

Feminist Perspectives in Business Studies: Breaking Barriers in Entrepreneurship, Governance and Management

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Introduction

The 2030 Agenda, with its focus on inclusion and gender equality, is expected to increase the importance of women in the business world. These pressures inevitably contribute to a cultural transformation that is expected to promote more inclusive economic and social progress for women. Beyond social considerations, the lack of women in leadership roles, both as entrepreneurs and in key decision-making positions within companies, constitutes a significant loss in valuable human capital. In practical management, women still encounter limited opportunities to promote their ideas and skills. The reasons for this inequality can be attributed to the challenges of maintaining a balance between personal and professional commitments, as well as the prevailing male-centric nature of businesses. Consequently, these conditions create obstacles that impede or hinder the economic development of companies and the contexts where this gender gap is more pronounced.

Feminist Perspectives in Business Studies: Breaking Barriers in Entrepreneurship, Governance and Management is a thought-provoking book that sheds light on the challenges faced by women in entrepreneurship and management positions, examining obstacles through a feminist lens. The book goes beyond traditional gender norms to explore how gender impacts leadership roles across various governance models and countries. Through in-depth research and analysis, the contributions provide theoretical discussion and empirical evidence on the disparities in representation and opportunities for women in top-echelon positions. The book offers valuable insights by exploring women's experiences in various contexts. It proposes strategies to break down barriers and foster gender diversity in the upper echelons of business worldwide. It serves as a compelling resource for anyone interested in promoting gender equity and inclusivity in upper-echelon roles across different societal structures and geographical locations.

Feminist perspectives introduce a novel perspective for analyzing women's roles in firms, recognizing their distinct attributes, and offering a framework that can be extended and applied to business studies (Ahl and Marlow, 2012). “Feminism, as both a theoretical perspective and a social movement, aims to diminish and ultimately eradicate sexist inequality and oppression” (Bell et al., 2020: 177). Feminist theories, rooted in an intersectional framework, emphasize not just gender disparity but also its

interconnections with other societal inequality, such as race and socioeconomic status (Galloway, et al., 2015).

Despite these ambitious goals, feminism is still relatively underutilized as a catalyst for business research (Marlow, 2020; Bell et al., 2020). A significant portion of the existing research fails to include a feminist perspective. Even when it does, this approach is typically recommended rather than explicitly utilized as a theoretical or methodological basis (Henry et al., 2016). Feminism is a diverse and multifaceted concept encompassing various forms, each emphasizing different aspects of women's experiences (Henry and Marlow, 2014). However, they share a common concern with how gender shapes "notions of knowledge, those who possess it, and methods of investigation and validation" (Anderson, 2020).

Feminist theories transcend the limitations of solely addressing gender inequity by recognizing that women's experiences are complex and diverse. They shed light on the interconnectedness of various inequalities and foster a more inclusive and equitable understanding. These theories empower scholars and practitioners to recognize the complexities within firms' dynamics and management practices. Feminist theories advocate for a profound shift in firms' cultures, advocating for policies and practices that embrace diversity and inclusivity. These theories provide new perspectives that encourage the reassessment of established power hierarchies, motivating the removal of obstacles that have hindered women's advancement for centuries. Furthermore, feminist theories extend beyond merely highlighting disparities; they also offer actionable solutions. Emphasizing the significance of representation and empowerment, they foster the creation of supportive environments that amplify the voices of women and marginalized individuals.

Addressing epistemological challenges is essential in business research: it aims to progress the discourse and critically evaluate normative interpretations of entrepreneurial activities and behaviours, governance roles, and management practices (Marlow, 2012). The journey commences with a fervent drive to challenge conventional norms and seeks to highlight the potential of feminist-informed studies to raise new questions that challenge and scrutinize the gendered dimensions of entrepreneurship globally, offering fresh and diverse perspectives and insights.

In the realm of business studies, feminist perspectives pave the way for a fresh perspective, reshaping how we understand women's role and impact in business. These theories acknowledge and encompass their distinctiveness and offer a thorough

framework that goes beyond conventional concepts of entrepreneurship, governance, and management. The volume compiles a broad range of contributions from various perspectives and research competencies. The diversity of approaches not only underscores the subject's importance and enduring appeal but also invites other scholars to contribute their expertise and perspectives to advance knowledge in this area. A briefly introducing of each chapter is now offered with the intention to lead the reader in this essential journey step by step.

We do not see things as they are, but as we are.

We are aware that some behaviors are so deeply ingrained in the way people think, speak, and act that they are often considered the norm. But this is not the reality. Feminism and Social construction are the lens we proposed to *see things as they are*. The structure of the book and the authors who chose to work with us have allowed us to realize this dream. Our thanks go to them for choosing to share an idea and bring it to life through their time, expertise, and scientific and cultural backgrounds.

*Thank you on behalf of all the women
who will find their experiences reflected in your work.*

Thematic Structure of the Book

The distribution of chapters follows the logical progression we planned during the conceptualization of this book.

The theme of women's roles in society is at a critical juncture, garnering global interest in developing equitable conditions. Therefore, it is essential *to make the invisible visible*, providing an overview of the current situation through the lens of feminist perspectives before examining its impact on the business world (Yadav and Unni, 2016). For this goal, we have a first section *Making visible the invisible: taking stock and moving forward* to setting the stage with an overview of the current landscape on the topic adopting feminist lenses to critically analyze and highlight the visibility and contributions of women.

In the second section *A multilevel analysis to disentangle feminist perspective in business* we collect contributions that reflect on the impact of women at three levels of business studies. Based on thorough research and data analysis, the chapters in this

section provide insight into the existing gender inequalities in business. They explore the complex social, economic, and cultural factors contributing to disparities, providing a nuanced understanding of the barriers hindering women's advancement. In particular, this second part of the book is structured on three levels of analysis that contribute to the economic development of countries:

Entrepreneurship, exploring the participation and influence of women entrepreneurs;

Governance, examining women's roles and representation in executive and leadership positions;

Management, investigating the presence and impact of women in various managerial roles.

In the last part, our book looks beyond the barriers, striving to break through. The third section, *Breaking barriers: women's public policy*, focuses on presenting and examining strategies to overcome current obstacles, intending to foster a more inclusive and fair future in both business and society. It emphasizes the importance of continuous evaluation and adaptation to ensure that policies remain relevant and responsive to evolving societal needs. The chapters analyze the influence of public policies on women's status in management and entrepreneurship, taking stock of existing policies and their effectiveness. They critically assess the strengths and limitations of current policies, emphasizing the need for evidence-based approaches to achieve meaningful gender equality outcomes. Furthermore, the book presents innovative strategies and best practices from diverse European countries that have made notable progress in promoting women's representation in leadership and entrepreneurship. It highlights successful initiatives that can serve as models for fostering gender-inclusive environments. Building on the insights gained from the multilevel analysis and acknowledging the advancements made, the book also acknowledges the ongoing challenges and gaps that require further attention. It provides a forward-looking perspective, proposing actionable recommendations for policymakers, businesses, and civil society to move toward greater gender equality in management and entrepreneurship collectively.

We are confident that this book not only thoroughly examines the present situation but also fosters additional discussion and efforts to attain gender equality in business.

Part I - Making visible the invisible: taking stock and moving forward

This section starts with *Feminist Perspectives in Business Studies: A Conceptual*

Framework by Bannò and D'Allura where we propose an interpretative framework for understanding the role of women in business. The scope is to furnish a novel viewpoint that will assist scholars and practitioners in gaining a deeper comprehension of the involvement of women in business. The chapter first presents the theoretical foundations of feminist and management theories. It then emphasizes the importance of interpreting the implications of feminist perspectives as a means to examine women's influence in business. The novelty of the framework is the examination of the interplay between two levels of investigation: the women's role in society, as individuals and as part of the family institution, and the management theories to interpret women's role in business studies. The analysis of barriers generated by institutional contexts that hinder women's exercise of role in business can be explained by feminist theories and Social Identity Theory. This last theory, which rejects biologically deterministic explanations for gender differences, considers the impact of social construction on individual behavior.

Then, the section continues with the conceptual contribution by Bertola. *Feminist perspective in entrepreneurship: Breaking barriers*, through an historical theoretical journey, demonstrates that it is imperative to create a supportive environment for women to fully leverage their entrepreneurial skills, implement comprehensive mentorship programs, and institute policies that promote increased assistance for female entrepreneurs, thereby fostering the growth of a more inclusive and encouraging entrepreneurial landscape. The main conclusion of Bertola's chapter is that the feminist viewpoint regarding entrepreneurship highlights the obstacles faced by female entrepreneurs. This perspective emphasizes the crucial need to eliminate discrimination and systemic biases to promote gender equality in the field of entrepreneurship. It is of fundamental importance to develop an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem that recognizes and supports women entrepreneurs. To overcome the barriers they face, efforts should focus on ensuring adequate funding, education, mentorship, and networking opportunities.

Social identity theory and diversity management: A socio-psychological approach to inter-gender dynamics in organizations (Chapter 1.3) by Ferrari presents and discusses the applications that social identity theory can have to explain inter-gender conflict and the discrimination suffered by women in particular. Drawing on a socio-psychological approach, it also presents and discusses possible practices for exploiting multiple

group memberships in organizations in order to prevent or reduce gender-based conflictual dynamics. After introducing general lines of social identity theory, with particular reference to its application in an organisational/work context, the chapter sets out the minimum conditions in which the perception of belonging to a category activates discriminatory behaviour towards the outgroup. Then, the chapter clarifies how the extent, nature, and systemic roots of discrimination differ between genders; moreover, it suggests how to prevent intergroup conflict, promoting the salience of the professional role rather than gender belonging.

The first section ends with Chapter 1.4 *Taking stock of research on gender issues in business: An institutional perspective* by Costanza *et al.*. This chapter offers a comprehensive and institutional theory-based literature review concerning gender issues in business. Second, it shows the difference between studies that focus on geography and those that don't. This gives a more complete picture of how gender affects management, especially when it comes to cognitive and normative factors and the way institutions usually work. Third, the analytic efforts converge on the proposal of a research map, synthesizing the main research themes and representing the basis for the identification of future research avenues.

Part II - A multilevel analysis to disentangle the feminist perspective in business

The second section focuses on a multilevel analysis to disentangle the feminist perspective in the business world, a crucial endeavor to understand and verify the realities faced by women in this field. The chapters in this section examine various layers of influence, from individual experiences to institutional structures, aiming to shed light on the complex dynamics at play. This examination illustrates how feminist theories can be applied to understand and address the unique challenges faced by women in business on the three levels of entrepreneurship, governance and management.

Entrepreneurship level of analysis

The first chapter of this level of analysis is devoted to assessing the impact of Agenda 2030. D'Allura and Floris in *Breaking Barriers: Assessing Agenda 2030's Impact on Women Entrepreneurship Studies* (Chapter 2.1.1) propose an integrative review, addressing two significant shortcomings: the undervaluation of women's

entrepreneurship in achieving sustainable development and the lack of studies on how women entrepreneurs can align with the 17 SDGs. By providing a comprehensive analysis of the current state of research, the authors enhance our understanding of the strategic role of women entrepreneurs in sustainable development.

Leggerini's contribution focused on the intersection of feminism and entrepreneurship within entrepreneurial studies. *The unfulfilled promise of feminist research in entrepreneurship studies* (Chapter 2.1.2) describes a systematic review of the top 50 journals in business management, accounting, strategy, and management. The top 50 journals serve as a storehouse for accepted theories, accepted practices, and relevant empirical situations. By raising awareness and advocating for the recognition of feminist scholarship, the author aims to expand understanding and utilization of feminist perspectives in entrepreneurial research. Recognition and redress of this oppression are essential for fully harnessing feminism's potential in comprehending strategic dynamics and entrepreneurial processes.

The following are two studies that propose ways to break barriers in two specific contexts, one of which is the delicate context of family business. The family business, in light of the framework proposed by the study, is a context where the presence of stereotypes surely affects women's entrepreneurship. Chapter 2.1.3 *Unveiling gender-disparities in male-dominated industries: An intersectional perspective* by Floris *et al.* goes presents empirical findings alongside examples of how feminist theories are applied in practice, adopting an intersectional approach to examine disparities. This approach not only sheds light on the hurdles women entrepreneurs face in overturning conventional gender norms but also underscores effective strategies for overcoming obstacles and enhancing gender diversity. Through this lens, the chapter adds depth to theoretical debates and sparks more comprehensive discussions on advancing women's empowerment and transforming rural economies.

Conflicting perceptions and stereotypes about women's expected roles at individual, family, and societal levels persist, preventing women from breaking the glass ceiling. Women in family businesses are not immune to gender-biased dynamics and they often feel trapped in "golden cages". *Women leaders in family firms: Are they breaking the glass-ceiling and redefining their golden cage?* by Conti and Calabrò explores the obstacles women face and the unique value they bring to their family firms. It contributes to advancing our understanding of gender inclusion issues and suggests strategies to promote equal opportunities in the most prevalent type of firms in the

global economy.

Governance level of analysis

At governance level of analysis, contributions address a highly debated topic in the literature. Inspired by the Feminist theories, the challenge is to incorporate the role of stereotypes into this theme and, consequently, be prepared to reassess some of the established findings in the literature (D'Allura et al., 2022). *Female "bright side": The role of women in management and board on corporate performance in Europe* (Chapter 2.2.1) by Fasano et al. investigates how gender-diversity affects firm performance in Europe, considering the role of national culture in shaping the nature of the relationship. The main conclusion they reach is to demonstrate that breaking barriers by encouraging women's presence at the governance level is crucial for achieving effective governance in the entrepreneurial sector. They find it particularly relevant to increase female presence not only at the top level of executives but also throughout the entire managerial staff within a firm. Moreover, they find essential to break such barriers, especially in specific institutional environments and in the context of small and unlisted firms.

The implications of female directors for risk-taking in Italian high-tech boards (Chapter 2.2.2) by Reguera-Alvarado et al. contributes to the discussion by pointing out the boundary conditions under which gender diversity can positively affect firm risk-taking. Specifically, it helps to 'break down barriers' by highlighting the effect of board human capital heterogeneity on the relationship between gender diversity and firm risk-taking. In this regard, the chapter moves the discussion on gender in leadership beyond the dichotomy of male and female to incorporate a more holistic view of human capital in the boardroom. The authors empirically investigate a sample of Italian high-tech firms and show that a greater representation of female directors on the board negatively affects firm risk-taking and such effect is increased by board human capital diversity.

With their contribution entitled *Does female executives' involvement in corruption affect firm value? European evidence* (Chapter 2.2.3) La Rocca et al. offers a significant perspective on the intersection of gender, corruption, and firm value. Specifically, they contribute to the overarching book's topic by serving as a critical lens through which to examine the multifaceted ways in which gender dynamics shape managerial landscapes. The insidious nature of corruption appears to amplify existing

gender inequalities, creating a toxic cycle detrimental to both individual careers and overall company value, in addition to considering the erosion of trust, the disruption of ethical frameworks, and the long-term consequences on corporate reputation.

Drawing from a selected literature review, *Opening the black box of gender in family business advisory* (Chapter 2.4) by Alvarado-Alvarez *et al.* addresses the topic of gender in the realm of family business advisory. In this chapter, the authors propose a research agenda and a roadmap for family business advisors aiming to integrate a gender perspective into their practice. This integration has the potential to positively impact gender equality in family firms, given the significant role advisors play as both providers of advice and role models. Through this chapter, the authors contribute to the promotion of gender equality and inclusivity in family firms by offering insights on adopting a more gender-sensitive approach to family business advisory.

Management level of analysis

The management level concludes the second part of this book and, in several respects, represents the most novel aspect proposed. The section deserves renewed attention, especially to highlight the various barriers women face daily. The levels of governance and entrepreneurship pertain to women who have undoubtedly chosen leadership roles. However, in the case of the management level, we are evaluating the everyday reality of women's roles in businesses, where every woman has the right to contribute and work serenely.

Gender workforce diversity for resilience: The multinational enterprises' institutional work (Chapter 2.3.1) by Leone *et al.* aims to bridge two apparently disconnected bodies of literature: studies on gender in management and research on firms' resilience. The authors describe Procter & Gamble's initiatives to promote gender diversity within STEM disciplines. They leverage this as a best practice case to unveil how individuals and firms dynamically establish and mould institutions. This chapter goes behind the curtain of the institutional work of multinational enterprises for gender equality and shows the role of gender workforce diversity in shaping firm resilience.

Gender equality strategies in the steel sector: An innovative perspective on chances and challenges of female workforce in production (Chapter 2.3.2) by Tolettini and Di Maria aims to contribute to the book by delving into the issue of gender imbalances within sectors traditionally dominated by men. The authors break down barriers in the steel manufacturing industry, contributing to the discussion by providing an innovative

perspective on gender equality. Specifically, they examine a groundbreaking initiative by a well-known European steel producer with headquarters in Italy that aims to employ women in the production process. In doing so, they expand on the analysis of gender equality's integration into a broader diversity and inclusion strategy by examining best practices in the manufacturing sector.

Taking a broader perspective to show that although the changes in the situation of women in socialist Poland were hardly comparable to the waves of Western feminism, the authors Bogacz-Wojtanowska *et al.* of *On women managers of co-operative shops in Poland during the communist period*, (Chapter 2.3.3.,) propose that the socialist period in Poland and other countries of the Eastern Bloc should be considered part of an overall transnational feminist movement. More narrowly, without naturalizing the mainstream narratives, the chapter gives voice to women leaders who were not only unheard of during socialism in Poland but also remained undiscovered during the subsequent 35 years of Poland's systemic transformation. In a broader context, the authors state that it is important to recognize the factual situation of women during socialism, particularly in contrast to the rather popular but stereotypical perception of it as disadvantageous for women, as well as the belief that in socialist countries, feminist ideas were not spreading at that time. They conclude by stating that female managers and their social activism and agency may well contribute to the global map of debates around cultural production and the reception of diverse feminisms around the globe.

Board diversity as a resilience determinant for small and medium enterprises: an empirical investigation of the Italian context (Chapter 2.3.4) by Damiano investigates the role of board gender diversity in enhancing the resilience of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the food and beverage sector in Italy. In particular, the study aims to understand if board gender diversity can be a determinant of SMEs' resilience, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It builds on the upper echelons theory, and reveals that board gender diversity does not significantly affect the resilience of SMEs in the Italian food and beverage sector. The finding supports the gender structure theory and suggests that resilience is not significantly influenced by the gender composition of the board.

PART III - Breaking barriers: women's public policy

From its very inception, this book was conceived in our minds as a work aimed at

examining the state of the art both theoretically (Part 1) and empirically (Part 2), and ultimately offering guidelines for breaking barriers. Section 3, "Breaking Barriers: Women's Public Policy," achieves this goal by presenting five contributions that precisely advance the understanding of the topic, charting its future directions.

European Regulatory approaches to increase women in Upper Echelon: A retrospective (Chapter 3.1) by Lo Preiato and Bannò contributes to the discussion by explaining how different cultures influence the tools introduced for promoting gender equality, particularly regarding accessing managerial positions. Using the cultural classification proposed by the GLOBE project and focusing on four specific dimensions related to a more inclusive and gender-oriented culture (i.e., power distance, assertiveness, uncertainty avoidance, and gender egalitarianism), the chapter identifies the correlation between gender equality of the cultural clusters and the introduction of stringent measures to promote the accessibility of women on top echelon positions.

Unveiling gender equality: Assessing the impact of board gender diversity approaches in European Countries (Chapter 3.2) by Filippi and Fornasari investigates whether the effects of gender inclusivity measures aiming at increasing women's representation in corporate boards (i.e., gender quota laws, recommendation approach, and disclosure approach) extend beyond their primary goals, potentially shaping societal norms and driving cultural change. The chapter examines whether these actions have promoted women's representation in important positions involving decisions, such as those in business and finance, politics, public administration, judiciary, education, science, and research.

The existence and spread of discriminatory practices are not in question, nor is it possible to deny the influence of cultural aspects on phenomena such as salary levels, access to the job market, and career advancement. However, suppose one adopts a scientific and non-ideological approach. In that case, biologically influenced group differences in talents, tastes and interests predispose men and women to make, on average, different choices in the workplace. These ancestral mechanisms that govern the preferences and choices of a person can hinder women's career progression and explain, at least in part, phenomena such as the 'glass ceiling', professional segregation of women, and the gender pay gap. By shedding light on these mechanisms, *Socio-cognitive factors hindering women careers: An evolutionary psychological perspective* (Chapter 3.3) by Ferrari reveals the so called 'evolutionary dissonances'

(i.e., the unconscious cognitive and socio-relational mechanisms that contribute to hindering women's careers in the workplace). Evolutionary psychology empirically supports the idea that sexes are not identical and show different workplace results even without discrimination. In this direction, the chapter shows how evolutionary psychology can help design and implement active policies to reduce gender discrimination in the workplace.

Beyond the Feminist Approach: Integrating Feminine Capital and Care without Sacrifice in the JEDI Framework for Sustainable Employability, (Chapter 3.4) by Erasmo et al., provides a theoretical elaboration of the community debate. The chapter offers a theoretical framework for a novel approach to business gender policies that can represent women's qualities fairly by combining perspectives on feminine capital, corporate social responsibility, and sustainable employability. The authors discuss the ongoing discrimination against women in workplaces and call for immediate action to address issues such as equal pay, insurance, social security, and lasting education to ensure women's rights and reduce exploitation and discrimination. The contribution stems from the work done in the Women for Economy Village inside the Economy of Francesco initiative. The main indication offered by the authors is the necessity for women to have access to professional training and emphasizing that work structures should respect their dignity and vocation helps them to better balance household and work commitments.

Concluding this amazing journey to inspire the design of the future, *More than having a seat at the table: From bringing women in the boardroom to making their voice heard* (Chapter 3.5) by De Masi et al. contributes to the biggest challenge women face today which is not gaining access to the board of directors but making their contributions more visible and their voices heard more by the other board members. Policy-makers have used two mechanisms to overcome these obstacles and promote board gender diversity: regulatory norms (gender quota laws) and the development of good governance codes' recommendations. Going forward, increasing the number of women in high-level decision-making roles such as CEO, board chair, lead independent director or board committee chair will be the new context but it is essential to find the way to make their contribution. The authors contribute to this debate underlining the channels through which women's voice may be amplified.

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