path creation and the agency of multiple entrepreneurial actors to change the EE evolutionary trajectory. We draw inspiration mainly from two literature strands that link multi-actor agency to organisational and regional change.

First, in the management studies field, an influential article clarifies that path dependence refers to complex processes that are unable to break-away from their history and lock-in occurs in the absence of exogenous shocks to the system, whereas path creation is characterised by “distributed agency” which is “based on a relational ontology that sees agency as part of unfolding action nets that emerge around issues and events” (Garud *et al.*, 2010, p. 770). This contrasts with the complex adaptive systems perspective and path dependence, which “serves to rob actors of any agency, as they find themselves pushed and pulled from one state to another” (Garud *et al.*, 2010, p. 768). Crucially, instead of the agency of individual actors, distributed agency involves a multiplicity of different kinds of human actors who are involved in shaping the trajectory of an emerging technology (Garud and Karnøe, 2003).

Second, notions of path creation are increasingly employed in evolutionary economic geography and regional studies to understand regional diversification and development, change in industrial structures and new industrial path development (e.g. Boschma *et al.*, 2017; Miörner, 2022; Hassink *et al.*, 2019). Lately, these concepts have also been fruitfully applied to interrogate industrial change associated with the transition to a green economy and achieving environmentally sustainable goals (Eadson and van Veele, 2023; Gibbs and Jensen, 2022). As with the first literature strand, this literature too affords pride of place to the agency of many human actors in the system (Beer *et al.*, 2023). For instance, Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020, p. 707) refer to an integrative holistic framework comprising “the trinity of change agency”, namely “Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurship, institutional entrepreneurship and place-based leadership”. They identify three types in their trinity of change agency. First, Schumpeterian innovative entrepreneurship, in accordance with Schumpeter’s (1934) ideas of entrepreneurship and “creative destruction”, involves entrepreneurs “breaking with existing paths and working towards the establishment of new ones” (2020, p. 7). The second type of agency, in line with Battilana *et al.* (2009), encompasses leveraging resources to create new or transform existing institutions. Place-based leadership, the third type of agency, essentially involves mobilising actors and coordinating their activity “to stimulate the emergence of a regional growth path . . .” (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020, p. 9).

The trinity of change agencies are types of “transformative agency” rather than “reproductive agency” (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). While reproductive agency maintains existing structures, transformative agency or change agency is necessary to construct and shape new growth paths (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Bækkelund, 2021; Isaksen *et al.*, 2019). An agency-led approach related to the actions of a range of actors is key to understanding how regions transform and forge a new development trajectory (Beer *et al.*, 2023; Hassink *et al.*, 2019).

The EE literature has also recently begun to place greater emphasis on a multi-actor agency-led perspective. Ozkazanc-Pan (2022, p. 83) argues that “by rethinking entrepreneurial ecosystems as contested communities, new opportunities arise for thinking about change toward equity”. This rethinking shifts the onus and responsibility for change to broader ecosystem actors rather than lying with the individual. We concur with Ozkazanc-Pan (2022) that the responsibility for effecting change toward equity in EEs is not a matter of the exercise of personal agency to rectify deficiencies of the individual in networking activities and such like, but rests more broadly with multiple actors or communities of the EE. Similarly, albeit not in relation to EE equity, Scott *et al.* (2022) also highlight the centrality of the agency of multi-actors.

These literature insights lead us to align with the exercise of agency encompassed by the path creation view, and emphasise the potential of the agency of multiple human actors to disrupt the path-dependent trajectory of an EE. Therefore we propose:

*Proposition 2.* Transformative agency of multiple actors is the driver of EE path creation.

### *Metaphorical imagery*

Metaphors are frequently employed as a tool to help conceptualize and assist understanding of entrepreneurial phenomena (Hakala *et al.*, 2020; Haslam *et al.*, 2017). For example, Brush *et al.* (2009) in their “5M” gender-aware framework effectively use “motherhood” as a metaphor to represent the household/family context which impacts women entrepreneurs more than their male counterparts. Metaphors have also been frequently employed in EE theorisation (Audretsch *et al.*, 2019; McMullen, 2018; O’Connor and Audretsch, 2023).

At the overarching level, the EE is itself a metaphor which Audretsch *et al.* (2019, p. 316) aptly highlight “is a vehicle for carrying us to larger insights into individual and collective action in the field of entrepreneurship”. While Kuckertz, 2019 urges the EE metaphor be given greater consideration, the ecosystem metaphor and sub-metaphors of the ecosystem have now become an integral part of the EE discourse. For instance, O’Connor and Audretsch (2023) adopt the analogy of forest ecosystems as a conceptual framework for the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. However, this frequent recourse to metaphors in scholarly writing on EEs so far has neither conveyed the possibility that the support and resources in EEs can be unevenly spread, nor provided an analogy to fit in with the imperative for inclusive, gender-neutral EEs. In fact, just the opposite has been conveyed.

Hence, when Audretsch *et al.* (2019) hark back to the historical origins of the ecosystem metaphor, coined by Greek philosopher Hesiod around 700 BC, they point to the term *oikos* or household, as the basic unit of economic organisation and resource allocation. However, on contemplation, since common perceptions of spatial organisation in the *oikos* was a separation of male and female spaces with Greece a traditional, male-dominated androcentric society (Blundell, 1995). Such imagery could serve to turn a blind eye to the gendered nature of EEs that characterise EEs (Brush *et al.*, 2019; Motoyama *et al.*, 2021; Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2021). To move away from such implications and incorporate greater inclusivity, we suggest there is a need for more appropriate metaphorical imagery in the shift toward inclusivity.

*Proposition 3.* Appropriate metaphors contribute to changing the gendered EE discourse in the move toward inclusivity.

### *Underpinning constructionist-poststructuralist feminist framework*

The poststructuralist feminist perspective envisages gender as a social construction and places emphasis on how dominant discourses are constructed by gendered social practices (Bruni *et al.*, 2005; Henry and Marlow, 2014; Henry *et al.*, 2016; Reyes and Neergaard, 2023). Research in the poststructuralist tradition springboards from acknowledgement that entrepreneurship is entrenched in a masculine discourse which stereotypes males as entrepreneurs and females as the “other”, where “other” characteristically means “lacking”, “in deficit” or “less” (Henry and Marlow, 2014, p. 118).

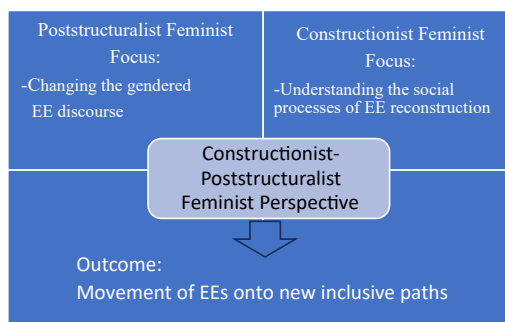
However, as Henry *et al.* (2016, p. 233) underscore, “a shift to constructionist epistemology” and “a post-structuralist feminist and constructionist epistemology is necessary”. Such a shift enables the study of gender as a process and a relational and performative construct (Ahl, 2006, 2007). Thus, combining the constructionist perspective which has more of a focus on the nuances of how “gender is done” (West and Zimmerman, 1987) with poststructuralist feminism, which focuses on how the discourse is gendered and must encompass change, we assert is a preferable theoretical framing for advancing thinking on EEs.

A constructionist feminist approach has previously been employed for relational analysis and to interpret the structural disadvantage of the networks of female entrepreneurs (Constantinidis, 2021; Foss, 2010; Hudson Breen and Leung, 2020). For this paper, since our focus is on a still broader context of the operation of entrepreneurship, namely the EE, a constructionist lens turns the focus on understanding the processes by which gendered EEs are reconstructed. It is our contention that this involves not only “doing gender” but also “undoing gender” that encompasses actions to defy the standard gender order (Deutsch, 2007, p. 122). As such in an EE context, undoing gender would encompass resisting the standard gender biased resource allocation of EEs (Brush *et al.*, 2019).

A constructionist-poststructuralist perspective is consonant with the suggestion that there can be change in the gender-typing of careers, including entrepreneurship (Gupta *et al.*, 2020). Recent empirical evidence finds that in Western societies, the commonly held masculinised, stereotypical image of entrepreneurship may be changing (Rudic *et al.*, 2021; Mattner and Sundermeier, 2023). This change toward a more androgenous view is noticeable principally among younger adults (Mattner and Sundermeier, 2023). Accompanying such societal changes that are conducive to changing gendered social norms that reinforce the masculinisation of entrepreneurship, “continued commitment, trust and collective action between feminists will be needed to address systemic structural barriers to equality” (Fotaki and Pullen, 2023, p. 2). We endorse this feminist line of thinking in our argument for collective action and transformative agency in the following section.

Our deliberate linking of the constructionist and poststructuralist perspectives serves to highlight that the need for changing the mainstream, hegemonic gender order of EEs must couple with the formation of new gender understandings (Deutsch, 2007; Poggio, 2006). Furthermore, it has been shown that gendered language and descriptions can reinforce the stereotypical masculinisation of entrepreneurship (Jones and Warhuus, 2018; Jones, 2014). Language matters and varies with the context and approach taken (Holmes, 2007). Hence, making explicit the two perspectives in our theoretical framing, is also to linguistically convey what needs to happen to make EEs more inclusive.

The application of a constructionist-poststructuralist feminist framework to EEs is portrayed in Figure 1. It shows the two feminist foci, namely, poststructuralist and constructionist. There are subtle differences in the application of each perspective to EEs. Thus, on the one hand Figure 1 shows the poststructuralist approach emphasises discourse change while on the other hand, bringing in a constructionist epistemology there is emphasis on the need for understanding the processes by which EEs can become more inclusive. Together, the resultant outcome is a movement and shift of EEs onto new inclusive paths.



**Figure 1.**  
Constructionist-  
poststructuralist  
feminist framework

**Source(s):** Authors' own work



From a feminist standpoint, this translates to change and new path creation away from the gendered formal and informal institutional conditions that discriminate and disadvantage some groups in the EE.

### **Changing the metaphorical discourse: an example**

To springboard thinking on how the discourse on EEs needs metaphors and analogies that effectively portray the imperative for inclusiveness, we offer an example in this section.

We put forward flocks of geese, their V flight formation, and the evolution of collective migration, as an example of an alternative analogy. With V flight formation, there is energy conservation, an important societal value for today's climate crisis-stricken world. Inclusion, gender neutrality and collective leadership essential to EEs, is portrayed by birds taking turns at the front and the interchanging of leader birds. Furthermore, the honking flight calls of both the male and female birds symbolise the encouragement within the whole community to work together, contribute, as well as share coordination of the migration flight (Birds and Wild, 2022). Importantly, the migratory patterns and habits of geese are also not path-dependent and evolve with environmental changes (Hooper, 2020; Tombre *et al.*, 2019). Social interactions, social learning and the inclusive community of the birds improve migratory performance (Aikens *et al.*, 2022). Thus, we suggest a flock of flying geese metaphor, effectively encapsulates the prerequisite features of EEs that we seek to highlight for an inclusive EE framing.

### **Moving the entrepreneurial ecosystem onto a gender inclusive path: Coralus**

In this section we illustrate our conceptual musings on the reconstruction of EEs with an empirical example. Methodologically, supporting new conceptual reflections with actual examples is valuable as it moves it from being purely conjectural to having a degree of factuality. Such an approach is beneficial especially in a relatively underdeveloped area of scholarly research like EEs (Wurth *et al.*, 2022). Thus, we draw on secondary data available in the public domain to reinforce our conceptual thinking on gender inclusivity via EE path creation and the processes by which this happens.

We focus on a global entity operating within existing EEs (Canada, New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom and United States): Coralus (formerly SheEO) [1]. Launched in Canada as SheEO in 2015, Coralus is a high-impact economic and social model powered by a uniquely inclusive community. Our sources of information were the Coralus website as well as additional online media articles from the five countries Coralus operates in. Coralus piqued our initial attention when it was launched with media fanfare in New Zealand where we reside. Thereafter, as researchers in gender and entrepreneurship we probed publicly available information on the organisation. This led us to choose it as an exemplar to support our conceptualisation as well as the feminist lens employed. It pertinently demonstrated that the literature informed propositions we had developed, aligned with evolving Coralus practice.

In the following subsections, we discursively engage with Coralus to illuminate how it is working to create opportunities for more inclusive entrepreneurship. We present Coralus as a "window study" (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 65) rather than an extensive case study. As such, we employ secondary data to peer through a "window", capture a focal view of this organisation and then use it to illustrate the EE model we envisage will advance gender inclusivity.

#### *Path creation via transformative agency*

We've never been ones to shy away from transformation.

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Originally, SheEO, the precursor of Coralus, was created as an experiment in more equitable funding for women and nonbinary folks, “SheEO began with the realization that, as women and non-binary folks, we exist in a world not designed by, or for, us. 4% of funding going to 54% of the population? Not on our watch”. From a poststructuralist feminist perspective, we can see how the *raison d’être* for SheEO was to establish a change-making entity as a direct challenge to the gendered inequalities in relation to entrepreneurial finance. Founder and serial entrepreneur Vicki Saunders had launched several successful ventures before in Prague, Czech Republic, Toronto, Canada and Silicon Valley, USA, with one company going public on the Toronto Stock Exchange (Horowitz and Saunders, 2019). Eventually pitching to venture capitalists in Canada, she experienced the endemic issue of gender bias and dismissal and felt compelled to “reboot this thing we’re in”, declaring “an urgent need for a fundamental overhaul of how we invest in and build companies”. Saunders, reflected on her motivation to transform systems:

When I was getting started with SheEO, people would say to me, “There’s nothing wrong with making money on an investment,” because that’s how it’s always been done. But you don’t have to make money on everything. This is a *radically different way* of thinking about investing — it’s more about a collective ensuring capital is flowing to innovators who have *been consistently put to the margins by our systems and structures* (Women of Influence, 2021).

Here we observe two pillars of the “trinity of change agency” (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020, p. 707). First, Schumpeterian entrepreneurship is plainly evident with the innovative finance model adopted. Members offer and access resources at their own pace, creating a self-regenerating pay-it-forward pool of skills, connections, funds and support which is then used to advance the UN’s Sustainability Goals (“The World’s To-do List”). Coralus has circulated nearly \$10 million to more than 120 women and non-binary led businesses by distributing capital via crowdsourced decision-making. This donation-based model involves “Activators” each donating \$1100NZD/£850GBP per year to join the collective and build a pool of “*regenerative, community capital*”. Forty-five percent of venture founders who receive this capital are from chronically excluded racial and ethnic groups. The payback rate on its unsecured 0% interest loans is 95%.

The second pillar of the trinity, institutional entrepreneurship, with a breaking away from existing institutional structures interwoven with the novel “ways of doing” their radical new approach to investing, is also conveyed: “Stop trying to fit into this thing [existing approach to investing]. Go create the new one!”. In addition, this is fuelled by a constructionist feminist approach that seeks to alter social processes to reconstruct EEs for the benefit of marginalised entrepreneurs. Illustrating path creation in action and encompassing institutional entrepreneurship, Saunders explains how staying on the current path was not feasible if more inclusive ecosystems are to be achieved: “From my experience I don’t think you can incrementally change your way out of this. You have to build new systems” (Field, 2022).

Finally, place-based leadership, the third pillar of the trinity, is exhibited through the decentralised structure of Coralus and the opportunity for women to come together across different countries and collectively organise within their regional EEs. For example, a highly credible businesswoman, investor and entrepreneur – Theresa Gattung launched the New Zealand community as Vicki explained:

... Theresa flew me over here with my husband and did a beautiful introduction to people locally and all of a sudden we’d launched in New Zealand ... and over time she brought her community on board. However as we’ve been growing we see *the collective as really being the next step* for this and Theresa helped to bring credibility to the idea which was very, very important and then a lot of her influence and so a lot of the ventures have had follow-on funding from people in the community that Theresa has brought in and really grown that support *and I feel like we’ve been quite catalytic in the ecosystem*. This idea has led to lots of other funding going on for women as we’ve raised awareness so it was wonderful to have her start this in NZ and *now the collective is kind of taking over* (National Business Review, 2023).



Coralus also serves to highlight the evolving boundaries of EEs. In the digital age EEs do not need be spatially confined – locally, regionally or nationally (Cho *et al.*, 2022; Song, 2019; Sussan and Acs, 2017). EEs can span geographic boundaries. Thus, Coralus is a community that taps into a global network but at the same time maintains a degree of national containment of some of its activities.

In 2022, entity members collectively reflected on their organisational identity and questioned whether it was “fit for purpose” and a true reflection of how they had evolved and grown as an organisation since its inception. The result was multi-actors from all five regions working together to reconfigure the SheEO entity in light of its organic development over its first seven years. Initially, SheEO sought to organise itself within the existing structures and discourses of regional EEs: “In the beginning, it looked like it was about money. We started with the words and structures we inherited. And realised there was more to it”. Described as a “surprise twist” the “more to it” was the emergence of “an abundance of social capital” from members. Thus, SheEO evolved from an economic model to one that combined a social perspective with a strong collective focus. “From that effort spilled out a wealth of resources and a foundation of trust—gifts from individuals to the collective”.

Evident is the leveraging of such resources to create new or transform existing institutions (Battilana *et al.*, 2009). When asked directly about the rationale for rebranding, Saunders strongly emphasized a discourse of inclusivity, community and collective impact, confirming the centrality of multi-actor agency (Scott *et al.*, 2022) to enable real transformation.

We changed the name partly because of inclusivity number one . . . . .over time as we decided to open up to non-binary folk SheEO wasn't broad enough so it was a mix of that and then also there's been this sort of shift in the world from focusing on the individual to focusing more on the collective, the collective impact we can have together and that we've noticed that in our community at the beginning we talked a lot about individual ventures, and how we can help individual ventures, but they've all said the community aspect of this is the real “special sauce” so that shift from CEO individual to the collective Coralus (National Business Review, 2023).

Overall, Coralus lends support for Propositions 1 and 2. As Coralus states they are “Uncovering a new path. A maturing economic model. A thriving collective. As these flows continue, the collective has gathered wisdom and experience to be shared and amplified”. Coralus proactively has navigated a new path for its inclusivity agenda to validate path creation is the way forward in the evolution of EEs toward inclusivity (Proposition 1). It is a collective where transformative agency of multiple actors drive EE path creation (Proposition 2).

### *Metaphorical discourse*

The name Coralus is itself a metaphor. It reflects “coral” of the oceans and its ability to regenerate in the right environmental conditions, combined with the first-person plural pronoun “us” to emphasise that it is a collective community rather than an individual that drives change.

Coral is regenerative; it is really the source of life in the ocean and a very small amount of coral, one percent actually creates the conditions for life for 25 percent of the ocean. It's almost homeopathic; a small little drop has a much bigger impact and that's what we see with our community. (National Business Review, 2023)

Integral to the regenerative properties of coral is that many species of coral are hermaphrodites so have both male and female reproductive organs and can produce eggs and sperm. Coral colonies can be comprised of solely hermaphrodites, single sex individuals or a mix of male, female and hermaphrodite corals [2]. As a metaphor coral complements the

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societal shift in our understanding of gender as a form of multiplicity that is “in a constant, though not necessarily radical, state of change, or becoming” (Linstead and Pullen, 2006, p. 1266) and challenges the binary thinking which dichotomizes the terms men, male and masculinity against women, female and femininity. The variety in composition of coral colonies explained above, depicts an alternative metaphor to enable more inclusiveness within EEs, as different subecosystems can co-exist and avail equally of ocean resources, i.e. opportunities in the wider EE. Thus, we find support for our third proposition: Appropriate metaphors contribute to changing the gendered EE discourse in the move toward inclusivity.

#### *Utilising a constructionist-poststructuralist feminist framework to re-imagine EEs*

As we illustrated in Figure 1, combining a poststructuralist approach with a constructionist epistemology allows feminist scholars to focus attention on changing discourse in EE research as well as emphasising the need to understand the processes by which EEs can become more inclusive.

As we unearth our biases, we make space for the emergence of new approaches.

Unearthing biases, loosely allude to the constructionist feminist approach of undoing gender (Butler, 2004; Deutsch, 2007). An example is the deliberate metamorphosing from SheEO to Coralus once the community reflected that it might be unintentionally excluding marginalised groups such as non-binary. Furthermore, the community emphasises the value and promise that indigenous entrepreneurs can offer to EEs and celebrates an investment portfolio that includes 45% black, indigenous women of colour and 15% indigenous globally, as Saunders explains, “nobody’s [other investment groups] portfolio has anything like that so we’re very, very activist about where that capital goes” (National Business Review, 2023). There is a strong movement here to defy the standard gender order (Deutsch, 2007) and switch gendered resource allocations to groups who would otherwise be ignored.

Coralus as an entity operating at the systemic level within EEs across five regions is focused on addressing the gendered social norms that reinforce the masculinisation of entrepreneurship. Adopting a poststructuralist feminist lens, we illustrate how Saunders as Coralus founder is acutely aware of the existing gendered discourse within EEs.

*I think we’re caught in a really strong mono-narrative of you have to go big or you should go home, that you need to go win the whole market to be successful these days. We have five people on the planet who have the same wealth as half the population of the world. The inequality that continues to be the result of this economic system I think is a big problem and if we could change our mindset and shift that thinking, I think that’s the big one (National Business Review, 2023).*

Changing mindsets and shifting thinking requires a constructionist-poststructuralist approach not just among feminist scholars but all EE enablers (Mouazen and Hernández-Lara, 2023) and stakeholders if discourse is to be meaningfully altered and EEs reconstructed. The reality that prevails is that the majority of entrepreneurs, be they women, men, transgender, non-binary, families, couples, or teams operate small, modest ventures that will remain so for the duration of their existence (Treanor et al., 2020). However, societies globally persist in celebrating and stereotyping the heroic male entrepreneur, driving a high-growth (often tech-focused) venture in media portrayals, in policy papers and in entrepreneurship pedagogy (Swail et al., 2014; Jones and Warhuus, 2018). Coralus actively challenges such stereotypes with the declaration that: “We do things differently so things can be different . . . We’re going to share what we’ve developed to help people in the margins”. Epitomising new path creation, transformative agency and reconstruction of EE social processes and discourses by Coralus, we conclude this section with the words of an entrepreneur who has been a recipient of

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Coralus funding and support: “You taught me that I don’t have to try to fit my vision into the current system. I could imagine and build a better way. I didn’t need to fight for my seat at the table; I could flip and reset the table (Erin)”.

### **Future research directions and concluding comments**

Our paper is a speculative theoretical exploration of what needs to happen to make EEs more gender inclusive. We conduct our exploration from the standpoint of EEs being a single composite community within specified boundaries, e.g. regional or nation state, in which all entrepreneurs and their supporters are encompassed. Hence women and non-binary genders, as well as other disadvantaged entrepreneur groups come within the purview of each boundary specific EE. In our exposition and propositions we are referring to “more traditional EEs” to borrow the nomenclature of [Pickernell et al. \(2022, p. 219\)](#). However, we now acknowledge and bring up the contention of [Pickernell et al. \(2022\)](#) that “alternative EEs” for disadvantaged entrepreneurs can substitute for and complement more traditional EEs. A similar question too was posed by [de Bruin et al. \(2023\)](#) in relation to social entrepreneurial ecosystems and EEs – are they the same, different or both? Likewise, this raises the question: Are alternative EEs and traditional EEs the same, different or both? In other words, in the context of a particular EE, are there overlapping sub-types of EEs or EE communities and how might they propel the overall EE toward inclusivity, is a question to be tackled further. Another overarching question that future research might ponder is: Is new path creation a prerequisite for the evolution of EEs toward inclusivity (as indicated by [Proposition 1](#))? Hence, a critique of our foundational conceptual premise of path creation is warranted in follow-up research.

Our example of Coralus highlights the value of grounding conceptual reflections in a real-world illustration. Future research can draw on new examples, and especially developing world exemplars, to examine the credibility of the propositions we suggest. Additionally, how leadership for transformative change, plays out in these different EE contexts is worthwhile investigating in greater detail. Furthermore, while our investigation of how transformative agency of multiple actors is the driver of EE path creation ([Proposition 2](#)) focused on an organisation operating in the private sector (Coralus), future research could probe how public and private sector actors, as well as actors from non-profits, might work together to chart new paths for more equitable EEs.

Our paper showcased the importance of changing the EE gendered discourse to move toward inclusivity. The discursive construction and re-construction of EEs is an area that can be studied further ([Roundy, 2016](#)). The surrounding narratives and metaphors are an integral part of the social construction of EEs and are assimilated into the informal institutional structure. [Martens et al. \(2007\)](#) reveal the value of embedding entrepreneurial activities within existing broader discourses. However, as our example of Coralus highlights with its name change from SheEO, telling new stories is imperative to convey the changed paths that must be carved out to re-route EEs toward inclusivity. Hence, the process of re-storying EEs can be investigated with further empirical examples, using feminist-driven methodologies and research designs, particularly studies that meet explicit feminist aims will be valuable. In addition, the coral imagery of Coralus and our own flying geese analogy, can springboard further development of more inclusive language and imagery for EEs (to validate [Proposition 3](#)).

Although in this paper our focus has been on gender inclusivity, broadening this to include other disadvantaged groups of entrepreneurs such as refugee entrepreneurs ([Bizri, 2017](#)), immigrant entrepreneurs ([Pugalia and Cetindamar, 2022](#)) and disabled entrepreneurs ([Williams and Patterson, 2019](#)) as well as to a broader consideration of intersectionality, is a future research recommendation. As [Marlow and Martinez Dy \(2018,](#)

p. 6) sagely emphasise, the time is ripe “to ensure that within entrepreneurship, we analyse gender as a multiplicity that transcends the male–female binary while acknowledging the importance of intersectionality and context”. We echo this sagacity for future study on the evolution of EEs.

Our paper is a first step towards conceptually advancing thinking on the evolution of EEs by exploring how gendered EEs can become more inclusive. It is our hope that we have shed sufficient light for future research to apply and test our propositions in other contexts, extend our propositions for intersectional study and accordingly articulate an inclusive EE discourse. We are also hopeful that our paper will spark awareness of the benefits of greater engagement with poststructuralist feminist theory within a constructionist epistemology, for understanding the nuances of EE evolution.

### Notes

1. <https://www.coralus.world/> All quotes used in this section are taken from the Coralus website unless referenced otherwise.
2. <https://www.endangeredspeciesinternational.org/coralreefs2.html>

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