

Building gender-transformative innovation ecosystems supporting women's entrepreneurship

Patrice Braun, Adjunct Professor, Research & Innovation, Federation University Australia

Summary of text:

The information and knowledge transformation of the past two decades means that starting and operating a business in today's digital economy requires a level of digital entrepreneurship. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many enterprises were forced to shift their operations online to manage the demand for goods and services. Business model adaptation was particularly challenging for women entrepreneurs with enterprises in sectors traditionally associated with women, such as agriculture, tourism, food, and accommodation services, which were most severely affected by the economic downturn. E-commerce also proved challenging for women, who tend to hold lower levels of digital skills and have less free time to engage in online activities due to disproportionate household responsibilities. In the case of women-led informal, micro or small and medium-sized enterprises (MSME) in developing countries, pivoting to an e-commerce model was near impossible due to lack of digital literacy, stable Internet access, e-business skills, and e-payment capabilities, within both their own enterprises and their entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Research has shown that entrepreneurial ecosystems do not support female entrepreneurs to the extent they support male entrepreneurs. An inherent gender bias obstructs female entrepreneurs from equal access to ecosystem resources such as finance and markets, while weak governmental and private actor collaboration within ecosystems deters women entrepreneurs from accessing ecosystem pillars. As a result, many women entrepreneurs tend to 'go it alone'. Policies that take a holistic framework approach are pivotal to unlocking the potential of female entrepreneurs, whereby ecosystem actors working closely together – with each actor making a unique contribution to the digital, entrepreneurial, regulatory, e-trade and training landscape – can achieve transformative innovation ecosystems.

Key recommendations:

- An inclusive systems-thinking and action research lens should be adopted to regularly evaluate women entrepreneurs' participation across all pillars of the gender-transformative innovation ecosystem. This should encompass the collection of sex-disaggregated data which addresses access to IT infrastructure, digital literacy skilling, resources, markets, financial support, and public procurement.
- A gender-transformative innovation ecosystem framework must be constructed to unlock the potential of women. This should embody holistic, gender-responsive supports to build women's entrepreneurial capacity and strengthen the digital talent-pipeline of women entrepreneurs. Solutions should be contextual and acknowledge women entrepreneurs as a heterogeneous group, located across widely differing geographic locations and innovation ecosystems, with widely varying resource, support, and educational needs.
- STEM programmes must be evaluated for impact and respect women's individual career choices. National education curricula, which are still saturated in print skills, must be transformed into 'digital' curricula. This could include the introduction of coding at kindergarten level to engage both female and male students in STEM at an early stage to prepare them for a digital career, workplace, and society.