

Entrepreneurship networks and business management with a gender focus in micro and small enterprises

Redes de emprendimiento y gestión empresarial con enfoque de género en micro y pequeñas empresas

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Abstract

This study analyses how gender-sensitive entrepreneurial network management can foster equality, diversity and inclusion within the global entrepreneurial ecosystem, especially in the context of Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs). The type of study described is qualitative, exploratory and documentary in nature, using a systematic review of the literature under the PRISMA method, 23 relevant studies were identified and analyzed. These studies include a combination of empirical and theoretical research. Of the 23 selected studies: 15 were empirical studies, which included qualitative and quantitative research focused on the evaluation of entrepreneurial networks, business management and gender perspective; 5 were theoretical reviews, which provided key concepts and models related to gender equity and business networks; 3 corresponded to case studies, which analyzed practical examples of inclusive entrepreneurial networks in different economic and cultural contexts. The results reveal that women entrepreneurs face significant barriers, such as limited access to financial resources and support networks, as well as gender stereotypes. However, effective strategies were identified, such as mentoring programs, targeted financing, and inclusive policies, that can enhance women's equal participation in the entrepreneurial arena. The study underlines the need for targeted interventions and public policies to foster a more inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurial environment. However, the findings also highlight promising strategies, such as targeted mentoring programs, inclusive financing, and the implementation of equitable public policies, that can transform current structures and promote a more accessible and sustainable entrepreneurial environment. In this regard, the study reinforces the need for concrete and coordinated interventions between the public and private sectors to ensure a more equitable participation of women in global entrepreneurship, driving not only gender equality, but also economic growth.

Keywords: Female entrepreneurship, MSEs, gender focus, business management, support networks.

Resumen

El presente estudio analiza cómo la gestión de redes de emprendimiento con enfoque de género puede fomentar la igualdad, diversidad e inclusión dentro del ecosistema emprendedor global, especialmente en el contexto de las Micro y Pequeñas Empresas (MYPES). El tipo de estudio descrito es cualitativo, exploratorio y de carácter documental, utilizando una revisión sistemática de la literatura bajo el método PRISMA, se identificaron y analizaron 23 estudios relevantes. Estos estudios incluyen una combinación de investigaciones empíricas y teóricas. De los 23 estudios seleccionados: 15 eran estudios empíricos, que incluían investigaciones cualitativas y cuantitativas centradas en la evaluación de redes de emprendimiento, gestión empresarial y perspectiva de género; 5 eran revisiones teóricas, que aportaban conceptos claves y modelos relacionados con la equidad de género y las redes empresariales; 3 correspondían a estudios de caso, que analizaban ejemplos prácticos de redes de emprendimiento inclusivas en diferentes contextos económicos y culturales. Los resultados revelan que las mujeres emprendedoras enfrentan barreras significativas, como el acceso limitado a recursos financieros y redes de apoyo, así como estereotipos de género. Sin embargo, se identificaron estrategias efectivas, como programas de mentoría, financiamiento específico y

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políticas inclusivas, que pueden mejorar la participación equitativa de las mujeres en el ámbito empresarial. El estudio subraya la necesidad de intervenciones específicas y políticas públicas para fomentar un entorno emprendedor más inclusivo y sostenible. Sin embargo, los hallazgos también destacan estrategias prometedoras, como programas de mentoría dirigidos, financiamiento inclusivo y la implementación de políticas públicas equitativas, que pueden transformar las estructuras actuales y promover un entorno empresarial más accesible y sostenible. En este sentido, el estudio refuerza la necesidad de intervenciones concretas y coordinadas entre los sectores público y privado para garantizar una participación más equitativa de las mujeres en el emprendimiento global, impulsando no solo la igualdad de género, sino también el crecimiento económico.

Palabras claves: Emprendimiento femenino, MYPES, enfoque de género, gestión empresarial, redes de apoyo.

INTRODUCTION

According to Orellana (2019), business management is a set of actions that are within a strategic business plan and that contribute to the growth of the company. Business management is, above all, a skill that is acquired over time, through experience and constant dedication to learning in the field where the company operates. Good business management is based on excellent relationships with those interested in the business, maintaining cordial relationships, exclusive benefits with partners, investors and collaborators. The above are business management actions.

Business and innovation management undergoes changes in its structure and involves new principles and relationships between people and work, with the aim of overcoming traditional management models (Alves et al., 2021). The organizational principles are based on a structured operation, dividing the company into individual departments in which people are responsible only for specific activities according to Cohendet and Simon (2017) cited by Da Silva et al. (2021).

For his part, Schumpeter (1939) cited by Cohendet and Simon (2017) highlights the role of the entrepreneur in the full realization of innovation. This factor differentiates the entrepreneur from being just an inventor. He is an authentic agent capable of directing the idea from the initial invention to the commercialization phase through the combination of knowledge, skills, capabilities and resources that differentiate and add value (Guerola et al., 2021).

According to Dougherty et al. (2005), people in innovative organizations generally seek to adhere to the following three basic principles: (1) look for opportunities to add, value and select the available

alternatives; (2) take responsibility for the entire innovation, process and expect everyone to contribute; and (3) seek and share knowledge.

In this context, McClelland (1961), a pioneer of studies on entrepreneurial characteristics, defines the first principle suggested by Dougherty et al. (2005) as the search for opportunities and initiative. According to Schumpeter (1939), in order to do things quickly, entrepreneurs take advantage of opportunities that arise to expand their business, act in new market areas, or even implement new products and services. For Dornelas (2021), he adds that attentive entrepreneurs can identify promising ideas before others, but these promising ideas can also arise from what other people cannot see (Da Silva et al., 2021).

Regarding the second principle, McClelland (1961) has stated in his studies that the entrepreneur assumes responsibility for the entire performance of the organization. Committed entrepreneurs apply business management, pursue objectives and goals, put themselves in the shoes of their employees and seek the satisfaction and loyalty of their customers, thus making the necessary efforts to complete tasks (Da Silva et al., 2021).

According to Dornelas (2021), he states that entrepreneurs continually seek knowledge, with the perspective of improving their knowledge of their field of activity. He adds that this knowledge can come from practical experience, information obtained from specialized publications, courses or even advice from people who have started similar ventures. According to Dougherty (2017), knowledge based on practice is

a collective entity, since no person can know all the theory or have all the necessary experiences regarding something.

In terms of gender, Aragon et al. (2016) argue that the gender of the entrepreneur influences investment decision-making. In general, investors tend to have unconscious gender biases and favor male entrepreneurs over female entrepreneurs. This can lead to a lack of funding for female-led ventures, which in turn can limit their ability to grow and succeed in the market. However, these gender discrimination tendencies are not universal. Some investors may be more aware of their biases and try to mitigate them in their decision-making.

Ratten and Jones (2021) highlighted business education and management as key components in the training of entrepreneurs and business leaders. Although it does not offer a specific definition of business management, relevant aspects can be drawn from how management and entrepreneurship education influences business management.

On the other hand, gender equity has emerged as a central theme in studies on economic and social development, especially in the field of entrepreneurship. Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs), which represent more than 90% of the global business fabric and generate a significant proportion of global employment, offer an important space to promote equality. However, it also reflects the deep structural and cultural inequalities faced by women entrepreneurs, limiting their full participation in the business ecosystem and reducing their potential impact in terms of innovation, growth and community development (Ribes et al., 2018; De Vita et al., 2014).

In many contexts, women face significant barriers on their path to entrepreneurship, including unequal access to finance, lack of representation in business support networks and gender stereotypes that restrict their ability to lead businesses. According to recent studies, these barriers not only affect the individual performance of women entrepreneurs, but also perpetuate exclusionary economic structures that limit the social and economic development of their communities (Drori et al., 2018; Özsungur, 2019). In particular, women-led SMEs often have less access to capital and strategic resources, which negatively affects their sustainability and capacity for growth (Elizundia, 2015).

To address these inequalities, this study focuses on gender-sensitive entrepreneurial network management, an emerging field that combines inclusive networking with business management strategies designed to

promote equity. Entrepreneurial networks, understood as systems of relationships that facilitate access to resources, knowledge and business opportunities, are presented as key tools to close gender gaps in the business ecosystem (Gueret et al., 2021). However, as Drori et al. (2018) point out, these networks, often dominated by men, do not always offer an inclusive environment for women, underlining the need to design specific interventions that promote equality and encourage female leadership.

Female entrepreneurship is influenced by multiple structural, cultural and social factors that limit its development. One of the main challenges is unequal access to financial resources. Studies such as that by De Vita et al. (2014) indicate that women entrepreneurs face greater difficulties in accessing financing due to implicit biases in financial systems and limited female representation in key business networks. In addition, skills gaps in areas such as business management and strategic planning further restrict women's opportunities for success (Nemlioglu & Mallick, 2021).

Cultural factors also play an important role in perpetuating these inequalities. According to Özsungur (2019), traditional social norms and gender stereotypes continue to influence perceptions about women's ability to lead and manage businesses. These perceptions not only affect financing decisions, but also limit opportunities for collaboration and mentoring, which are essential elements for the development of inclusive business networks.

Theoretically, this study is based on Barney's (1991) resources and capabilities theory, which emphasizes the importance of strategic resources – such as access to support networks, financing, and management skills – in creating sustainable competitive advantages. In the context of female entrepreneurship, inclusive business networks act as platforms to connect women with mentors, investors, and business opportunities, allowing them to overcome structural and cultural barriers.

Furthermore, the conceptual framework incorporates the principles of efficient business management, highlighting how adequate planning, combined with access to strategic resources, can transform women-led businesses into sustainable models of innovation and resilience. Authors such as Nemlioglu and Mallick (2021) and Pal et al. (2021) underline that by integrating a gender approach into management strategies, companies can foster diversity, improve performance and contribute to a more equitable business environment.

Recent literature highlights important advances in the understanding of female entrepreneurship and its relationship with economic and social development. De Vita et al. (2014), point out that women-led entrepreneurship has a positive impact on reducing poverty and promoting gender equality, especially in developing countries. However, these benefits are limited by structural barriers, such as lack of access to financing and specific training programs.

Ribes et al. (2018) and Drori et al. (2018) highlight that inclusive business networks can act as catalysts to close these gaps, by facilitating access to financial resources and mentoring that strengthen women's entrepreneurial skills. However, they warn that the implementation of these networks is still uneven and depends largely on public policies and the sociocultural context.

On the other hand, authors such as Gueret et al. (2021) and Sepúlveda and Hernández (2023) highlight the importance of designing specific interventions that address the particular needs of women entrepreneurs. These include targeted mentoring programs and support networks designed for women. According to Pal et al. (2021), gender-focused public policies, such as tax incentives for women-led businesses and gender quotas in strategic sectors, have proven to be effective tools to encourage female participation in entrepreneurship. However, their effectiveness depends on their contextualized implementation and their ability to address the specific barriers of each environment.

Similarly, Herrera (2009) argues that an entrepreneurial social network is the result of exchanges that take place between actors, which favor both the creation of new companies and the growth of entrepreneurial activity. Entrepreneurial social networks are composed of other networks that facilitate interaction and development: interpersonal networks, which are those formed by the entrepreneur himself (Hung, 2006), and interorganizational networks, which connect the entrepreneur and his network with various support organizations, such as government entities, non-governmental organizations, universities, research, innovation and technological development centers, investors, among others. In the field of entrepreneurship, two key concepts are addressed: business development and business strengthening, which are enhanced by the existence of these entrepreneurial networks.

Entrepreneurship networks are presented as key regional tools to effectively support and promote corporate environmental management, providing

guidelines and encouraging the development of new support mechanisms for start-ups (Osorio et al., 2011).

The analysis was structured around four key dimensions: Gender equity: Assessed as equal access to resources, opportunities and support networks in entrepreneurship (De Vita et al., 2014). Entrepreneurship networks: Understood as systems of strategic relationships that connect female entrepreneurs with financial resources, knowledge and business opportunities (Gueret et al., 2021). Business management: Analyzed as the set of skills and competencies necessary to run a company efficiently, including planning, decision-making and resource control (Nemlioglu & Mallick, 2021). Gender approach: Incorporated as a transversal perspective that promotes inclusion and diversity in business management strategies (Pal et al., 2021).

These dimensions will provide a conceptual framework to analyze the barriers, motivations and strategies that influence female entrepreneurship, highlighting how inclusive networks and business management training can close gender gaps and strengthen the sustainability of women-led MSMEs.

These theoretical and empirical contributions underline that the success of women entrepreneurs does not depend solely on their individual capacity, but also on the existence of support systems that allow them to overcome structural barriers and make the most of the opportunities available. This analysis highlights the need for a comprehensive approach that combines the design of inclusive policies, the creation of support networks and training in business skills as pillars for strengthening female entrepreneurship.

This study contributes to the existing literature by integrating a gender perspective into the analysis of entrepreneurship and business management networks, providing a deeper understanding of the barriers and strategies affecting women in the MSMEs field. By answering key questions, such as what specific challenges do women face in entrepreneurship networks?, and what strategies are effective in fostering equity in the entrepreneurial ecosystem?, the analysis offers a solid basis for the design of public policies and practical interventions that promote a more inclusive and sustainable business environment.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted through an exploratory review of the existing literature on entrepreneurship and business management networks in

MSMEs with a gender focus. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) method was used for the selection and analysis of relevant articles. This approach allowed a systematic and exhaustive identification of relevant studies, ensuring the inclusion of high-quality and relevant evidence.

To search for articles, various key terms and synonyms related to the central theme are combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT). The main combinations of keywords were:

- (“Entrepreneurship networks” OR “Female entrepreneurship”) AND (“Business management” OR “MYPES”) AND (“Gender approach” OR “Gender equity”)
- (“Female entrepreneurship” OR “Entrepreneurial women”) AND (“Business management” OR “SMEs”) AND (“Gender perspective” OR “Gender equity”)
- (“Gender equality” OR “Gender inclusion”) AND (“Business networks” OR “Business networks”) NOT (“Corporate companies” OR “Large companies”)

These keywords were used in different combinations to maximize the coverage of the relevant literature. The academic databases consulted include Google Scholar, Redalyc, DOAJ and Scielo, among others.

The inclusion criteria for the selection of articles were:

- Publications in English and Spanish.
- Studies carried out in the last 05 years (2018-2023).
- Articles that specifically addressed entrepreneurship and business management networks with a gender focus.
- Empirical research and literature reviews that provided data or analysis relevant to the topic.

Exclusion criteria:

- They would not be available in full text.

- They would not provide clear information on the methodology used.
- They would not have an explicit focus on gender or MSMEs.

The article selection process followed the stages of the PRISMA method:

1. Identification: An initial search was conducted in the selected databases using the key term combinations. A total of 922 potentially relevant articles were obtained.
2. Screening: Duplicates were removed and titles and abstracts were reviewed to assess relevance. Articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded, resulting in 80 studies.
3. Eligibility: The full texts of the remaining studies were reviewed to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria. Those that did not provide relevant data or analysis were excluded, reducing the sample to 60 articles.
4. Inclusion: Finally, 23 articles that met all inclusion criteria and provided relevant information on entrepreneurial networks, business management and gender focus in MSMEs were included in the analysis.

Figure 1
PRISMA flow chart



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that women entrepreneurs face complex and multifaceted barriers. Cultural factors, such as restrictive social norms, limit their participation in male-dominated entrepreneurial networks, while structural gaps, such as lack of business management training and unequal access to finance, restrict their ability to expand and sustain their businesses (Drori et al., 2018; Elizundia, 2015).

On the other hand, promising strategies have been identified that have proven effective in diverse contexts. These include women-specific mentoring programs, which facilitate the development of entrepreneurial skills and strengthen their confidence as leaders (Gueret et al., 2021). In addition, inclusive support networks and targeted financing have shown positive results by providing women with access to key resources that would otherwise be unavailable. Finally, gender-sensitive public policies, such as tax incentives and gender quotas, represent fundamental tools to promote equality in the business field (Pal et al., 2021).

Gender-sensitive entrepreneurship network management is an emerging field that seeks to address gender disparities in the business field. By reviewing the literature and current practices, several key challenges and opportunities were identified that affect women and other underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship.

Identified Challenges

1. Access to Resources: One of the most significant barriers for women entrepreneurs is limited access to financial resources. According to the reviewed literature, women face more difficulties in obtaining financing due to implicit biases in financial systems and a smaller network of contacts in the investment field (De Vita et al., 2014).

2. Support Networks: Entrepreneurship networks are often dominated by men, which can make it difficult for women to integrate. Networks provide access to mentors, knowledge, and collaboration opportunities, and a lack of female representation limits these opportunities for women entrepreneurs (Dheer et al., 2019).

3. Gender Stereotypes: Gender stereotypes and biases continue to affect perceptions about women's ability to lead and manage businesses. These stereotypes can influence financing decisions and business opportunities (Drori et al., 2018).

4. Policies and Institutional Support: Although there has been progress in policies to support women entrepreneurs, there are still gaps in the implementation and reach of these policies. Women often do not have the same access to government support programs as men (Ribes et al., 2018).

Opportunities and Strategies

1. Mentoring and Training Programs: Implementing specific mentoring and training programs can help women acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to overcome entrepreneurial barriers. These programs should be designed to address the specific needs of women entrepreneurs (Nemlioglu & Mallick, 2021).

2. Access to Specific Financing: Establishing funds and financing programs specifically targeted at women can help level the playing field. Initiatives such as women-specific venture capital funds and microfinance programs have shown positive results in various contexts (Elizundia, 2015).

3. Creation of Support Networks: Encouraging the creation of support networks among women entrepreneurs can provide an environment of collaboration and mutual support. These networks can facilitate access to resources, knowledge, and business opportunities (Gueret et al., 2021).

4. Inclusive and Equitable Policies: Public policies should focus on promoting gender equality in the business field. This includes tax incentives for women-led businesses and the implementation of gender quotas in certain sectors to ensure equal representation (Pal et al., 2021).

5. Education and Awareness: Awareness campaigns and educational programs that promote gender equality can help change perceptions and attitudes towards women in entrepreneurship. This is crucial to creating an inclusive environment that supports and encourages female participation in the business world. Educational initiatives can include workshops, seminars, and mentoring programs specifically designed for women entrepreneurs. In addition, it is essential to incorporate gender equality education in schools and universities to cultivate an equitable mindset from an early age (Jones et al., 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

Research on gender-responsive entrepreneurship network management reveals that while significant progress has been made, numerous challenges remain that limit women's full participation and success in entrepreneurship. The findings of this study highlight

the need for a multifaceted approach to address these barriers and foster a more inclusive and equitable environment for all entrepreneurs.

It is imperative to recognize the need for specific interventions to overcome the unique obstacles faced by women entrepreneurs. The implementation of targeted financing programs, specialized mentoring, and support networks designed exclusively for women constitutes an effective approach to mitigate these barriers. These strategies must be aligned with the real needs of the ecosystem and focus on promoting equitable access to resources.

Likewise, institutional and political support plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality in entrepreneurship. It is essential that governments and institutions implement inclusive policies and provide strategic resources that encourage the active and equitable participation of women in the global economy. Such initiatives can make a difference in the sustainable development of MSMEs and in generating a positive economic impact.

In addition, a profound cultural change is necessary to challenge and overcome gender stereotypes that limit opportunities for women entrepreneurs. Education, together with awareness-raising campaigns, can significantly contribute to transforming social perceptions, promoting a more inclusive and equitable business culture that values talent and capabilities.

On the other hand, support networks emerge as a key element for the success of women entrepreneurs. These networks not only provide access to resources, but also generate invaluable knowledge and opportunities that might otherwise remain out of reach. Strengthening them is essential to ensure the sustained progress of women in the field.

Finally, innovation and the ability to continuously adapt are essential to ensure the effectiveness of strategies and programs targeting women entrepreneurs. Constant evaluation and dynamic adjustment of policies ensure that they respond to the changing needs of the business environment and maintain their relevance and effectiveness over time.

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