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Journal of Entrepreneurship and Public Policy

Exploring female entrepreneurship experience of Ireland's business ecosystem: implications for business support

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper investigates the motivations and challenges of women entrepreneurs in Ireland, assessing the role of policies and Enterprise Ireland (EI) support for women-led companies and high potential start-ups (HPSUs). It employs the gendered theory of entrepreneurship and opportunity recognition theory to analyse the enablers and obstacles to women's entrepreneurship, particularly in the context of EI's support, aiming to suggest improvements.

Design/methodology/approach – Grounded in a feminist epistemology and employing a mixed-methods approach, a targeted survey explores motivations, barriers and supports the needs of female entrepreneurs in Ireland, offering a comprehensive gender perspective evaluation for policy enhancement.

Findings – Findings note a shift in Irish women's entrepreneurship motivations and outlines major hurdles like limited funding and work–life balance issues. It recommends policy enhancements in data collection, website usability, financial guidance and childcare support.

Practical implications – This paper aims to highlight the impact of gender-specific factors on entrepreneurship, the study highlights the importance of ongoing data collection and gender comparative analyses. It advocates for women mentoring networks and improved financial support to build a more inclusive entrepreneurial environment in Ireland, with potential global implications.

Originality/value – This study is unique for its in-depth exploration into Irish female entrepreneurship challenges, this study proposes actionable strategies with local and global relevance. Advocating for caregiving support integration and women's increased involvement in tech, it offers a blueprint for fostering female entrepreneurship. It contributes to global discussions on creating supportive, equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems, serving as a valuable resource for advancing gender inclusivity and equity in entrepreneurship worldwide. It identifies scope for integration of a feminist epistemology in policy development.

Keywords Female entrepreneurship, Gender, Mentorship, Support mechanisms, Ireland, Policy reforms, Inclusivity

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

This paper identifies the primary motivations for Irish women to initiate new business ventures, drawing on international literature. It examines the motivations and experiences of women entrepreneurs, with particular focus on the effectiveness of support mechanisms provided by government agency supports, delivered via Enterprise Ireland (EI) [1].

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The purpose is to explore the main challenges and enablers within the Irish entrepreneurial ecosystem of female entrepreneurship, using a survey of 25 agency-service users in 2023, and to consider directions and specific mechanisms [2] appropriate to addressing current weaknesses. The rationale for the study is the influential contributions of women entrepreneurs in shaping global entrepreneurial ecosystems (Brush *et al.*, 2019; GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2017; Meyer, 2018). Despite such contributions, women's representation in entrepreneurship globally is still overshadowed by men (GEM, 2022). This disparity calls for an exploration of gender stereotypes [3] in business (Constantinidis, 2021) and policy interventions to address institutional and market barriers (OECD, 2017).

Women's entrepreneurship is an important force in driving vibrant global entrepreneurial ecosystems, spurring economic growth and social change (Xie *et al.*, 2021; Nielsen *et al.*, 2021; Bhatia and Singh, 2019; Mashhadi Moghadam and Rafieian, 2019). Entrepreneurship, long characterised as an innovative feature driving business activity and market opportunity (Ali *et al.*, 2020), exhibits a rich diversity in its motivations and impacts, revealed in dispersion in national and gender performances. This diversity is particularly evident in Ireland, a nation distinguished by its high ranking in entrepreneurial activity.

Notable international transformation of the landscape of female entrepreneurship is also evident in Ireland. Historically, Irish women primarily focussed on domestic roles, with limited engagement in business. Legal changes in 1973, coinciding with EU entry, catalysed a transformative shift by no longer requiring women in public sector and civil service roles to leave the workforce on marriage (Bercholz and FitzGerald, 2016). Global and national evolutions, detailed in Brush *et al.* (2010) and Fitzsimons and O'Gorman (2022), marked a critical transition in Ireland's business sector, with increasing prominence of women in the business community, albeit from its low base. By 2002 Irish female labour participation reached the EU average (Worldbank, 2023).

At the same time, the global entrepreneurship monitor (GEM) consortium report ranked Ireland third, behind Iceland and Hong Kong, for levels of entrepreneurial activity, i.e. higher than the rest of Europe (Bosma *et al.*, 2008). However, positive overall rankings masked a rate of female entrepreneurship substantially lower than that of men in Ireland – 6% compared to 23%, and below European averages of 9% for women and 17% for men (Humbert and Drew, 2010) [4]. Earlier GEM analysis revealed similar figures for Irish women's entrepreneurship (of 6%), but growth was evident for men (from 12% in 2002; GEM, 2003). Despite a high level of entrepreneurial activity in Ireland (Bosma *et al.*, 2008), there remains a notable gap in female entrepreneurship rates compared to men (Humbert and Drew, 2010).

To address this gap, the female entrepreneurship unit was established by EI in 2012, focussing on gender-specific entrepreneurial supports. This initiative reflected a broader trend towards recognising and addressing the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, including gender stereotypes and market access barriers. A necessity for policy measures to address gender stereotypes and institutional barriers in business was called out by the OECD (OECD, 2017). Despite these efforts, recent data indicates a need for continued focus on enhancing the environment for women entrepreneurs in Ireland, with the country now showcasing higher rates of early-stage female entrepreneurship and a shift towards more inclusive leadership styles (Berkery and Ryan, 2023).

More recent data revealed Ireland placed third across European countries (behind the Netherlands and Latvia) – although growth in women's entrepreneurship to 11% meant Ireland placed above the norm for *both* men and women for Europe, notwithstanding the impacts of the international pandemic over this period (DETE, 2022). Ireland now stands out with its higher rates of early-stage female entrepreneurship, suggestive of an improved and more supportive environment for women entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurial landscape in Ireland, reflecting global trends, is witnessing a marked evolution in gender roles and leadership paradigms. Berkery and Ryan (2023) have highlighted a shift towards more

androgynous leadership styles within the realm of Irish management, signalling a departure from conventional gendered norms towards a framework that is more inclusive and diverse. This redefinition of entrepreneurship, moving beyond traditional gendered perceptions, positions the Irish entrepreneurial ecosystem [5] as an interesting case study. Characterised by its transformed and dynamic entrepreneurial environment and the changing roles of gender (Bosma *et al.*, 2008; Berkery and Ryan, 2023), Ireland presents a distinctive backdrop for exploring the nuances of this transformation.

Delving into the interplay between gender-influenced entrepreneurship in Ireland and the broader societal shifts affecting gender perceptions and participation, we examine how these dynamics shape the entrepreneurial motivations, journeys and challenges encountered by women entrepreneurs. Furthermore, this work scrutinises the efficacy of support mechanisms and identifies gaps in the current understanding of obstacles within the Irish entrepreneurial landscape, highlighting the complex interdependence of market forces and societal changes in gender roles.

The literature review on women's entrepreneurship, while extensive, reveals areas needing further exploration, particularly in the Irish context. Research on women's entrepreneurship in various contexts, including the gulf cooperation council (GCC) region, South Africa and China, has identified a range of barriers and success factors. These include inadequate funding, inability to clarify business goals and engagement in necessity-based entrepreneurship (Meyer, 2018). However, there is a need for new research directions that capture the richness of women's entrepreneurship and avoid reproducing gender stereotypes (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). This suggests a need for a comprehensive investigation into the motivations, challenges and enablers of Irish women entrepreneurs, as well as an examination of the effectiveness of entrepreneurial support mechanisms and its fitness in meeting their specific needs.

Research on women entrepreneurs highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and challenges. Incorporating feminist viewpoints is crucial to uncover the gendered biases in entrepreneurship theory (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Mc Adam, 2012; Marlow *et al.*, 2019). The absence of gender-sensitive theories in the Irish context is particularly notable (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Calls for a unified entrepreneurship classification and a focus on innovation-driven female entrepreneurship (Loza, 2011), along with a demand for in-depth qualitative research (Henry *et al.*, 2016) further define the research landscape.

This work, rooted in the gendered theory of entrepreneurship (Rouse *et al.*, 2013) and opportunity recognition theory (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), seeks to blend these theories with insights and empirical data. It unpacks the experiences of Irish women entrepreneurs, guided by the critical perspectives of Strawser *et al.* (2021), Muntean and Ozkazanc-Pan (2015), Marlow (2014) and Marlow *et al.* (2019) who argue for a more sophisticated understanding of gender in entrepreneurship. The goal is to forge a strategic toolkit to bolster women's entrepreneurship, potentially refining, if not redefining, current policies and programs.

This research delves into the intricacies of female entrepreneurship in Ireland, acknowledging the increasing focus on empowering women through government and agency supports. It aims to bridge the knowledge gaps by concentrating on three underexplored areas: the socio-cultural drivers for Irish women's business ventures, the impact of support agencies from the women entrepreneurs' viewpoint and the specific challenges and enablers within the Irish entrepreneurial ecosystem. These focal points highlight the importance of targeted research to inform and enhance support strategies for Irish women entrepreneurs.

The next section of the paper provides a literature review covering women's entrepreneurship, societal perceptions and the challenges encountered before turning attention to the specific institutional context for Ireland. This calls for the analysis of EI and

key impacts of EI on women's entrepreneurship are identified. The methodology design and data collection methods are then detailed. The paper culminates with the presentation of findings and an in-depth discussion of these outcomes, offering comprehensive insights into the interactions of agency supports and the experience and success of women entrepreneurs in Ireland.

2. Women's entrepreneurship: navigating challenges and shaping policies

2.1 Evolution and critical insights into Women's entrepreneurship research: bridging theoretical gaps

Women's entrepreneurship research has experienced a profound transformation. Initially, entrepreneurship research was largely gender-neutral, overlooking the unique experiences and barriers faced by women entrepreneurs (Marlow and Strange, 1994). This perspective began to shift in the late 1970s, notably through Schwartz (1976), who acknowledged the distinct characteristics and motivations of women in entrepreneurship. A gendered theory of entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow, 2012) emerged, emphasising the influence of societal, cultural and institutional factors on women's entrepreneurial experiences. This theoretical framework has been instrumental in shaping the current understanding of women's entrepreneurship. The approach highlights the need for research that accounts for gender-specific dynamics and challenges – without assuming that individuals face equal opportunities for entrepreneurship or that entrepreneurship is inclusive.

Significant theoretical conflict is evident where the conventional entrepreneurial environment, historically shaped by male-centric norms (Marlow and Strange, 1994) contrasts against the growing influence and participation of women entrepreneurs. Such a dichotomy is thoroughly examined through the gendered theory of entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Brush *et al.*, 2009) and opportunity recognition theory (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Ardichvili *et al.*, 2003). These theoretical frameworks jointly highlight the need to deeply understand the complexities in women's entrepreneurship, focussing on how gender-related social norms and perceived and experienced entrepreneurial opportunities interact (Goby and Erogul, 2011).

The gendered theory of entrepreneurship fundamentally questions the previously assumed gender-neutrality of entrepreneurship, revealing how the entrepreneurial experiences of women are uniquely sculpted by gender-based processes (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Hughes *et al.*, 2012). Concurrently, the opportunity recognition theory offers a prism through which the influence of gendered experiences and social conditioning on the identification and exploitation of entrepreneurial opportunities can be examined (DeTienne and Chandler, 2007; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Ucbasaran *et al.*, 2009). Recent critiques of the gendered theory of entrepreneurship and opportunity recognition theory have however highlighted the need for a more nuanced understanding of women's entrepreneurship. Muntean and Ozkazanc-Pan (2015) and Marlow (2014) both argue for a more gender-integrative approach that considers the impact of gender bias and the multiplicity of gender on entrepreneurial behaviour. Dy and MacNeil (2023) further emphasises the importance of recognising the heterogeneity amongst women entrepreneurs and the intersectionality of gender with other social categories. Strawser *et al.* (2021) provides a framework for understanding the current state of research in gender and entrepreneurship, calling for future studies to address these critiques and explore the full spectrum of entrepreneurial motivations and barriers.

Muntean and Ozkazanc-Pan (2015) builds on this by critiquing existing approaches and proposing a gender integrative conceptualisation of entrepreneurship that considers institutional and structural barriers. Calls for rethinking the gender agenda in entrepreneurship research suggests greater need both for a critical feminist stance and

advocates for a deeper exploration of gender as a multiplicity (Marlow, 2014; Marlow *et al.*, 2019). The combination of these theoretical insights is pivotal in unpacking the distinct challenges and drivers propelling women entrepreneurs, especially within settings such as Ireland, where long-standing societal and cultural norms have deeply influenced gender roles within the business sector (Noguera *et al.*, 2013; Welter, 2011; Ryan *et al.*, 2024). Thus, the value of this investigation lies in its ability to deepen the dialogue on gender and entrepreneurship, offering an analysis that is pertinent not only within the Irish milieu but also on a global scale. By navigating these theoretical complexities, this work guides both policy-making and practical interventions, creating evidence-based recommendations that could elevate the status of women in entrepreneurship and pave the way for a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem (Brush *et al.*, 2019; Hechevarría *et al.*, 2019).

2.2 Challenges and motives: global and Irish perspectives

Globally, women entrepreneurs face a plethora of challenges deeply embedded in societal and structural factors. These include, but are not limited to, entrenched gender roles, discrimination and limited access to finance (Loscocco and Bird, 2012; Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Yousafzi *et al.*, 2018). These challenges vary significantly across different contexts, with women in South Asia, Indonesia and rural Oman. India and Saudi Arabia face unique barriers, including educational and capital barriers (Agrawal *et al.*, 2023), religious and societal stereotypes (Hayati and Arini, 2023), household and organisational constraints (Ghouse *et al.*, 2021) and study–family balance (Abrar ul Haq *et al.*, 2021), patriarchal norms and limited access to networks and resources (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2010; Welsh *et al.*, 2014) [6].

Furthermore, motivations driving women towards entrepreneurship reveal a spectrum ranging from necessity-to opportunity-driven factors. While Hughes *et al.* (2012) suggest that women are predominantly necessity entrepreneurs, Jennings and Brush (2013) counter with evidence of opportunity-driven motivations, such as personal fulfilment and flexibility. This dichotomy, however, simplifies the complex array of influences shaping Irish women's entrepreneurial pursuits.

Rather, Ireland's unique economic policies, cultural norms and entrepreneurial infrastructure (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Henry *et al.*, 2016) suggest motivations are multifaceted. Challenges are compounded by male-centric national cultures, leading to infrastructural and regulatory hurdles (Naidu and Chand, 2017; Longoria, 2018; Kaciak and Welsh, 2020). Opportunity recognition theory (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000) provides a valuable lens for understanding the gendered differences in how entrepreneurial opportunities are perceived and acted upon. However, the original theory did not attribute gender differences to opportunity recognition. Instead, subsequent research revealed variations in experience and cognitive processes between genders (DeTienne and Chandler, 2007). Recent critiques emphasise the need for a more nuanced and gender-integrative approach in entrepreneurship research (Muntean and Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Marlow *et al.*, 2019; Strawser *et al.*, 2021). These critiques highlight the importance of considering gender bias, the multiplicity of gender and the intersectionality of gender with other social categories in understanding entrepreneurial behaviour. This complexity highlights the inadequacy of the necessity–opportunity binary in fully capturing the motivations of Irish women entrepreneurs. It signals the need for an in-depth exploration into the motivations, challenges and support systems from a gendered lens, aiming to cultivate an inclusive and equitable entrepreneurial environment in Ireland.

2.3 Mentorship and support networks

Entrepreneurship practice emerges systemically from individual and contextual features, with contingency an important aspect (Acs *et al.*, 2014, Welter, 2020, Harmeling, 2011). From

unique mixes of context and individual characteristics (e.g. experience, talent and networks) viable ventures emerge. A systemic approach is evident in entrepreneurial ecosystems research emphasising interaction of entities with their environmental elements (Acs *et al.*, 2017). The creation and development of social capital across networked stakeholders is emphasised (Neumeyer *et al.*, 2019). Network capital emerged as a notable concept in economic development (Huggins and Thomson, 2015; Byrne *et al.*, 2021) and a mix of weak and strong ties facilitate access to information, expertise and resources across phases of entrepreneurship (Stam *et al.*, 2014; Constantinidis, 2021; De Carolis and Litzky, 2019).

The significance of mentorship and role models as network elements in the success of female entrepreneurs is well-documented. The presence of entrepreneurial role models significantly influences women's likelihood of pursuing entrepreneurship (Buunk *et al.*, 2007; Quimby and De Santis, 2006), with mentorship and established networks playing a crucial role in supporting women's entrepreneurial journeys (Fadeyibi and Sajuyigbe, 2017; Sharafizad and Coetzer, 2016).

The effectiveness of entrepreneurial support mechanisms especially for women remains contentious. Formal supports like mentoring, role models networking and financial assistance are heralded for their positive impact on women's entrepreneurial success (Welter, 2011; Malmström *et al.*, 2020). In Ireland, programs like *Going for Growth* highlight the critical role of mentorship and networking in advancing women's entrepreneurship (Enterprise Ireland, 2020a, b). However, Marlow and McAdam (2013) highlight significant barriers to *accessing* these supports, stemming from institutional biases and a misalignment between program designs and the specific needs of women entrepreneurs given the social contexts in which they are embedded (Stoker *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, studies have highlighted a gender gap in access to external financing, with women entrepreneurs facing significant barriers to obtaining risk capital and encountering financial discrimination, such as stricter access criteria and less favourable loan conditions (Gusman and Kacperczyk, 2019; Gill and Ganesh, 2007; Dos Santos *et al.*, 2019; Muravyev *et al.*, 2009). The ongoing gender gap in financial access highlights the necessity for funding approaches that specifically address the unique needs of women entrepreneurs, especially those in sectors requiring significant capital investment.

2.4 Agency supports in Ireland

EI has played a pivotal role in supporting female entrepreneurs in Ireland, particularly with targeted initiatives introduced since 2012 aimed at narrowing the gender gap in entrepreneurship. These measures reflect EI's commitment to provide a blend of financial and non-financial support tailored to the unique challenges faced by women in business. Noteworthy programs such as *Going for Growth* and *Inspiring Women* exemplify EI's targeted approach, offering essential resources like training, mentorship and networking opportunities designed to empower women entrepreneurs across various stages of their business journey, from rural start-ups to ventures looking to scale and export (Enterprise Ireland, 2023; Lewin, 2023).

However, these initiatives, while targeting significant strides towards equality in entrepreneurship, intersect with broader systemic challenges within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly evident in financial support. Despite EI's efforts through the *competitive start fund (CSF)* and *high-performance start-up* (HPSU) schemes, a stubborn gap in financial accessibility for women persists, suggesting that these initiatives may not fully address the specific capital needs of female-led, high-growth ventures (Gusman and Kacperczyk, 2019; Dos Santos *et al.*, 2019).

The establishment of the female entrepreneurship unit by EI in 2012, alongside the development of policies and support measures tailored to the needs of female entrepreneurs,

highlight a recognition of the significant hurdles women face, especially in securing financial backing. The evolution of policy dialogue on female entrepreneurship, gaining traction with the Small Business Forum report in 2006 and the efforts by the department of justice and equality's gender equality unit, highlights a growing awareness and response to the unique challenges of female entrepreneurship (Forfás, 2007).Yet, the effectiveness of these supports in the face of ongoing financial disparities calls for a more holistic and nuanced approach to supporting female entrepreneurs.

Since EI's role extends beyond the provision of financial and programmatic assistance acknowledging and addressing systemic issues that perpetuate financial disparities fall under its remit. This includes refining or re-defining, support mechanisms to be more accessible and gender-sensitive and advocating for policy reforms aimed at fostering a financial sector culture that is equitable and free from biases against women seeking capital (Gill and Ganesh, 2007; Hechevarría *et al.*, 2019).

The significance of evaluating these supports lies in the complex challenges female entrepreneurs face and the crucial role of tailored, effective support mechanisms in fostering a more inclusive and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Ireland. EI's initiatives represent crucial steps forward, but the journey towards fully leveraging the potential of women in Ireland's business landscape necessitates ongoing attention to financial disparities and systemic discrimination. Through a nuanced approach, this work highlights the importance of continuous adaptation of support strategies to meet the evolving needs of female entrepreneurs in Ireland, ensuring their ability to thrive and contribute significantly to the economy.

3. Methods and research design

This study utilised a qualitative research approach to explore the motivations and experiences of Irish women entrepreneurs who have received support from EI. Following the framework outlined by Creswell and Plano (2007) and Creswell and Creswell (2018), the research was designed to delve into the entrepreneurial motivations of Irish women, particularly focussing on how EI's support influenced their entrepreneurial journey.

3.1 Participant selection and sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to ultimately identify 25 women entrepreneurs who received EI funding within the five years to 2023. This method was chosen specifically to target participants with direct, relevant experience of the support mechanisms being studied [7]. The sampling criteria ensured all respondents could provide informed insights about EI's impact on their entrepreneurial journeys and respond to the survey within the study timeframe. Following Gog's (2015) guidelines for multiple case validity, the sample included diverse participants from various regions and business sectors across Ireland. This approach allowed for a focussed yet comprehensive exploration of experiences with EI support, capturing a range of perspectives within this specific group of funded women entrepreneurs.

The sample size of 25 responses was influenced by several factors related to the evolving landscape of entrepreneurial support in Ireland. The relatively recent introduction of some funding programs, such as the pre-seed start fund (PSSF), naturally limited the pool of eligible participants. To ensure timely and relevant data collection, the study focussed on companies known to be actively operating and likely to respond within the short research timeframe. It is noteworthy that some potential participants were excluded from the sample due to having ceased trading, sold their businesses or transitioned to different support agencies, typically local enterprise offices. These constraints, while limiting the sample size, ensured that the responses gathered were from current and relevant participants, thus providing an accurate snapshot of the present entrepreneurial ecosystem supported by EI.

To support the survey's reliability and validity, a pilot study was initially conducted with a select group of women entrepreneurs outside the main sample, allowing for refinement of questions based on feedback. Additionally, the survey underwent an ethics review by the social research ethics committee at University College Cork, Ireland (Log, 2023–106), to eliminate bias and enhance validity. These steps guaranteed that the survey accurately captured the intended data while maintaining ethical standards.

3.2 Female enterprise Ireland funding

Over the five years to 2023, EI provided significant equity funding to female entrepreneurs through various programmes. The HPSU programme has been the most consistent, supporting between 19 and 34 female-led businesses annually from 2019 to 2023. The CSF, which offered €50,000 in equity funding, supported 19 female entrepreneurs in 2020, 14 in 2021 and five in 2022 before being discontinued. The PSSF, a newer initiative offering either €50,000 or €100,000, supported 15 female entrepreneurs in 2022 and 18 in 2023. While these numbers represent a significant investment in women-led businesses, some entrepreneurs may have benefited from multiple funding streams. Therefore, the total number of unique female entrepreneurs supported is at least 122 (the highest number from the HPSU programme) but less than the sum of all programme participants.

3.3 Survey design and distribution

Data were collected through a survey consisting of 20 questions, blending open and closed formats to explore themes of business motivations, effectiveness of EI's support and challenges faced by entrepreneurs. The survey, crafted to ensure both accuracy and comprehensiveness (Bell, 2005; Saunders *et al.*, 2019), was distributed electronically to participants during the first half of 2023. With a response rate of 81% (25 responses), the study achieved a typical return rate for online surveys (Wu *et al.*, 2022), affirming the targeted sampling strategy's effectiveness.

3.4 Data analysis approach

Analysis was conducted using a cross-sectional approach, following recommendations by Saunders *et al.* (2019) and Newman (2014), to provide a contemporary snapshot of women's entrepreneurship in Ireland. A thematic analysis was employed to identify and organise themes (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). The analysis employed percentage-based and descriptive techniques.

3.5 Research design considerations

The research design was structured to delve into the core phenomenon of examining the motivations, challenges and experiences of Irish women entrepreneurs, particularly in relation to the support from EI. This exploration was crucial in understanding the unique circumstances and hurdles that Irish women face in their entrepreneurial journey and how institutional support from EI influences their business development and success. The socio-economic and cultural context of Ireland, offering both challenges and opportunities for women entrepreneurs, was a key consideration.

Three research questions were designed to investigate:

(1) What role do socio-cultural factors play in influencing the entrepreneurial motivations of Irish women? This question aims to delve into the motivations driving Irish women to launch new business ventures, with a focus on the socio-cultural context as framed by the gendered theory of entrepreneurship, to uncover the specific socio-cultural influences that propel women in Ireland towards entrepreneurship.

(2) How do women entrepreneurs perceive the effectiveness of support from EI in meeting their specific needs? This question aims to critically evaluate the alignment between Irish support agencies and the actual requirements of women entrepreneurs, to identify any gaps or mismatches in institutional support.

(3) What specific challenges and enablers within the Irish entrepreneurial ecosystem impact women's business ventures, and how do agency supports like EI, societal norms, gender biases and policy frameworks contribute to these conditions? This question focusses on outlining the distinct barriers and supports influencing women's entrepreneurship in Ireland, with an aim to analyse the intricate dynamics shaped by institutional support, societal attitudes and policy environments

3.6 Primary and secondary data sources

The study's primary data source is the survey responses from 20 Irish women entrepreneurs. This is supplemented by secondary sources, including GEM reports, government and EI reports, OECD analyses and existing literature, which informed the survey's construction and provided context for the research.

3.7 Sample survey questions

The survey incorporated a mix of open-ended questions to gather in-depth insights and closed-ended questions for quantitative assessment of EI's support. The questions were as follows:

Primary business motivations: What inspired you to start your business? (open-ended)

Entrepreneurial challenges: Can you describe the challenges you've encountered on your entrepreneurial path? (open-ended)

Support from EI: How has support from EI contributed to your business? (open-ended)

Effectiveness of financial support: On a scale from 1 to 5, how would you rate the effectiveness of financial assistance from EI in promoting your business's growth? (closed-ended, rating scale)

Impact of non-financial support: How would you rate the influence of EI's non-financial support (such as mentorship and networking opportunities) on your business's development? (closed-ended, rating scale)

Suggestions for improvement: What recommendations do you have for enhancing the support provided by EI? (open-ended)

Table 1 demonstrates how the survey questions are designed to gather data that directly addresses the research questions.

The questions capture comprehensive perspectives on the motivations behind business initiation, the hurdles faced by entrepreneurs, the utility of EI support and areas for potential enhancement within EI's support framework.

4. Results

4.1 Respondent profile

The survey highlighted diverse stages of business operation amongst the female entrepreneurs. Across the sample, 40% have been operating their business for over five years, indicating established ventures. Another 40% were in the growth phase, ranging from one to three years, while 20% were in the intermediate stage of four to five years, showcasing a comprehensive range of business development stages (See Figure 1). Geographically, 70% are based in urban areas, aligning with the trend of urban entrepreneurship, while the remaining 30% operate in rural Ireland, reflecting the diversity of the entrepreneurial landscape (See Figure 2).

Table 1.
Linking research questions to survey questions

Research question	Relevant survey questions
1. What role do socio-cultural factors play in influencing the entrepreneurial motivations of Irish women?	What was your motivation to start your current business? Prior to setting up your current business, what was your previous occupation?
2. How do women entrepreneurs perceive the effectiveness of support from Enterprise Ireland in meeting their specific needs?	Five questions about respondents' satisfaction with EI funding supports and navigation of EI processes What EI non-funding mechanism has been of most benefit to you? What has Enterprise Ireland done well for women entrepreneurs? What could Enterprise Ireland do better for women entrepreneurs?
3. What specific challenges and enablers within the Irish entrepreneurial ecosystem impact women's business ventures, and how do agency supports like Enterprise Ireland, societal norms, gender biases, and policy frameworks contribute to these conditions?	When you were setting up your company, where did you start to look for support? Two questions about skills programmes and types of Enterprise Ireland sills programs Ranking importance of peer-to-peer network What is the biggest challenge in business that you are currently facing?

Source(s): Authors own work

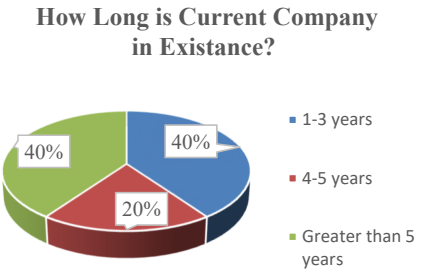


Figure 1.
Age of company

Source(s): Authors' own

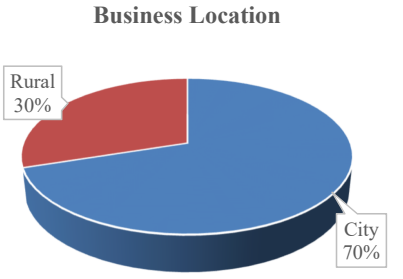


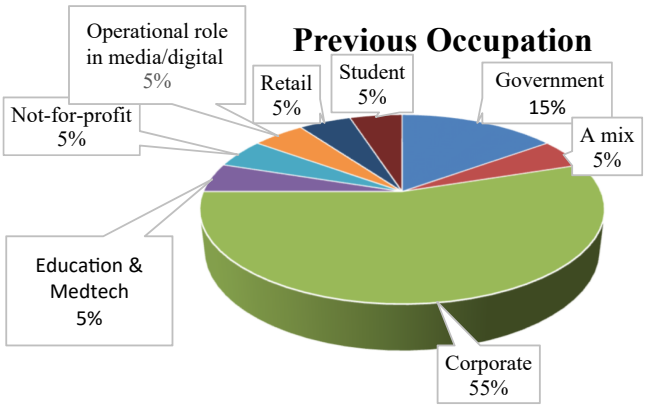
Figure 2.
Location of business

Source(s): Authors' own

The respondents' background experiences were diverse: 55% transitioned from corporate sectors, 30% from varied fields and 15% from government roles, indicating a rich tapestry of experiences feeding into entrepreneurship (See Figure 3).

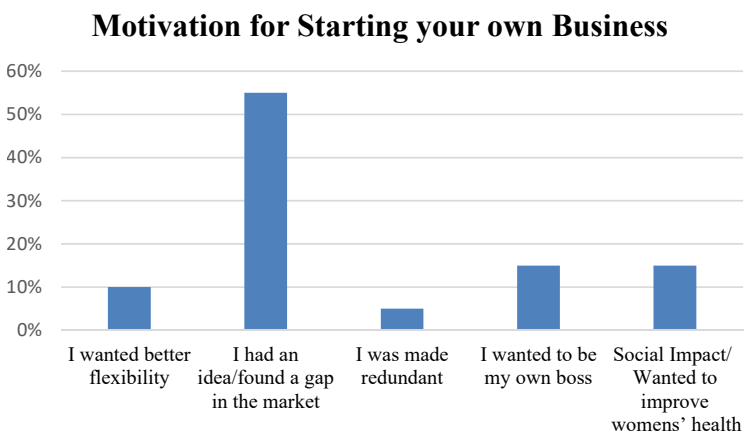
4.2 Reasons for entrepreneurship

The survey revealed varied motivations for entrepreneurship. A notable 55% were driven by opportunity, such as identifying market gaps or innovative ideas. This finding aligns relatively well with the broader GEM data, which shows 59% of Irish entrepreneurs motivated by wealth creation and 58% by making a difference (Fitzsimons and O'Gorman, 2022). The survey also uncovered that "the pursuit of greater flexibility in study arrangements" [8] motivated 15% of respondents, a unique insight not directly captured in the GEM metrics. Redundancy catalysed 5% into entrepreneurship, indicating a proactive approach in the entrepreneurial landscape (See Figure 4). This percentage is significantly



Source(s): Authors' own

Figure 3. Previous occupation



Source(s): Authors' own

Figure 4. Motivation for starting a business

lower than the GEM report's finding of 56% motivated by job scarcity, likely due to the specific nature of the EI-supported sample here.

4.3 Support mechanisms and impact

Government support was identified as 'crucial' for 80% of respondents, with 50% specifically identifying EI as their primary support source. Local enterprise offices were important for 30%, and 20% relied on peer networks, emphasising the value of shared experiences in entrepreneurship (See Figure 5).

It is noteworthy that all respondents reported benefitting from EI's funding, highlighting the critical role of both financial aid and non-financial support such as networking and mentorship. The effectiveness of these supports appears significantly influenced by their timely provision.

4.4 Utilisation of EI supports

The survey revealed 65% of respondents utilised the HPSU funding from EI, highlighting its critical role in business growth. Mentorship programmes were also pivotal, with 60% of respondents reporting benefit from them, as illustrated in Figure 6 showcasing the importance of expert guidance.

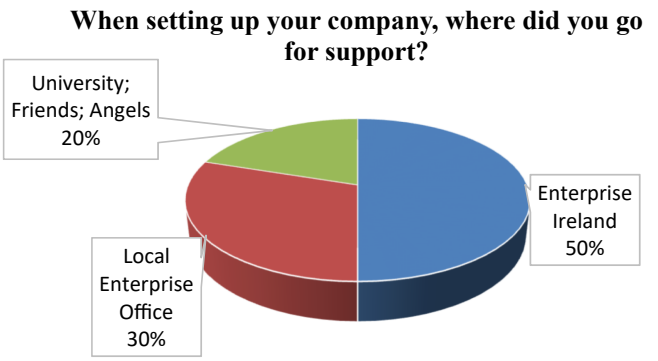
Furthermore, 35% accessed both feasibility and competitive start funds, 30% utilised research and development grants and 20% benefited from key hire funding, reflecting the diverse funding requirements across different business stages.

4.5 Participation in Skills Programs

The survey indicated a high participation rate (75%) in skills development programs, emphasising the significance of ongoing professional growth. The new frontiers [9] programme was favoured by half of the respondents, while going for growth [10] attracted 30%, highlighting these programmes' perceived effectiveness in supporting entrepreneurial progress. See Figures 7 and 8 below.

4.6 Confidence and skill level perception

The survey uncovered a notable confidence gap amongst female entrepreneurs, with only 39% feeling fully prepared to start a business. This confidence gap is even more pronounced when compared to the GEM data for men (66%). This suggests that the confidence gap might



Source(s): Authors' own

Figure 5.
Starting point for support

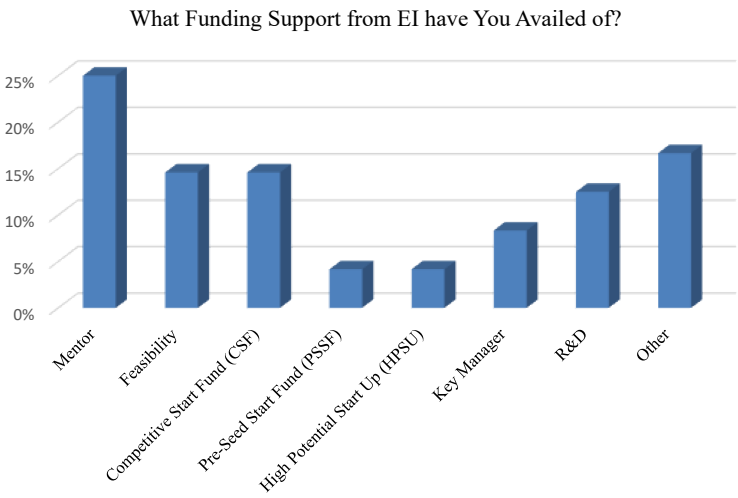


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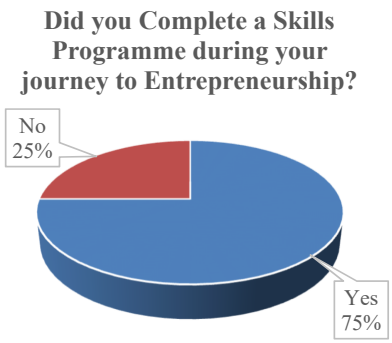
Figure 6. EI Funding Supports used by women entrepreneurs'



Source(s): Authors' own

Figure 7. Completion of skills programme

be even wider than what the GEM report indicates, at least amongst this specific sample of female entrepreneurs.

It is worth noting that despite this confidence gap, the GEM report shows that the actual rate of early-stage entrepreneurial activity amongst women in Ireland (11.3%) is not far behind that of men (13.7%), with a ratio of 1.2 to 1 (Fitzsimons and O'Gorman, 2022). This suggests that while women may feel less confident, many are still pursuing entrepreneurship.

This comparison highlights the pressing need for more support and skills development initiatives specifically designed for women entrepreneurs, as there seems to be a persistent gap between perceived capabilities and actual entrepreneurial activity. Programmes aimed at building confidence and skills amongst female entrepreneurs are crucial, as recommended by the global entrepreneurship report, 2018. These initiatives could help bridge the discrepancy between women's entrepreneurial potential and their self-perceived readiness to start and grow businesses.

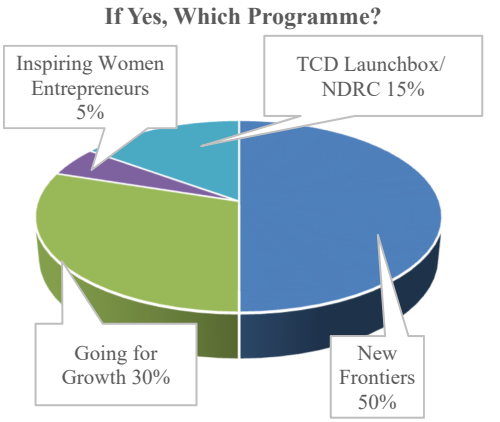


Figure 8.
Skills programme breakdown

Source(s): Authors' own

4.7 Impact of enterprise Ireland on women's visibility in business

The role of EI in promoting women entrepreneurs was positively acknowledged, with 36% of respondents valuing EI's efforts to increase the visibility of women in business. As one entrepreneur reflected

> EI's support in highlighting the achievements of women in business and running programs like Starting Strong and Going for Growth has been invaluable,

This response highlighted the critical role of recognition in empowering female entrepreneurs (See Figure 9).

4.8 Identifying challenges and support needs for women entrepreneurs

The survey explored the unique challenges women entrepreneurs face in Ireland, offering insights into how EI could tailor support more effectively. This exploration supports

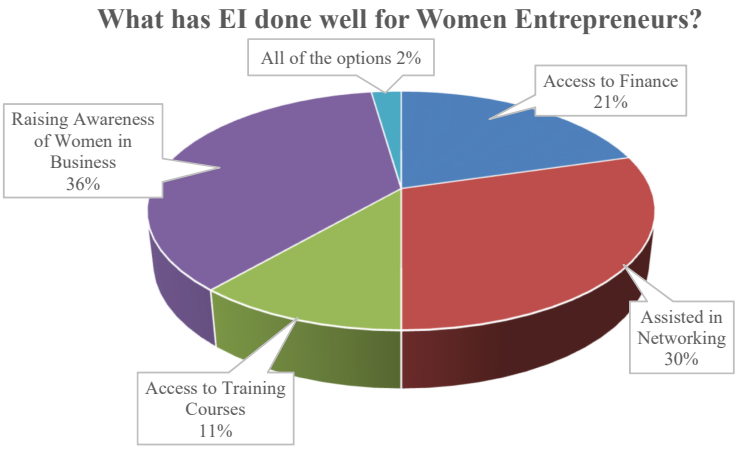


Figure 9.
What has EI done well for women entrepreneurs?

Source(s): Authors' own

McAdam's (2022) assertion about the vital role of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in supporting women in business. It informs on primary and secondary types of ecosystem services, i.e. direct services created through interactions with entrepreneurs and indirect services that emerge via increased productivity as resources are allocated to their best uses, such as when obstacles to engage in entrepreneurship are removed (Autio and Ranikko, 2016).

4.8.1 Funding and financial challenges. Echoing findings of Solal and Snellman (2023) and Ewens and Townsend (2020) the survey highlighted the pronounced difficulties women encounter in obtaining funding. "Securing initial funding was a major hurdle", shared one respondent, highlighting a widespread challenge for women in entrepreneurship. This issue, while not exclusive to women, is a significant barrier within the entrepreneurial environment.

4.8.2 Early-stage income and childcare challenges. The struggle with insufficient income in the early stages of business and the challenge of securing affordable childcare were prominently mentioned. Balancing the demands of family life with business responsibilities was a common theme. "The early days were tough, juggling business growth with family responsibilities", shared one entrepreneur, echoing McAdam's (2022) findings on how family dynamics can impact women's entrepreneurship.

4.8.3 Study–life balance and gender-specific challenges. Aligning with the observations of Dos Santos *et al.* (2019), the survey highlighted challenges related to childcare and balancing educational pursuits with family obligations, framing childcare as an issue primarily affecting women. "Balancing study and family life is a constant challenge for me," remarked a participant. Furthermore, the study revealed that women entrepreneurs often feel compelled to seek recognition through awards rather than focussing solely on business growth. Evening networking events were identified as more accessible to men, presenting a challenge for women with family commitments. Additionally, the survey highlighted a perceived gender bias within tech-based sectors, where women are often steered towards traditional roles.

4.9 The role of enterprise Ireland in mitigating entrepreneurial challenges

While respondents were unanimous in their appreciation for EI's ongoing initiatives they suggested further enhancements to better meet their needs. Key recommendations include expanded training on investment strategies, more opportunities for networking with potential investors and policy improvements regarding childcare support and early-stage financial assistance. Important roles for public 'bridging' support (Autio and Ranikko (2016) – encompassing networking with other entrepreneurs and stakeholders across the ecosystem, especially capital partners such as business angels and venture capitalists – were highlighted by many respondents. Bridging activities are most often associated with initial stages of entrepreneurial venturing which does not align with the range of experienced respondents included here. This could point to both general (gender-neutral) ecosystem weakness and indicate the specific gendered perceptions reflected in culture and social norms of 'think entrepreneur – think male' (Laguía *et al.*, 2022) and the embedded context experienced by women entrepreneurs constraining routes and network access to support and resources (Jack and Anderson, 2002).

Specific feedback from participants underlined the diversity of these needs:

> Funding scale-up activities and we move to the next stage of growth.

> EI has been supportive financially. More warm introductions to private investors would be beneficial.

> Understanding the fundraising process and how to navigate, when to raise, and guidance on how much to raise.

Links to more funding opportunities from VCs or Angels. Help on understanding investing–term sheets, conditions etc.

Sustainability / market research / capital grants.

These insights highlight the critical role of EI in not only sustaining but also expanding its support framework to align with the specific needs of women entrepreneurs. Tailoring support to address these varied challenges is essential for fostering a supportive ecosystem that acknowledges and addresses the specific challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in Ireland.

4.10 Summary of results

This study, grounded in the gendered theory of entrepreneurship and opportunity recognition, reveals a pivotal shift in the driving forces behind women's entrepreneurship in Ireland. It observes a move away from previously dominant motives like work–life balance, as identified by Humbert and Drew (2010), towards a stronger inclination for opportunity-driven entrepreneurship. This shift aligns with global trends (Longoria, 2018) and presents a challenge to conventional perceptions within female entrepreneurship studies.

Key challenges identified include the juggling of work–life commitments and the struggle for adequate childcare, echoing the findings of McAdam (2022). These issues highlight the uneven caregiving burdens that women often shoulder, which significantly hinder their entrepreneurial activities directly but also systemically. Such challenges are reflective of the broader gendered theory of entrepreneurship, which highlights the unique societal and cultural hurdles confronting women entrepreneurs, recognises male dominance in social organisation and, in the case of feminist approaches, want to alter such domination (Calás *et al.*, 2007).

Identifying specific obstacles faced by women entrepreneurs, such as gender biases in the tech industry (Ozkazanc-Pan and Muntean, 2018), and work–life balance difficulties, this study concurrently pinpoints essential enablers like mentorship and networking opportunities, supporting Grunfeld *et al.* (2020)'s findings. Scheduling of networking opportunities outside of evenings is an identified support for our cohort of women entrepreneurs.

The difficulty in accessing finance is another critical obstacle, reinforcing McAdam's (2022) analysis. Enhancing financial literacy and providing targeted advice on securing funding are deemed crucial steps towards empowering female entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the importance of comprehensive support systems, encompassing both financial and non-financial aids, is emphasised as vital for nurturing business growth and readiness for investment.

Cultural norms, including those affecting the scheduling of entrepreneurial events, are identified as influential factors in the entrepreneurial journey of women. Adopting inclusive practices is vital for overcoming such barriers (Dos Santos *et al.*, 2019; Brush *et al.*, 2010). The study acknowledges the beneficial effects of non-monetary assistance from EI, like mentoring and networking, while also pointing out areas for enhancement within EI's support infrastructure, such as website navigation and application process simplification.

The study calls for focussed support and policy adjustments to cultivate a vibrant and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem in Ireland. By doing so, it aims to enable women entrepreneurs to thrive, thereby making a substantial contribution to growing inclusivity of the economic landscape.

5. Discussion: refining gender and entrepreneurship theoretical perspectives

This investigation enriches the theoretical landscape of female entrepreneurship through the integration of the gendered theory of entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow, 2012) with

opportunity recognition theory (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). It sheds light on the distinct experiences of women entrepreneurs in Ireland, exploring the intricate interplay between systemic and institutional contexts and the lived experiences, including the impact of gender, societal norms and entrepreneurial endeavours, as reflected in the experiences of a diverse group of female entrepreneurs.

5.1 Enhancements to literature and theoretical insights

The research uncovers a significant transition in what motivates Irish women to start their businesses and monitor their entrepreneurial ventures, moving from the pursuit of work–life balance to opportunity-driven entrepreneurship. This shift aligns with the gendered theory of entrepreneurship's advocacy for a nuanced understanding of women's motivations in entrepreneurship. Although findings mirror global shifts, we note that there is no evidence of feminist reflexivity in policy development to date as policy remains silent on the need for inclusive policy support–beyond a focus on economic growth and productivity (Mayoux, 2001). In light of alternative rationale for business development, such as what kind of value should be created in entrepreneurial ventures and for whom (Bacq and Aguilera, 2022), such gaps in Irish policy are rife for debate focussing on underlying assumptions of the economic imperative and implications for more equitable policy development (Ahl and Nelson, 2015). With limited evidence of challenges to either structural conditions or fundamental changes of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in evidence in recommendations across a research review of 30 years of women's entrepreneurship internationally, the scale of the challenge in linking a feminist epistemology to research on women's entrepreneurship is clear (Foss *et al.*, 2019).

Nevertheless, exploration of EI's contributions from the viewpoint of female entrepreneurs offers invaluable insights into the efficacy and limitations of current institutional support mechanisms addressing historical underrepresentation of women in opportunity-driven ventures. This scrutiny enriches the conversation around gender and customised entrepreneurship programmes to their institutional contexts, a theme evident in less-developed country contexts (e.g. Mustapha and Subramaniam, 2016) as well as developed countries (Martínez-Rodríguez, 2022).

By presenting new empirical data and calling out underlying paradigms and economic rationale evident in policy orientation based on prevailing theory, this study broadens the scope of female entrepreneurship research. It unveils the evolving nature of women's entrepreneurial motivations and highlights the crucial role played by supportive institutional frameworks in their entrepreneurial pathways. This approach deepens the discourse on gender and entrepreneurship, particularly within the developed European context of Ireland, offering implications for both theory and practice.

5.2 Enhancing policy and practical support for women entrepreneurs

This work highlights the need for policy reforms specifically designed to address the unique needs and challenges of women entrepreneurs in Ireland. It advocates for initiatives that mitigate gender inequities and biases within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, emphasising the creation of a supportive environment that nurtures women's entrepreneurial pursuits beyond just financial support (Constantinidis, 2021; OECD, 2017).

At system level, particularly given the networking implications identified, increasing knowledge and awareness for all stakeholders within the ecosystem and throughout the entrepreneurship pipeline would appear required, if far from current practice. In practical terms, even in contexts perceived as socially progressive (e.g. Nordic countries) delivering empowering entrepreneurship programmes for women reveals challenges given underlying neo-liberal paradigms (Pettersson *et al.*, 2017).

The insights into EI primary support mechanisms suggest a need for resetting to better align with women entrepreneurs' specific needs. Recommendations include bespoke mentorship programmes, expanded networking opportunities and specialised financial guidance, coupled with addressing infrastructural barriers to facilitate a smoother entrepreneurial journey for women (Brush *et al.*, 2010; Naidu and Chand, 2017).

6. Methodological limitations

This study, focussing on a limited sample of female clients of EI, is not likely to fully represent the diverse experiences of women entrepreneurs, potentially limiting the breadth of its conclusions. However, as an exploratory study the approach was appropriate. To broaden the scope, future research could include male and non-binary entrepreneurs, offering a more comprehensive comparative view of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This inclusion is crucial, as the current study's exclusive focus on women entrepreneurs, without a comparative gender analysis, might overlook specific gender-related dynamics in entrepreneurship. Expanding the participant base beyond those affiliated with EI would also capture a wider array of entrepreneurial experiences and perspectives, enriching the study's findings. Further in-depth analyses could choose to focus on specific phases in the entrepreneurial process.

7. Implications of the study

The implications of this study are threefold, highlighting the necessity for nationwide support structures, flexible support systems and advancements in policy and practice in gender and entrepreneurship. The study highlights the importance of geographic inclusivity in entrepreneurial support, advocating for the expansion of support structures throughout Ireland. This aligns with the insights of Spigel and Harrison (2018), who emphasise the need for distributing resources more evenly to nurture entrepreneurship in diverse regions. The study suggests that agency supports such as EI, should extend its reach beyond dynamic urban centres (such as Dublin) to more rural and less economically developed areas, ensuring that women entrepreneurs nationwide have access to vital networks, resources and support. This issue is a challenging feature of the national economic landscape where centralisation is an often-cited weakness of many aspects of the economy including policy and programme delivery, e.g. "Ireland is one of the most centralised states in Europe with local government having few responsibilities and lacking the commensurate resources" (Turley and Flannery, 2013:37).

In addressing the challenge of balancing entrepreneurial activities with family responsibilities, the study calls for the development of more flexible support systems. This recommendation is in line with the research by McAdam (2022) and Dos Santos *et al.* (2019), which stress the importance of supportive policies for women entrepreneurs. The study suggests that EI could integrate caregiving supports, such as childcare facilities, into its framework, making it easier for women entrepreneurs to manage their professional and personal responsibilities. Such an approach would not only aid in achieving a more equitable balance between family and professional responsibilities for women entrepreneurs but also foster a more inclusive and supportive business ecosystem.

This study also provides a blueprint for advancing policy and practice in the field of gender and entrepreneurship. By offering concrete recommendations based on empirical findings, it contributes to shaping a more inclusive, diverse and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem in Ireland. The emphasis on understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs paves the way for enhanced support mechanisms contributing significantly to Ireland's entrepreneurial landscape and driving economic growth and innovation.

This study not only enriches the theoretical understanding of female entrepreneurship but also provides actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners. Grounding the research in the gendered theory of entrepreneurship and opportunity recognition theory, it offers a refined perspective on the motivations, challenges and supports that shape women's entrepreneurial journeys, highlighting the critical role of tailored, inclusive policies and practices in fostering a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem.

8. Recommendations

The recommendations provided for enhancing the ecosystem for women entrepreneurs in Ireland, grounded in both the specific context of Irish women's entrepreneurship and the broader international research on women's entrepreneurship, serve as a comprehensive blueprint for addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by women in business. These recommendations intricately connect theory and practice by leveraging insights from seminal works in the field, such as those by Marlow *et al.* (2019), Brush *et al.* (2010), Agrawal *et al.* (2023), and others, and proposing actionable strategies that address both local and global challenges. The recommendations listed contribute to the theoretical framing of women's entrepreneurship and identify practical measures that can be implemented within Ireland and potentially adopted globally.

(1) Ongoing data collection and research

A call for continuous data collection and research highlights the dynamic nature of entrepreneurship and the evolving motivations and challenges of women entrepreneurs. Coleman *et al.* (2019) and Marlow *et al.* (2019) emphasise the importance of understanding the unique challenges and opportunities within women's entrepreneurship through continuous research. This recommendation leverages their advocacy for ongoing data collection to adapt and improve support mechanisms for women entrepreneurs in a timely and informed manner. The recommendation is rooted in the theoretical understanding that the entrepreneurship ecosystem is not static, and as such, support mechanisms and policies must be continually assessed and updated to remain effective. By emphasising longitudinal research, this approach not only contributes to the academic body of knowledge on women's entrepreneurship but also provides policymakers and support organisations like EI with data-driven insights to refine their strategies over time.

(2) Comparative analysis with male entrepreneurs

The emphasis on comparative analysis between female and male entrepreneurs addresses the theoretical critique of the gendered dimensions of entrepreneurship. Noting the gendered dimensions of entrepreneurship (Marlow *et al.*, 2019; Sweida and Woods, 2015), understanding differences is crucial for developing equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems. Comparative analysis aligns with a need for evidence-based insights into the unique challenges and opportunities for women, informing more inclusive policy and support programs. This recommendation moves beyond identifying disparities to understand the underlying causes of these differences. From a practical standpoint, such comparative research can illuminate specific areas where targeted interventions are necessary, thus enhancing the effectiveness of support programmes for women entrepreneurs.

(3) National women's mentoring network

Development of a national women's mentoring network is informed by the theoretical and empirical evidence on the significant impact of networking and mentorship on women's entrepreneurship (evidenced in. Botha *et al.*, 2006; Jennings and Brush, 2013). Evidence suggests that mentorship can effectively address specific challenges faced by women

entrepreneurs, such as access to networks, knowledge and confidence-building. Practically, the establishment of such a network would provide a structured platform for sharing experiences, advice and support, directly contributing to the growth and success of women-led businesses.

(4) Enhanced funding support and education

Acknowledging the critical role of funding and the unique challenges women face in securing venture capital, this recommendation bridges the gap between the theoretical understanding of gender disparities in funding and the practical need for more accessible financial support mechanisms (detailed in Carter *et al.*, 2003; Orser *et al.*, 2006; Solal and Snellman, 2023). Enhanced funding support and educational initiatives aim to improve women's access to financial resources and knowledge on navigating the fundraising landscape. By collaborating with venture capital associations to offer workshops, this strategy aims to demystify the fundraising process for women entrepreneurs and improve their success rates in securing investment. Such development could support gender-sensitive learning environments to increase awareness, via, e.g. training on unconscious bias in decision-making and investment decisions specifically and showcasing cases of successful investment in (and by) women entrepreneurs.

(5) Women-only accelerator program

Recommending a women-only accelerator programme is based on the recognition of the need for targeted support that addresses the specific challenges and opportunities for women entrepreneurs (identified in Gundry *et al.*, 2002; Hisrich, 1990). This recommendation reflects insights on the effectiveness of specialised programmes in fostering the growth and success of women-led ventures, including addressing barriers like childcare. Implementing such a programme would offer practical support, including mentorship, funding and childcare facilities, thus addressing barriers to women's full participation in entrepreneurship.

(6) Focus on emerging technology opportunities

Emphasising support for women in technology and innovation responds to the theoretical and empirical findings on the underrepresentation of women in these fields. Kuschel (2019) and Kuschel and Labra (2018) and Ozkazanc-Pan and Muntean (2018) discuss the underrepresentation of women in technology and innovation sectors. By recommending support for women in these areas, encouraging participation through initiatives like commercialisation funds, this recommendation aims to translate the understanding of gender disparities in technology and innovation into practical measures that facilitate women's entry and success in these high-growth areas.

(7) Adaptation to cultural norms

Recognising the importance of creating a supportive ecosystem that respects and accommodates unique challenges including balancing professional and family responsibilities, reflects a deep understanding of the sociocultural factors that influence women's entrepreneurship. Both Dos Santos *et al.* (2019) and Alsos *et al.* (2016) explore how cultural and societal norms impact women's entrepreneurship. This approach translates the theoretical framework around gender, culture and entrepreneurship into actionable policies that respect and support the identified diverse needs of women entrepreneurs.

The holistic approach, revealed in the recommendations, transcends the Irish focus of this study, suggesting that the challenges identified, and the solutions proposed have a global relevance. The strategies, such as establishing a national women's mentoring network,

launching women-only accelerator programs focussing on emerging technology sectors and adapting to cultural norms, offer universally applicable solutions to barriers commonly encountered by women entrepreneurs across different countries. For the recommendations to engage across the ecosystem, conversations on the rationale underlying entrepreneurship support, its purpose, targeted impact and effectiveness can orient and challenge policy rather than simply serve to provide technical and immediate solutions. This serves to link a feminist epistemology specifically with the findings and broaden the recommendations beyond mitigating (unspoken) assumed deficiencies in women to succeed as entrepreneurs within the ecosystem (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Marlow, 2014). This universal applicability implies that the insights gained from implementing these recommendations in Ireland could serve as a model for other nations looking to enhance support for female entrepreneurship within their own contexts.

Furthermore, the interconnected nature of the global entrepreneurial landscape means that successful innovations and policies in one country can serve as inspirations elsewhere, facilitating a worldwide exchange of best practices. Ireland's proactive steps towards fostering a conducive ecosystem for women entrepreneurs could thus contribute to an international dialogue, potentially influencing policy reforms, programme designs and research focusses across the globe. This global perspective not only highlights Ireland's potential contribution to advancing women's entrepreneurship but also positions the recommendations as a valuable resource for policymakers, researchers and practitioners worldwide, emphasising their significance beyond the immediate context and highlighting the potential for a global impact on the entrepreneurial ecosystem for women.

Notes

1. Enterprise Ireland is the government organisation with responsibility for the development and growth of Irish enterprises in world markets: see https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/about-enterprise-ireland
2. Support mechanisms specifically pertain to those tailored or available to women entrepreneurs in Ireland, including funding opportunities, mentorship programs, networking events and educational workshops designed to address the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs.
3. Gender stereotypes: preconceived notions and cultural beliefs about the roles, behaviours and attributes considered appropriate for men and women. They can influence perceptions of women's capabilities as leaders and business owners, potentially impacting their access to capital, networks and support.
4. With thanks to a reviewer, we note that while women may not be listed as owners or co-owners, they may play an equally important role as their male partner in the running of a business. This may overstate the higher participation of men in entrepreneurship in official data, and further research into the nature of the business would be required to provide indications of such under-counting, and its extent.
5. The entrepreneurial ecosystem in this research specifically looks at the conditions in Ireland, considering how the interplay between these factors supports or hinders women entrepreneurs in establishing and growing their ventures.
6. The authors acknowledge that a broader literature review, including other studies on gender differences in entrepreneurship and examining factors such as race, ethnicity, education and class, would provide a more comprehensive overview. However, this is outside the remit of the current study.
7. Access to participants was facilitated through institutional affiliation with Enterprise Ireland, the organisation responsible for administering the programs under investigation. One of the co-authors of this study is employed by Enterprise Ireland, which provided the necessary framework for

identifying and contacting eligible participants. This professional connection ensured trusted access to a relevant and targeted sample for the research.

8. The specifics of this experience were not shared in more detail but would be suitable for further research (for both women and men).
9. This programme is generally delivered in three phases over a six-month period, aiming to equip participants with the skills and knowledge needed to develop scalable businesses with potential for job creation and growth.
10. This programme often runs over several months and is designed to be highly practical, organised with roundtable sessions and a focus on achieving tangible results.

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