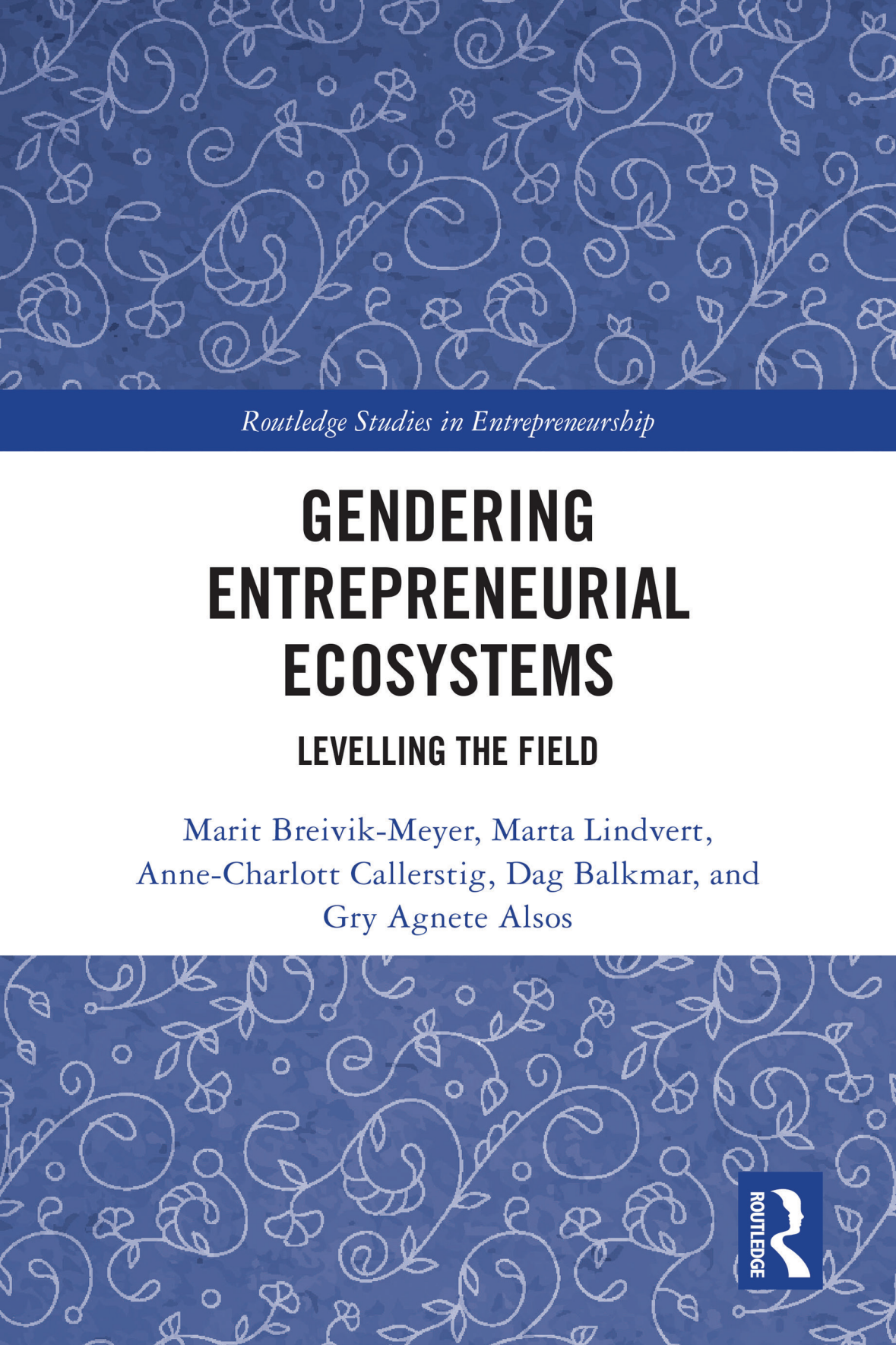




Routledge Studies in Entrepreneurship

GENDERING ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS

LEVELLING THE FIELD

Marit Breivik-Meyer, Marta Lindvert,
Anne-Charlott Callerstig, Dag Balkmar, and
Gry Agnete Alsos



“This necessary volume gets to the heart of how entrepreneurship and gender intersect in cities and regions. By addressing issues such as gender difference, child care, and networks, the chapters in this book invite a more critical perspective of if and how entrepreneurship can power just and equitable economic development.”

Professor Ben Spigel, *Babson College, USA*

“Dive into the dynamic world of inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems with this invaluable and insightful book on gendering entrepreneurial ecosystems. This must-read offers a comprehensive understanding of how addressing gender challenges is crucial for fostering equitable opportunities for all entrepreneurs and building inclusive, innovative environments.”

Professor Christina Theodoraki,
Aix-Marseille University – IAE, France

“Current literature, practice and policy assumes that ecosystems are neutral and that all entrepreneurs have equal access to resources, opportunities and support to start and grow ventures. The present volume addresses this assumption by analyzing how ecosystems are gendered. Authors explore key themes – founding, incubating and accelerating, financing and changing – providing insights for how we can make ecosystems more inclusive and how entrepreneurial ecosystems can be a space for resistance and activism in social transformation. Don’t miss this book!”

Professor Candida Brush, *Babson College, USA*

“Gendering Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: Levelling the Field” is an empowering and forward-thinking exploration of gender dynamics in entrepreneurship. While it critically addresses the barriers and biases women face, the book also highlights the immense potential for fostering inclusivity and innovation. By rethinking the structures of entrepreneurial ecosystems, it opens up exciting opportunities, emphasizing how diversity can fuel creativity and better opportunity recognition. A must-read for anyone interested in shaping a more inclusive and vibrant entrepreneurial world, this book provides a call to action for unlocking opportunities.”

Professor Jeaneth Johansson, *Luleå
University of Technology and Halmstad University, Sweden*



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Gendering Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

The increased interest in entrepreneurial ecosystems often builds on the underlying assumption that entrepreneurs have equal access to resources, participation, and support. However, women are underrepresented in successful entrepreneurial ecosystems and a persistent gender bias continues to exist. This bias is reflected in assumptions about the typical entrepreneur. It is white American men that spring to mind, portrayed as entrepreneurial superheroes, associated with risk-taking and big money. That they are men is often taken for granted; with successful female entrepreneurs seldom elevated in the same way. This illustrates how entrepreneurship is gendered, with implications for resource access and chances of success. The entrepreneurial ecosystem is not a level playing field.

This book gives insights on how to remedy gendered challenges that pose problems not only for individuals but also for the entrepreneurial ecosystem. By analysing ways of making entrepreneurial ecosystems more gender-inclusive, the chapters collectively highlight the impact of gender dynamics on entrepreneurial ecosystems and introduce innovative methods for fostering inclusivity. With examples from around the globe, they emphasise the actors and factors that matter for gender-inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The book is interdisciplinary and will appeal to scholars, upper-level students and policymakers interested in entrepreneurship and gender inclusivity.

Marit Breivik-Meyer is Associate Professor in Entrepreneurship at Nord University Business School, Norway. Her main research interests include venture start up processes, entrepreneurial ecosystems, sustainability, and gender perspectives to entrepreneurship and innovation.

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Gendering Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Levelling the Field

**Edited by Marit Breivik-Meyer,
Marta Lindvert, Anne-Charlott Callerstig,
Dag Balkmar, and Gry Agnete Alsos**

First published 2025
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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ISBN: 978-1-032-54785-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-55514-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-43106-0 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003431060

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Newgen Publishing UK

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Foreword

Gendering Entrepreneurial Ecosystems – *Inclusive EE*

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this edited collection on entrepreneurial ecosystems, a field of inquiry that has attracted growing attention and importance in academia, policy and practice in recent years. Originating from the biological and ecological literatures, the entrepreneurial ecosystem framework utilises “economic gardening” as a metaphor to account for local economic development. This biological/ecological perspective on entrepreneurship helps to create a structure and defines the relationships between human and non-human interactions: the actors and factors in specific entrepreneurial environments. The emergence of the entrepreneurial ecosystem concept is part of the new contextual turn in entrepreneurship which reflects a shift away from individualistic, personality-based research towards the acknowledgement that entrepreneurship takes place in a community of interdependent actors, individuals, entities, and regulatory bodies within a given geographic area.

Examining existing entrepreneurial ecosystems research reveals that much like natural ecosystems such as rainforests, deserts, or grasslands – each associated with a particular climate – there are significant global variations in the nature and impact of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Moreover, the inclusiveness and development of entrepreneurial ecosystems vary widely across regions and cultures, with such differences in ecosystem maturity and inclusiveness affecting the strategies and results of entrepreneurial activities. Despite knowing this anecdotally and intuitively, theoretically and empirically, the entrepreneurial ecosystem is depicted as a neutral space where individuals (actors) shape their own paths through independent activity, with success achieved via effort, energy, and creativity available to all regardless of race, gender, or class. This depiction is somewhat surprising given that within the wider entrepreneurship domain, great strides have been made towards understanding the various inclusionary and exclusionary characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, neurodiversity, class, and ability on entrepreneurial agency and activity. This oversight necessitates a more nuanced debate to determine whether current entrepreneurial ecosystems are genuinely open systems accessible to a diverse array of entrepreneurs, or if inherent biases within these systems systematically exclude individuals based on their ascribed characteristics.

Put simply, entrepreneurial ecosystems are not neutral spaces, nor do they represent a level playing field. This comprehensive edited collection responds to a need for greater recognition of who benefits from the cultural, social, and material resources provided by ecosystems and the context-specific networks upon which they are established. Specifically, this collected volume focuses on the actors and factors that matter for making entrepreneurial ecosystems more gender-inclusive.

This edited collection significantly advances the entrepreneurial ecosystem domain with three distinct and impactful contributions. First, it acknowledges the role of the social context in enabling or constraining entrepreneurship. In so doing, the contributors collectively “tackle the roots causes” of exclusion and omission as opposed to merely “tinkering” at the edges. For instance, until we truly examine the uneven division of household labour and limited access to affordable childcare, we will fail to recognise the unique challenges women face, including geographically and temporally constrained choices. Furthermore, neglecting the impact of public childcare provision on entrepreneurial activities means that targeted support to enhance start-up rates amongst both women and men is insufficiently addressed. Overall, by advocating for systematic changes, this edited collection attempts to remedy previous efforts to create inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems which to date have been fragmented and ineffective.

Second, this edited collection underscores the influence of ecosystem intermediaries on the behaviours and activities of the entrepreneur. Although we know the importance that intermediaries such as incubators and accelerators play in entrepreneurial ecosystems, we have yet to truly challenge the gendered assumptions of the rationale and objectives informing them. The contributors to this collection respond to this by providing a detailed examination of the role that incubators, accelerators and related support organisations play in promoting or constraining inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Third, this edited collection highlights the role of entrepreneurs in creating, maintaining and developing the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and not just responding to its pressures and opportunities. This is important as we need to move away from viewing entrepreneurs merely as conformists to existing norms towards seeing them as change agents and ecosystem builders. In challenging the assumption of gender neutrality in entrepreneurial ecosystems, the contributions make explicit the two-way causal interaction between entrepreneurial action and behaviour and rapidly changing institutional contexts. In so doing, this edited collection responds to calls to pay more attention to productive institution altering entrepreneurship as a fundamental agent in the development of healthy entrepreneurial ecosystems.

In challenging the neutrality of the ecosystem, this edited collection puts forth the entrepreneurial ecosystem as a space for resistance and activism within the wider process of social transformation. In sum, through acknowledging the complex nature of entrepreneurial ecosystems, this edited collection challenges the assumption of gender neutrality in entrepreneurial ecosystems through its exploration of gender-constrained pathways that women entrepreneurs and other minorities have to navigate.

In taking a broader geographical stance and a broader conceptualisation of gender, this edited collection offers a holistic understanding of the intricate web of interactions, actors, and dynamics that shape entrepreneurial landscapes across regional and national ecosystems. Importantly, it adds to the current entrepreneurial ecosystems discourse, which assumes gender neutrality and largely overlooks issues of diversity, inclusion, and exclusion. This edited collection is a vital resource, offering empirically grounded, interdisciplinary insights into the various components of entrepreneurial ecosystems across diverse geographical contexts. It is essential reading for a wide range of global stakeholders, including academics, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and professionals in funding agencies and incubators, all of whom are working towards driving change in entrepreneurial ecosystems. I am very confident that the edited collection will inspire and create a better understanding of *how and why entrepreneurial ecosystems can become more inclusive*.

Professor Maura McAdam,
Dublin City University, Ireland

Acknowledgements

This book was initiated as a result of the research project “Overcoming the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Gender Divide: A Cross-Cultural Perspective” funded over the Horizon 2020 Gender-Net Plus Joint Call (Project ID: GNP-122). We, the editors, wish to thank all the project members for their important contributions, which laid the foundation for this book.

We would like to especially express our deepest gratitude to Professor Maura McAdam, who was the catalyst in uniting us all in this research project on gender and entrepreneurial ecosystems. We are deeply grateful for her generous sharing of experiences and knowledge, and her continuous support throughout the creation of this collected volume. Her contributions have been pivotal in shaping the concept of the book, and we are honoured over the foreword she has written. Thank you, Professor Maura McAdam. Your influence resonates throughout the book.

1 Levelling the field

Towards more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems

*Gry Agnete Alsos, Dag Balkmar,
Marit Breivik-Meyer, Anne-Charlott Callerstig,
and Marta Lindvert*

Introduction: Entrepreneurial ecosystems as gendered systems

It is widely acknowledged that entrepreneurship is a masculinized domain (Ahl, 2006; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Despite the increasing number of women engaging in entrepreneurship activities (GEM, 2023), and a growing interest in women entrepreneurs among policy makers and support actors, the masculine norm of entrepreneurship persists. This norm is reflected in assumptions about the typical entrepreneur, often portrayed as a white, heteronormative male driven primarily by economic gain (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Marlow & McAdam, 2015). Consequently, women entrepreneurs are marginalized and deemed the ‘other’ within the area (Ahl, 2006; Özkazanç-Pan & Muntean, 2021), leading to gendered barriers in resource access (Malmström et al., 2017) and network connections (McAdam et al. 2019; Neumeyer et al., 2019). Entrepreneurial ecosystems are certainly not level playing fields.

The interest in entrepreneurial ecosystems has expanded exponentially over a relatively short period of time (Alvedalen & Boschma, 2017; Theodoraki et al., 2022). The metaphor of an entrepreneurial ‘ecosystem’ is increasingly used by scholars and practitioners to understand the entrepreneurial environment within a given geographic area (Isenberg, 2010; Malecki, 2011; Kuratko et al., 2017). This growing interest reflects emerging contextualization approaches, which underscore the social embeddedness of entrepreneurship (McKeever et al., 2015) and the recognition that entrepreneurial activity is a function of interdependencies within the system (Spigel, 2017; Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). By combining the contextual factors relating to the individual, the entrepreneurial ecosystem approach facilitates a systemic view of entrepreneurship (Stam, 2015; Theodoraki, 2024).

Entrepreneurial ecosystem as a concept emphasizes the actors and factors which jointly enable or constrain entrepreneurship (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). In a well-functioning entrepreneurial ecosystem, these interdependent actors and factors are governed in such a way that they enable productive entrepreneurship (Stam, 2015). The entrepreneurial ecosystem consists of institutional arrangements (formal institutions, culture, networks) and resources (physical infrastructure, demand,

2 *Gendering Entrepreneurial Ecosystems*

intermediaries, talent, knowledge, leadership, and financing) (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). It is assumed that entrepreneurs benefit from access to resources from entrepreneurial ecosystems, and that entrepreneurs who are better able to access the resources will have an advantage (Spigel & Harrison, 2018). Entrepreneurial ecosystems, comprising cultural, financial, and support elements, play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes. The literature discusses the structure, the evolution, and the outcomes of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Theodoraki, 2024), but often fails to address the recruitment and inclusion of members of the ecosystem. In particular, discussions often overlook gender perspectives, perpetuating implicit biases that contribute to inequalities.

There is an implicit assumption that in principle all entrepreneurs have equal access to resources, participation, and support within ecosystems (Brush et al., 2019). However, entrepreneurial ecosystems exhibit gender biases (Brush et al., 2019; McAdam et al., 2019), meaning that male and female entrepreneurs may benefit differently from entrepreneurial ecosystems. Since entrepreneurs who are better able to access the resources of the ecosystem will be more competitive than those who are not (Spigel & Harrison, 2018), this issue is not trivial. Ecosystems enable particular types of entrepreneurial behaviour (Wurth et al. 2022), and entrepreneurs' ability to access the flow of resources within an ecosystem will depend on their perceived legitimacy as high-potential entrepreneurs within the community (Spigel & Harrison, 2018). The masculinized norm of entrepreneurship may lead women entrepreneurs to obtain less legitimacy within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, with important consequences for their resource access and potential outcomes (Brush et al., 2019). Further, acknowledging that intersections of gender and other identity markers, such as ethnicity or age, may identify even less with the norm, the legitimacy issue may be more severe for some groups of women.

In this volume, we put the gendered nature of entrepreneurial ecosystems on the agenda. By discussing the gendered aspects of entrepreneurship from an ecosystem perspective, we emphasize the gendered context in which entrepreneurs operate (Welter, 2020). The aim is not only to contextualize gender in entrepreneurship, i.e. discuss how the entrepreneurial ecosystems impact male and female entrepreneurs, but also to examine how entrepreneurial ecosystems are developed and sustained in gendered ways (Welter, 2020). In particular, we are searching for insights on how entrepreneurial ecosystems can change; how they can become more inclusive and less biased. We are looking for ways to level the field.

We discuss three main aspects of the gender divide in entrepreneurial ecosystems. First, the gendered processes of entrepreneurial ecosystems impact the recruitment of entrepreneurs to the ecosystem, and hence the prevalence of male and female entrepreneurs (Hechavarria & Ingram, 2019). Second, gendered processes within entrepreneurial ecosystems may have implications for the legitimacy of male and female entrepreneurs seeking resources for their ventures, and thereby the chances of a successful outcome (Brush et al., 2019). Third, given the gendered aspects of entrepreneurial ecosystems, we raise the question on how they can be changed to become more inclusive; how to level the field. The volume is

organized in three parts reflecting these three aspects, which is discussed in more detail in the remaining part of this chapter.

Entering entrepreneurship

The extent to which entrepreneurial ecosystems are open to new members from diverse backgrounds and with different perspectives is an important characteristic of the ecosystem, with implications for the ability to create new variety within the system, innovation, and value creation (Thomas et al., 2015). Given that participation in an entrepreneurial ecosystem is voluntary, openness has to do with inclusiveness, i.e. that the ecosystem appears as open and attractive to various types of entrepreneurs, and connectivity, i.e. that there are contact points to potential entrants. Further, studies have found that high performing ecosystems with good access to market opportunities, funding, and talent have more women entrepreneurs participating (Berger & Kuckertz, 2016), indicating a relationship between inclusivity and performance of entrepreneurial ecosystems. However, the literature on what makes entrepreneurial ecosystems more inclusive, is inconsistent. On the one hand, supportive policies towards entrepreneurship and towards gender equality both have been found to be associated with more women entrepreneurs (Hechavarria & Ingrem, 2019; Berger & Kuckertz, 2016). On the other hand, detailed governance of the ecosystem from local government seems to lead to stronger male dominance in the ecosystem, perhaps because their specification follows the masculine norm of entrepreneurs (Berger & Kuckertz, 2016). In any case, the characteristics of the entrepreneurial ecosystem influence the prevalence of male and female entrepreneurs both at national and regional levels. The first section of the book explores recruitment into entrepreneurship, where the role of gender is investigated in relation to entrepreneurial ecosystems. The included chapters analyse different aspects of early-stage entrepreneurship, focusing on how women and men are recruited into entrepreneurship at different life stages – at young ages, as students, and as parents.

One conclusion is that gender matters. When looking into what influences the entering into entrepreneurship, one aspect is the openness of the entrepreneurial ecosystems to entrepreneurs with different types of motivation, also motivation that deviates from the masculine norm that entrepreneurs are solely driven by economic gain. Many female entrepreneurs are more motivated to engage in entrepreneurship that has a wider social impact (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). In Chapter 2, *Hamouda, Wood, Johnston, and Nevins* investigate so-called *Gen Y female entrepreneurs* in Ireland, women born between 1980 and 2000, arguing that they represent a ‘new type’ of entrepreneurs. Hamouda et al. highlight several characteristics with Gen Y entrepreneurs such as their desire for freedom and autonomy, a need to customize their working life, low degree of trust towards the government, strong focus on environmental and societal issues, requiring speed and immediacy and inclined to use collaboration tools, such as social media platforms. These characteristics sometimes clash with how support system actors expect early-stage entrepreneurs to act, and therefore support agents may need to find other ways to support this cohort of entrepreneurs.

4 Gendering Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Addressing gender disparities where they exist is crucial to foster inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. Like Hamouda et al., *Keane and McNaughton* (Chapter 3) also investigate young people's entry into entrepreneurship, and the role of universities. In their quantitative study, they explore the gender gap in undergraduate student's entrepreneurial intentions, focusing on the entrepreneurial ecosystem connected to the University of Auckland, New Zealand. They find that, despite comprehensive support for entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial intentions among students are low overall. Further findings show a significant gender gap five years post-graduation. This is attributed to a complex interplay of factors, at both individual and system levels. Identified factors are women's less favourable attitude towards entrepreneurship compared to men's, and women's lower entrepreneurial self-efficacy, perceived discrepancies in the entrepreneurial environment of the university, lower participation in entrepreneurship courses and extra-curricular activities, and underrepresentation in disciplines such as business, economics, and engineering. Given this complexity, the authors argue that measures to closing the gender gap are needed at several levels, both within universities and at the governmental level.

The following chapter is also emphasizing the role of entrepreneurial ecosystems available for student entrepreneurs. However, *Eynaud, Catanzaro, and Foliard* (Chapter 4) broaden the picture by discussing how women student entrepreneurs are affected by embeddedness into two entrepreneurial sub-ecosystems – both as student entrepreneurs and as women entrepreneurs. While research has pointed to that all entrepreneurs are not given equal access to resources, support, and participation within an ecosystem (Brush et al., 2019; Grandy & Culham, 2022), this chapter points to the disadvantages in the intersection of sub-ecosystems. Studies on gender, entrepreneurship education, and entrepreneurial ecosystems have often primarily focused on either women or students, thus neglecting the intersectional dimension of entrepreneurs' identity. Based on a systematic literature review, Eynaud et al. (Chapter 4) propose a conceptual model, illustrating a mixed embeddedness into two parallel ecosystems, emphasizing the non-inclusive nature of the mainstream entrepreneurial ecosystem. Women entrepreneurs may choose to belong to women-only sub-entrepreneurial ecosystems, and student entrepreneurs may choose academic sub-entrepreneurial ecosystems. However, the mixed embeddedness of women student entrepreneurs shed light on the failure of the mainstream entrepreneurial ecosystem to promote inclusive and egalitarian integration, relegating to sub-ecosystems the role to provide these perceived 'specific' entrepreneurs with necessary resources.

In their chapter on the role of public childcare as an element of importance for entrepreneurial ecosystems, *Kay, Bijedić-Krumm, Brink, and Nielen* (Chapter 5) critique the issue of the presumed gender neutrality of entrepreneurs, from the perspective of childcare provision for entrepreneurs with dependent others. The authors demonstrate how the provision of childcare is related to entrepreneurship and start-up activities, not only for women, but also for men. Through investigating and relating entrepreneurial behaviours with the relative lack or provision of childcare, the quality of childcare offered and the age of children in need of childcare – a

more nuanced picture emerges. The authors demonstrate how entrepreneurship activities for entrepreneurs with children are reliant on more general gender relations as opposed to being the choice of individual women between either prioritizing entrepreneurship or family. Childcare provision offers an interesting case as it shows the complexities, interlinkages, and paradoxes of gender inequalities. According to Kay et al., entrepreneurship can provide the flexibility needed for attending to family needs, but it depends on how time-consuming the entrepreneurship is, the age of the children, and the flexibility and quality of childcare services offered. An important conclusion is that the patterns that emerge when a gender lens are placed on ecosystems, make it possible to understand which institutional mechanisms that are important for promoting entrepreneurship and support gender equality across different life stages and family situation. The tension between the entrepreneurial lifestyle and family responsibilities is a concern also for men. The strains that men may experience negotiating tensions associated with fatherhood and entrepreneurial masculinity cause conflicts between family and work-life in countries with strong gender equality discourses (Hytti et al., 2024).

Support and resources from entrepreneurial ecosystems

Entrepreneurs often face resource gaps during the development and growth of their firms (Van Weele et al., 2017). Entrepreneurs can benefit from access to resources from entrepreneurial ecosystems, including human capital, social capital, and financial resources (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). Entrepreneurs who are better able to access the resources of the ecosystem will be more likely to succeed (Spigel & Harrison, 2018). Policy makers and practitioners seeking to develop prospective entrepreneurial ecosystems therefore seek to put in place support organizations such as incubators and accelerators to help entrepreneurs in acquiring these essential resources. However, there may be patterns of difference in access to resources between women and men in an entrepreneurial ecosystem (Motoyama et al., 2021), due to legitimacy issues (Spigel & Harrison, 2018), disconnection (Motoyama et al., 2021), and since it may be more difficult for women to adapt to the masculinized norm of the entrepreneur that dominates, e.g. within incubators (Marlow & McAdam, 2015). The chapters in this section shed light on the intricate relationship between gender, entrepreneurship, and resources, while also offering suggestions for promoting more inclusive support organizations.

Business incubators and venture accelerators are specialized spaces that offer tailored support services to young entrepreneurial firms (Hackett & Dilts, 2004; Cohen et al., 2019). These environments have the potential to enhance the entrepreneurs' resource base, either through direct counselling or indirectly by facilitating interactions with external stakeholders (Scillitoe & Chakrabarti, 2010); hence, they can be considered sub-ecosystems within the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem (Theodoraki & Messeghem, 2017). The impact on firm development depends on firms' active participation in the process and their effective utilization of the services offered by these programmes (Breivik-Meyer et al., 2020; Bruneel et al., 2012; Van Weele et al., 2017). Researchers have highlighted this

relationship, emphasizing the importance of firms' engagement with incubators for positive outcomes. While both incubators and accelerators provide resources like office space, mentors, and expertise, accelerators distinguish themselves by offering cohort-based programmes over a fixed period of time, typically three to six months (Cohen et al., 2019), seeking to accelerate the venturing process for early-stage, high potential startups to reach the market. Thus, venture accelerators have become prominent players in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Hallen et al., 2020). The gendered aspects of venture accelerators have received little attention so far. The chapters in this section discuss gender in relation to various resource-providing sub-systems of entrepreneurial ecosystems, such as incubators, accelerators, and investment systems.

As *MacNeil and McAdam* (Chapter 6) indicate, accelerators are not neutral spaces; rather, they exhibit gendered structures and processes that perpetuate inequality. These gendered dynamics influence resource allocation, network development, and entrepreneurial identity formation for both male and female entrepreneurs (Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Özkazanç-Pan & Muntean, 2018). Further, these biases may intersect with other identity markers such as race, age, and class. MacNeil and McAdam critically examine existing literature on accelerators and use an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) within the accelerator setting to propose an inclusive agenda. This agenda encourages reflective practices and research questions to uncover embedded biases and power dynamics that may marginalize women and ethnic minorities.

Accessing appropriate financing poses a well-documented challenge for entrepreneurs regardless of gender. However, extensive research indicates that women entrepreneurs face additional disadvantages due to their gender (Alsos & Ljunggren, 2017; Malmström et al, 2017). Specifically, they encounter hurdles when seeking venture capital (VC) funding (Brush et al., 2018). The gender gap in financing can be attributed to differences in social and human capital between men and women, as well as varying risk awareness levels (Carter et al., 2003). *Pohlmann and Veer* (Chapter 7) use social capital theory and entrepreneurial self-efficacy literature to examine the gender composition of start-up accelerator cohorts' effect on funding outcomes. The results reveal that an acceleration cohort with a higher proportion of male entrepreneurs significantly affects women entrepreneurs' post-accelerator funding outcomes. However, the optimal gender mix varies based on founders' prior experience: (1) Inexperienced women founders benefit from women-only cohorts, (2) Experienced women entrepreneurs thrive in male-dominated cohorts, and (3) Experienced male founders can also gain from female representation in the cohort. These findings emphasize the importance of considering pre-accelerator experience and gender when selecting entrepreneurs for acceleration programmes. Moreover, they underscore accelerators' role in fostering inclusive ecosystems by influencing women entrepreneurs' funding opportunities.

While Pohlmann and Veer examine the role of accelerators' in enhancing women entrepreneurs' funding outcomes, *Lindvert, Breivik-Meyer, and Alsos* (Chapter 8) focus on the supply side of entrepreneurial financing by exploring variations among

investors gendered understandings. Previous studies highlight the prevalence of gender bias and stereotyping among financiers, impacting funding decisions (Alsos & Ljunggren, 2017; Malmström et al., 2017; Balachandra et al., 2019). Even in countries with better gender equality, women receive only a small share of entrepreneurial financing (GEM, 2023). By analysing four biographical narratives of Norwegian investors, Lindvert et al. find that while investors aim for gender equality and unbiased decision-making, they still exhibit gendered perspectives influenced by their personal experiences. Interestingly, prior exposure to gender bias does not always translate into increased gender equality; it depends on individual reflections on the exposure.

In the chapter by *Stoker, Martens, and Wakkee* (Chapter 9), the focus is on service clubs as resource providing networks for entrepreneurs and on how women access resources within these networks. The importance of networks has long been acknowledged within entrepreneurship literature (Greve & Salaff 2003; Leyden et al., 2014). Stoker et al. explore the role of service clubs in facilitating women entrepreneurs in the Netherlands. The chapter contributes to a growing literature stream on women entrepreneurs' network access. Previous research has emphasized gender related barriers and limited social capital faced by women acquiring resources for entrepreneurship. It has also been argued that women favour strong ties over weak ties due to their foundation in trust and close-knit relationships (David-Barrett et al., 2015). Therefore, Stoker et al. argue that service clubs could be beneficial for women entrepreneurs, as such clubs are renowned for high levels of trust and diverse ties among members. Through studying women entrepreneurs' experiences within mixed-gender service clubs, the authors explore how membership serves as a route to accessing resources for entrepreneurship. The investigated service clubs' aim to support community service and social goals, mainly through volunteer work and fundraising. The study highlights the role such clubs can play in cultivating strong ties among their members, promoting member equality, encouraging open discussions about business related topics and leveraging expansive member networks for business prospects.

Working for change

The third section explores the entrepreneurial ecosystem as a space for negotiating and resisting dominant and gendered understandings of belonging (Marlow & McAdam, 2015). Entrepreneurship as inherently gendered upholds and influence ideas about who entrepreneurship is for, affecting who is (less) likely to identify with entrepreneurship and who can accomplish an entrepreneurial career. Indeed, the entrepreneurial ecosystem is not a level playing field and not neutral spaces (McAdam et al., 2019). These understandings affect the extent of openness that an ecosystem has to the inclusion of new members from diverse backgrounds and with different perspectives. While the success of the venture ideally should be based on the effort, energy, and creativity of the entrepreneur, elements such as race, gender, or class also matter. Yet, gender perspectives are at large absent from discussions

of entrepreneurship ecosystems in both practice and theory. The contributors to this volume all adopt a gender lens to explore entrepreneurship ecosystems to gain insights on how to remedy such gendered challenges, across individual, regional, and national levels as well as for specific entrepreneurial ecosystems. In the third section of the volume, the chapters specifically investigate the aims and strategies for achieving change, what effects these strategies may have, and why. Together, they create a better understanding of *why and how entrepreneurial ecosystems can become more inclusive*.

Taking a grassroots approach to inclusivity in entrepreneurial ecosystems, *Stroila, Heitsch, and Rossano-Rivero* (Chapter 10) explore the dynamics between women entrepreneurs' identity and the gendered narratives in an emerging entrepreneurial ecosystem in Germany. They identify four strategies that women employ in their identity work related to entrepreneurship: equity advocacy, allyship, disavowal, and norm conformation. The chapter includes an in-depth analysis of the ways that women may shape entrepreneurial ecosystems through identity work, by either revising or affirming the dominant narrative – with implications for the ways that inclusivity can be supported (or not) in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

In their contribution on so called blame narratives, *Cruz García and Davis* (Chapter 11) demonstrate how women entrepreneurs may internalize experiences of inequality, attributing lack of entrepreneurial success to themselves. They illustrate how this perception relies on understanding gender inequalities as something relegated to the past or occurring elsewhere. More particularly, their contribution explores the postfeminist presumption that gender parity is an achieved reality – where women are supposed to achieve entrepreneurial careers in a context of assumed gender neutrality. The chapter explores the forms of negotiations that women perform as they negotiate postfeminist ideas of gender equality being already achieved. A situation that creates paradoxes that obstructs any 'real' structural transformation and blurs the root causes of women's experiences as entrepreneurs – making women responsible for overcoming structural and systemic gender gaps.

Combined, the contributions by Stroila et al. and Cruz García and Davis provide in depth insights into how women both adapt to the unequal gendered context while also exhibiting empowering actions to support and empower fellow women within their communities, and by doing so, contributing to making entrepreneurial ecosystems more inclusive. Their respective contributions shed light on the complex and dynamic nature of entrepreneurship and in particular its political nature and its ability to enhance individual empowerment and contribute to meaningful social change. We recognize how the everyday entrepreneurial activities carried out by individuals experiencing various forms of oppression (Sabella & El-Far, 2019) also can make entrepreneurship a form of activism driven by individual oppressions and by those of others. Indeed, the traditional understanding of entrepreneurship as an economic activity has been criticized for concealing entrepreneurship as part of society and fundamentally as a process for social change (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004). With a growing recognition of women entrepreneurship as a vehicle of empowerment of the self and for social change (Alkhaled, 2021), these

contributions add theoretical and methodological knowledge to highlight its potential for social change. Such spaces could serve to counteract the internalization of oppression and personal blame, shifting the focus towards broader societal forces that constrain individuals' lives and re-examination of personal strategies.

While the previous chapters in this section address gender and change with a particular focus on women's experiences and negotiations of existing inequalities in specific entrepreneurial ecosystems, *Callerstig, Balkmar, and Andersson* (Chapter 12) enhance our understanding of how a so-called norm critical perspective can mitigate inequalities in tech entrepreneurial ecosystems. Learning from a case study from within the increasingly technically advanced transport sector, Callerstig et al. suggest that change towards more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems can be achieved through applying specific tools for integrating norm-critical perspectives in technology innovation. Such a methodology, they argue, builds on the development of making norms visible and thereby possible to address in already existing ways of working in tech companies by their corporate entrepreneurs. Gender norms can be both enabling and constraining for entrepreneurs depending on how they are situated along lines of gender, age, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and other axes of inequalities. Given the typically male dominated and masculine context that make up tech entrepreneurship and dominant understandings of what constitute 'innovation' more generally, they introduce several tools and a particular methodology for integrating norm-critical perspectives into technology innovation processes.

With a similar focus on how to achieve inclusive change in typically male dominated sectors, *Lindberg and Croon* (Chapter 13) explore the initiative called *The Yes Way* as a potential catalyst for inclusive change in the Swedish entrepreneurial ecosystem. The initiative aims to support diversity, equality, and inclusion among Swedish business promoters, by offering programmes and tools with guidance, knowledge and methods. The authors approach the initiative with the aim of advancing the understanding of the prospects of entrepreneurial ecosystems becoming more inclusive regarding gender, ethnicity, disability, and age through orchestrated measures. While Callerstig et al. emphasize the need for identifying and remedying existing gaps in inclusivity in a large enterprises' innovation processes, *The Yes Way* in a similar manner emphasizes the significance of making visible power dynamics that are often taken for granted in innovation processes. The results show that a central mechanism for inclusive change in *The Yes Way* is the creation of institutional clearings, where participating business promoters are orchestrated in contact zones where they meet, clash, and grapple in view of asymmetrical power relations. This enables them to take part, apply, and reflect on knowledge and methods for inclusive business support, while also forcing them to navigate asymmetrical power relations, resistance towards change and different approaches to gender in innovation.

Taken together, the chapters in this section all contribute to deepen our understanding of *why* entrepreneurial ecosystems need to become more inclusive, and they also provide important insights on *how* to achieve ecosystems for more diverse entrepreneurs. However, more research on the *how* is clearly needed.

Conclusion and future directions

This book examines gender and inclusion within entrepreneurial ecosystems by integrating multiple perspectives, including norm-critical perspectives and intersectional analyses. The chapters collectively highlight the profound impact of gender dynamics on entrepreneurial ecosystems and introduce innovative methodologies for fostering inclusivity. This approach is not just about recognizing the presence of gendered challenges but also about systematically addressing and overcoming them to create more equitable environments for all entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurial ecosystem actors need to keep pushing inclusiveness (Motoyama et al., 2021). The chapters in this volume present insights into how.

The studies presented throughout the book demonstrate the complex interplay between gender, entrepreneurship, and ecosystem dynamics. They reveal how existing structures and norms can often marginalize certain groups while privileging others. One of the key contributions of this book is its emphasis on the importance of gender perspectives. By making gendered norms and processes visible and challenging them, we can begin to dismantle the implicit norms that often govern entrepreneurial ecosystems. This approach is particularly vital in sectors traditionally dominated by men, where gendered assumptions about innovation and entrepreneurship can significantly hinder inclusivity. The book also sheds light on the role of support systems, e.g. incubators and accelerators in perpetuating or challenging gendered norms. The gender analyses presented in the chapters reveal how these spaces can either reinforce existing inequalities or serve as catalysts for change.

Focusing on gender and inclusion in entrepreneurial ecosystems is crucial for several reasons. It ensures that the diverse talents and perspectives of all individuals are recognized and harnessed, leading to more innovative and resilient ecosystems. Moreover, inclusive ecosystems are not only fairer but also more effective, as they draw on a wider array of experiences and ideas. This inclusivity can drive economic growth and foster a more vibrant entrepreneurial landscape. There is a need to change the gendered discourse in and about entrepreneurial ecosystems to move towards inclusivity (de Bruin & Swail, 2024). The discursive construction and re-construction of entrepreneurial ecosystems tend to maintain the persisting masculine norm of the entrepreneur, and conscious work is needed to change the discourse.

Despite the valuable insights provided in this book, there is a clear need for further research to deepen our understanding of how to create inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. The research in this volume points to several directions for future research areas to bring forward relevant knowledge to overcome the gender divide of entrepreneurial ecosystems. First, future studies should investigate the effectiveness of regional and state-supported initiatives aimed at increasing inclusion and diversity. With the potential of such initiatives, as addressed by Callerstig et al., and Lindberg and Croon, the extent to which such initiatives manage to succeed in promoting more inclusive ecosystems would need further investigations. Studies should assess the long-term impacts of these initiatives on

ecosystem dynamics and the success of diverse entrepreneurs. In this, attention should also be devoted to the next generation of entrepreneurs and their ideas of entrepreneurship, challenging the dominant norms of entrepreneurs and support, as illustrated by Hamouda et al. and Keane and McNaughton, which may require new approaches to entrepreneurship support. More research is also needed to fully understand the role of the wider policy in relation to gendering of entrepreneurial ecosystems, such as the implications that various forms of public child-care may have on diverse entrepreneurs, as addressed by Key et al., and raised in Davis and Cruz García's contribution. Further, we need more multilevel studies examining the relation between national context and policy and the level of the support system, to understand the influence on male and female entrepreneurs, as indicated by the findings from Keane and McNaughton's study of a university ecosystem.

Second, the contributions point to what the support actors could do themselves to become more gender inclusive, which raises new questions for future research. MacNeil and McAdam suggest reflective practices within accelerators to encourage increased inclusion and diversity. Similarly, the chapter of Lindvert et al. points to investors' reflections on their own experiences as a key to developing their understanding of gender in entrepreneurship. How to support reflective practices on gender within entrepreneurial ecosystems is an area which asks for further research attention, as well as practitioner experimentation. Further, this also calls for investigations of how the individual experiences of investors and support actors influences the gendered practices of entrepreneurial ecosystems, as well as for the development of ways to ensure that support actors gain the experiences needed as input to reflective practices in this area. Also pointing to support actors, Pohlmann and Veer's finding that the gender composition of accelerators has implications for the attending entrepreneurs' outcomes, raises questions on how gender relations within these programmes facilitate learning and resource development, but also on how the characteristics of the accelerator programme, such as gender composition, influence on the legitimacy of entrepreneurs in search for funding. Future research in this area is needed to better understand the indirect effects of entrepreneurship support within entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Third, there are contributions to the understanding of entrepreneurial ecosystems, which also warrants future exploration. There is a need for acknowledging actors and factors within entrepreneurial ecosystems that so far has received limited attention, such as service clubs or other arenas for informal support and networking, as exemplified by Stoker et al. Further, more scholarly attention is required to fully understand the implications that women entrepreneurs' informal support may have for making entrepreneurial ecosystems more inclusive and diverse, as raised by Stroila et al. and Cruz García and Davis. Women supporting women in business needs to be more fully acknowledged and further investigated to understand its potential for creating entrepreneurial ecosystems where more diverse entrepreneurs feel they belong. Also previously, studies have pointed to peer-to-peer interaction within ecosystems as important for women entrepreneurs (Leitch et al., 2013; Hughes & Yang, 2020). Finally, several of the included chapters ask for more nuanced understanding of the gender challenges in entrepreneurial ecosystems, advocating

for intersectional perspectives where gender in combination with other identity markers reveals more severe barriers for subgroups of entrepreneurs, as put forward by Eynaud et al., and MacNeil and McAdam in this volume. Incorporating intersectional perspectives to explore how multiple identity markers, such as gender, ethnicity, and disability, interact to influence entrepreneurial experiences and opportunities is important and will uncover hidden barriers and inform the development of more inclusive support systems. By addressing the, often overlooked, gendered dimension of entrepreneurial ecosystem, future research can contribute to the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems that recognize and support the diverse needs of all entrepreneurs, fostering innovation and economic growth.

In conclusion, this book provides a comprehensive exploration of gender and inclusion within entrepreneurial ecosystems, offering both theoretical insights and practical methodologies for fostering inclusivity. By continuing to investigate and address these issues, we can work towards creating entrepreneurial ecosystems that are not only more equitable but also more dynamic and innovative. Deeper knowledge about the gendered nature of entrepreneurial ecosystems extend our understanding of entrepreneurial ecosystems more generally, and therefore provide insights in ways to facilitate entrepreneurship and remove obstacles for entrepreneurs overall (Brush et al., 2019). The contributions from this book send important messages to all who seek to develop vibrant and prosperous entrepreneurial ecosystems.

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