

***Examining the Influence of Entrepreneurial Ecosystems on Women's Empowerment
through Female Entrepreneurship in Developing Economies***

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Abstract

This developmental paper outlines initial research into how entrepreneurial ecosystems can promote female entrepreneurship and women's empowerment in developing economies, using Gabon as a case study. It summarises key literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems, women's empowerment, and female entrepreneurship in emerging markets. The paper then puts forth research questions exploring the macro, meso and micro elements of Gabon's ecosystem, how those elements interact with female entrepreneurs' agency, and how that agency contributes to empowerment. Feedback provided during the conference presentation will inform further research design and analysis on this underexplored area.

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised as a vital driver of economic growth and development in emerging economies (Theodoraki, 2021). At the same time, female entrepreneurship represents an overlooked engine that can generate productive work, reduce gender inequality, and alleviate poverty (GEM, 2019). However, women entrepreneurs often lack adequate support, facing cultural and institutional barriers that hamper their success (Muntean, 2013)

This research focuses specifically on Sub-Saharan Africa, which has surprisingly high early-stage female entrepreneurial activity rates, nearing 21%, according to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2019). Yet there remains a need for a more in-depth understanding of women's entrepreneurship in developing country contexts (Bastian et al., 2018)

Literature Review

ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS

The concept of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (EE) has evolved from various sources (Malecki, 2018). Entrepreneurial ecosystems were initially conceptualised in the 1980s and 1990s as entrepreneurship studies moved away from an individualistic, personality-based approach to a more comprehensive outlook that considers the impact of social, cultural, and economic factors on the entrepreneurial process (Stam & van de Ven, 2021). Cavallo et al. (2019) observed that the concept gained prominence as a result of the pioneering works of Cohen (2006), Isenberg (2010), and Feld (2012). EEs are frequently considered something that can be constructed, an organisational structure that emerges (Wurth et al., 2022).

The entrepreneurial ecosystem approach emphasises that entrepreneurship is not an isolated activity but occurs within a community of interdependent individuals and organisations (Freeman & Audia, 2006). According to Van de Ven (1993), individual entrepreneurs cannot regulate all the resources, institutions, markets, and operations required to develop and commercialise their entrepreneurial endeavours. Instead, entrepreneurship is a collective effort that needs essential contributions from many public and private entrepreneurs to establish an industrial infrastructure that encourages and constrains innovation (Stam & van de Ven, 2021).

Prior studies reveal that EEs promote value creation by providing critical institutional, social, political and cultural support with material resources (Cavallo et al., 2019; Van de Ven, 1993)

However, EEs may not be gender neutral, as women entrepreneurs face distinct barriers to access to networks, growth opportunities, funding, and so on (Malecki, 2018; Sequeira et al., 2016). There is a need to study women-specific sub-ecosystems and success factors independently from males (Harrington, 2017).

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The concept of empowerment has received significant attention across diverse literature, leading to a consensus that empowerment is a process, not a goal (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2013). Several definitions have been attributed to empowerment over the years. McWhirter (1991) defined empowerment as “the process by which people, organisations or groups who are powerless (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and



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capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others, and (d) support the empowerment of others in their community.”

Entrepreneurship is viewed as a tool for empowering women worldwide. It drives development and impacts the economy and society (Ng et al., 2022). There exists a substantial correlation in various countries between the status of women in society and economic progress (Banihani, 2020). Similarly, Bastian et al. (2019) observed that some international entities, such as the World Economic Forum (2019) and the United Nations (2018), view entrepreneurship as a driver for empowering women. Alkaled and Berglund (2018) demonstrated that women are beneficial to entrepreneurship and can also benefit women. This indicates a correlation between women's empowerment and countries' economic progress (Banihani, 2020).

FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN DEVELOPING CONTEXTS

Women's entrepreneurship holds unique promise in developing economies but remains constrained by ingrained sociocultural norms in many regions (Brush & Cooper, 2012; De Vita et al., 2014). While necessity may drive many women to entrepreneurship in low-income markets, their initiatives are often informal and subsistence-based rather than growth-oriented (Muntean, 2013).

There has been relatively little research on female entrepreneurship dynamics within Sub-Saharan Africa's distinct institutional and cultural contexts (Anderson & Ojediran, 2022; Bastian et al., 2018).

In addition, the existing literature contains numerous research gaps. Specifically, prior studies have centred on the obstacles women entrepreneurs encounter in Africa and have overlooked showcasing how female entrepreneurs have creatively devised mechanisms and strategies to overcome these challenges and access resources. Significant studies have not highlighted the difference between males and females in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. It is important to consider female entrepreneurs' unique challenges and opportunities to create inclusive and supportive environments that foster their success (Sequeira et al., 2016). By understanding the factors that promote women's entrepreneurship, we can create opportunities and provide adequate support for female entrepreneurs to thrive in their ventures. Overall, it is crucial to recognise the potential of women in entrepreneurship and provide them with the necessary resources and support to overcome barriers and achieve empowerment.

This research seeks to enhance our comprehension of women's involvement in entrepreneurship within the broader entrepreneurial framework, a facet overlooked in prior studies. Moreover, this subject has been limitedly explored within the African context. The study also encompasses the entrepreneurial ecosystem and broadens its focus to women's empowerment. Below are the fundamental questions driving this study.



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Strong structuration Theory

The theoretical framework for this research will be based on the strong structuration theory developed by Stones (2005).

Stone developed a quadripartite structuration model by responding to critiques by Archer, Mouzelis, and Cohen to correct identified shortcomings in Giddens' theory (Coad et al., 2015). The model includes 'external structures', 'internal structures', 'active agency', and 'outcomes' (Stones, 2005). External structures, also known as 'conditions for action', according to Stones (2005), come in two forms, 'independent causal influences' that lie outside the agent's control and 'irresistible causal influences' that the agent may potentially resist. On the other hand, internal structures can equally be divided into two components, including 'conjecturally specific knowledge of external structures or habitus. Active agency or 'Agent's practices' refers to how individuals use their resources by following established patterns and reflexive actions or through thoughtful strategies '. The impact of the agent's action on existing structures may include 'change and elaboration or reproduction and preservation.' The impact on internal structures can be considered part of structuration's broader influence on agents (Stones, 2005). Regarding structure duality, the internal structures in the latter portion of these distinct components serve as a medium for the agent's behaviour. In contrast, the fourth part's internal and external structural results represent structure as an outcome of behaviour.

By placing the theoretical framework in the context of the wider entrepreneurial environment, this study will uncover how both external and internal systems and proactive initiative play a role in shaping the dynamic environments where female entrepreneurs work. Expanding on Stones' ideas, this study will investigate how these structural components intersect with external entrepreneurial factors to impact conditions for female entrepreneurial activity.

Business Climate of Gabon

The business climate of Gabon presents significant challenges, with limited access to reliable corporate financial data and a legal system that creates uncertainty around debt collection. Furthermore, the institutional framework is marked by substantial weaknesses, making intercompany transactions particularly challenging in environments rated as highly risky (Trade.gov, 2023). This lack of transparency and legal certainty may discourage foreign investors and impede business expansion. Furthermore, the institutional framework in Gabon exhibits significant weaknesses such as bureaucratic hurdles, inefficiencies, and corruption, all serving as substantial barriers to entrepreneurial activities and business expansion. Corruption erodes trust in the business environment while increasing operational costs. Moreover, policy reforms may face delays in implementation exacerbating challenges for businesses.

Despite these difficulties, there are opportunities for businesses in Gabon due to its plentiful natural resources like oil, minerals, and timber, which offer investment potential. Additionally, Gabon's strategic location offers access to regional markets along with diversification efforts by the government creating possibilities in agriculture manufacturing & tourism sectors. Additionally ongoing infrastructure projects aim also aiming at enhancing market accessibility& trade facilitation benefiting companies. Nevertheless, infrastructure challenges remain, resolute action is necessary with focused investments from public-private partnerships. For Small Medium Enterprises, trade barriers, bureaucratic procedures, and regulatory complexities can constrain market entry. Improving trade facilitation measures and simplifying regulations play a



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key role. Thus, simultaneously addressing issues related to infrastructure, corruption, and policy reform remains imperative, to nurture sustainable economic growth & create favourable conditions for conducting businesses.

Research Gaps, Questions and Agenda

The available literature has several research gaps. Prior research has focused on women entrepreneurs' constraints in Africa rather than demonstrating how female entrepreneurs have established innovative processes and tactics to overcome these challenges and gain access to resources. In addition, it does not fully explain the differences between male and female entrepreneurs in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and systematic literature reviews still lack research in emerging and developing economies (Bastian et al., 2018; Cabrera and Mauricio, 2017; Chreim et al., 2018; Foss et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2016), with limited exploration of the subject within the African context and none conducted in Gabon.

Guiding this study are the following research questions exploring EEs' influence in empowering women through entrepreneurship in Gabon:

RQ1: What are the macro, meso and micro elements of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Gabon?

RQ2: How does the elements of the entrepreneurial ecosystem interact with female entrepreneurship agency?

RQ3: How does the agency of female entrepreneurs contribute to women's empowerment within the entrepreneurial landscape of Gabon?

Preliminary Research Approach

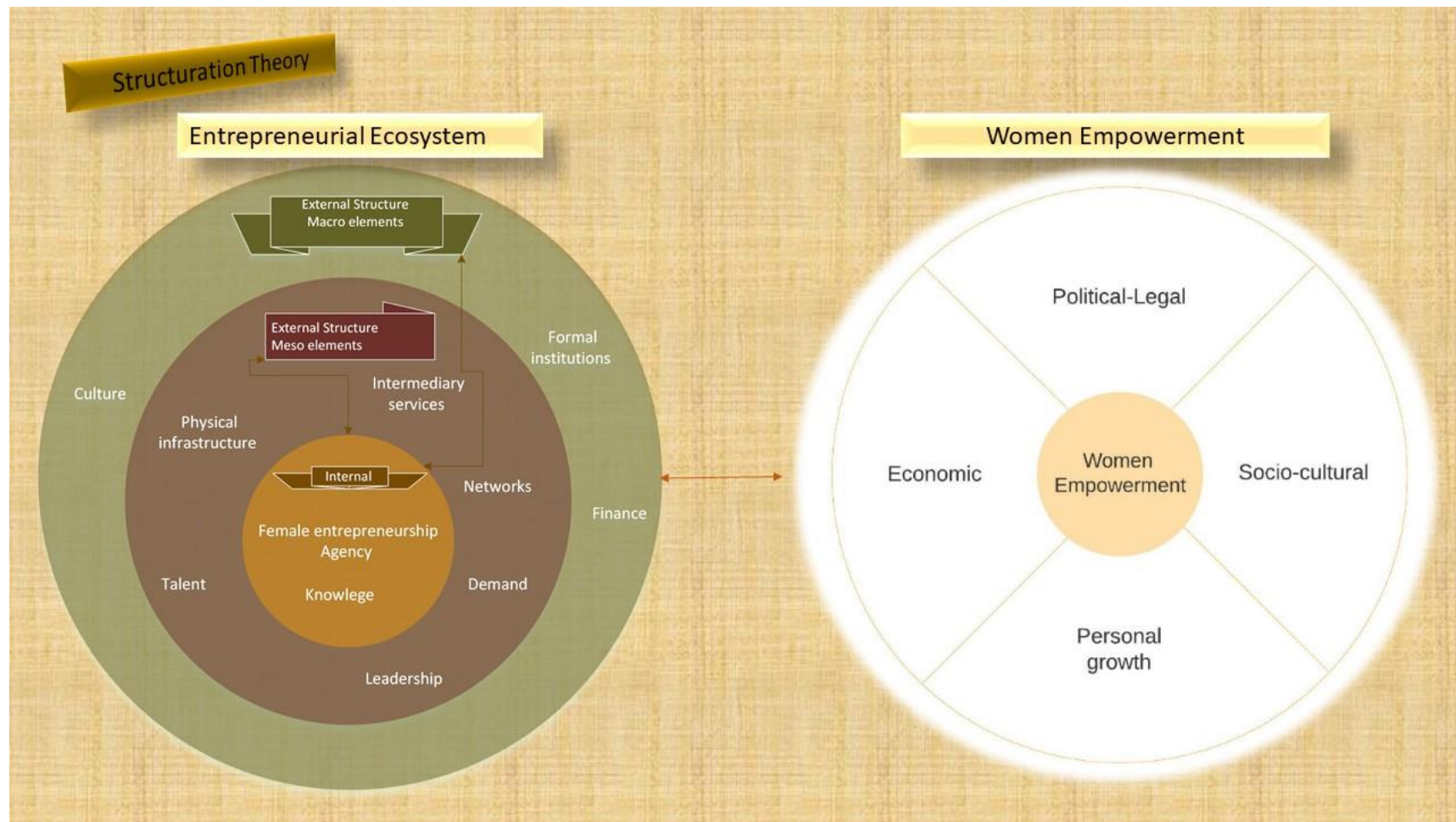
This study will employ a qualitative methodology to delve deeper into the intricate dynamics of female entrepreneurship in Gabon. Through semi-structured interviews with around 30 female entrepreneurs, key components of the entrepreneurial ecosystem will be mapped out, shedding light on their interactions and the multifaceted dimensions of empowerment. Employing an ecosystem analysis, this research aims to uncover macro, meso, and microelements as outlined in the proposed framework (Fig. 1), offering a comprehensive understanding of the ecosystem's influence on female entrepreneurs in Gabon.

Conclusion

In sum, by exploring how EEs can foster women's empowerment through female entrepreneurship in Gabon, this developmental research seeks to catalyse more inclusive policies, programs and support for women-led ventures across Sub-Saharan Africa. Feedback from the conference will enhance the scholarly merit and practical contributions of this undertaking.

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Fig. 1. Proposed conceptual framework.



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