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Women's Academic Entrepreneurship: Understanding Gender Disparities

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ABSTRACT

This monograph provides an overview of the current state of female participation in academic entrepreneurship and focuses on theories, approaches, and evidence in the university setting. Women represent a valuable yet underrepresented capital for economies and societies, and universities have recently made the effort to support and foster female participation in both science and entrepreneurship. However, differences in entrepreneurship rates between men and women still exist. This monograph offers a comprehensive framework drawn from the process-based concept of academic entrepreneurship, encompassing mindset, intention, and action. Each phase is discussed separately in terms of both student and faculty entrepreneurship, with the aim of detecting complementary findings and theories. Special focus is placed on the influence of context, since the unique

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factors of a university setting might mitigate the gender disparity in academic entrepreneurship and offer avenues for further investigation. In doing so, this monograph seeks to identify gaps in the field and areas for future research.

1

Introduction

Academic entrepreneurship is a critical driver of innovation (Acs *et al.*, 2009) and economic growth (Romer, 1986). It refers to the commercialization of knowledge and technologies developed in academia by students and faculty members. Academic entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between university and industry (Correia *et al.*, 2024) and favors new job creation (Wright *et al.*, 2007) and societal wellbeing (Siegel and Wright, 2015). The literature on academic entrepreneurship is dynamic and gaining momentum (Civera *et al.*, 2020; Fini *et al.*, 2018; Hayter *et al.*, 2018; Prokop, 2021). Scholars have increasingly targeted this topic to improve understanding of the key issues and the actors involved (Correia *et al.*, 2024). The research stream that examines female participation in the academic entrepreneurial ecosystem is currently a relatively modest area with growth potential (Halilem *et al.*, 2022). However, at the moment, there is no evidence of an organic reference framework, and recent literature reviews (e.g., Correia *et al.*, 2024; Hayter *et al.*, 2018) seem to have neglected this topic.

The number of papers dealing with this topic stems from a historical lack of interest in the gender dimension of academic entrepreneurship. Until the end of the 2000s, the gender dimension was examined in a

handful of articles dealing with university entrepreneurship (Rothaermel *et al.*, 2007; Thursby and Thursby, 2005). Among the reasons for underinvestigating this phenomenon is a lack of data on entrepreneurial activities from students and faculty in general, which rely mostly on local samples that do not allow an international comparison (Poggesi *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, academic entrepreneurial activities are multifaceted and difficult to codify and track over time (Abreu and Grinevich, 2024). This results in low rates of university entrepreneurship activities established by academic women.

Despite the increasing participation of women in academia, a gender gap can be found in many aspects of the university system, and women remain particularly underrepresented in academic entrepreneurship (Goel *et al.*, 2015). A bibliometric analysis from Larivière *et al.* (2013) shows that gendered disparities in science are a global phenomenon. For example, on a global scale, female academics account for less than 30% of authorship and are less cited than male academics. Similar data can be found among patenting individuals. Despite the positive trend in recent decades, female inventors are still around 13–15% of all inventors (Caviggioli *et al.*, 2023). In addition, men are three times more likely than women to own a business (Piacentini, 2013). This gender gap is observed not only in the broader entrepreneurial landscape but also in the area of academic entrepreneurship (Goel *et al.*, 2015). This disparity can be found in all activities that incorporate an entrepreneurial approach in academia. According to recent data, women researchers and professors are less likely than men to disclose their inventions (Colyvas *et al.*, 2012), hold a patent (Allen *et al.*, 2007; Murray and Graham, 2007; Whittington, 2011), or establish a firm on the basis of their research (Civera and Meoli, 2023; Lauto *et al.*, 2022; Woolley, 2019). Despite the limited evidence of studies focusing on university students, there is consensus in finding a lower share of female entrepreneurs than male (Epstein *et al.*, 2022; Moreno-Gómez *et al.*, 2022; Piva and Rovelli, 2022).

Scholars who have investigated the underrepresentation of women in entrepreneurial activities often rely on the metaphor of the "leaky pipeline" (Clark Blickenstaff, 2005; Polkowska, 2013) to explain the phenomenon. While this metaphor was originally used to illustrate

the shortage of candidates, both male and female, in scientific careers (Berryman, 1983), in recent decades it has mostly been used to describe women's trajectories in science (Morganson *et al.*, 2010; Sassler *et al.*, 2017). The leaky pipeline refers to the constant drain of women in each educational or career stage: from students in secondary school, through university degrees, to doctoral positions, to jobs in science and technology, whether in academia or in the business sector (Hunt *et al.*, 2013; Reed *et al.*, 2011; Toivanen and Väänänen, 2016). For example, Germany and the UK both exhibit high proportions of female life science doctoral graduates, at 46.7% and 56.6%, respectively. The figures decline markedly when viewed as the proportion of women employed as scientific researchers in higher education, with 14% of females in Germany and 31% in the UK (Haeussler and Colyvas, 2011).

Within academia, women are not only less represented but also experience a less supportive environment than men. Woolley (2019), for instance, reported that in the US, women earn less and are promoted to full professor at a slower rate than their male counterparts (American Society for Engineering Education, 2023; National Science Foundation, 2023). Women are also disproportionately overrepresented among part-time, temporary, and nontenure track faculty (Blume-Kohout, 2014). The same happened in the UK (Abreu and Grinevich, 2017; Rosa and Dawson, 2006) and Italy (Civera *et al.*, 2021). The lack of women in advanced academic positions results in several challenges, including an overburdening of those few women in these roles (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2012) and a lack of role models for the next generation (Clark Blickenstaff, 2005; Tartari and Salter, 2015). Thus, studies have shown that female faculty members are often burdened with a heavier service and teaching load than their male colleagues (Guarino and Borden, 2017; Hart, 2016).

Although women represent fewer than half of the faculty in several disciplines, their presence is especially low in engineering and some technology fields (Tartari and Salter, 2015). The particularly unbalanced nature of the demographics of female and male academics in the so-called STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) disciplines exacerbates the underrepresentation of female entrepreneurs since these areas are where academic entrepreneurship is more likely to

emerge. Scholars who have tried to investigate the dynamics of leaky pipelines have suggested that the gender gap is attributable both to personal characteristics (Vázquez-Cupeiro and Elston, 2006) and to discrimination experienced in their context (Parker *et al.*, 2017).

In spite of the current situation, the gender gap can be reduced more easily in academic entrepreneurship than in other contexts (Civera and Meoli, 2023; Lauto *et al.*, 2022; Sugimoto *et al.*, 2015; Whittington, 2011). Women and men in academia are characterized by similar levels of human capital and by similar attitudes, pressures, and motivations (Rosa and Dawson, 2006). Moreover, universities have oriented themselves toward a more entrepreneurial attitude (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000) by stimulating new enterprises and creating a supportive environment for both men and women who are willing to be entrepreneurs.

Regardless of all this, the underrepresentation of women in academic entrepreneurship is a significant issue that warrants thorough investigation. This is not only a matter of fairness and equality but also of economic efficiency and innovation potential (Abreu and Grinevich, 2017; Muscio and Vallanti, 2022). Women represent a substantial portion of the intellectual talent in our society, and their underutilization in the entrepreneurial sector represents a significant loss of potential innovation and economic growth (Bell *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, diversity, including gender diversity, has been shown to enhance problem solving and creativity, key elements in the entrepreneurial process (Minniti, 2009). Therefore, understanding and addressing the gender gap in academic entrepreneurship could lead to more effective utilization of human resources, increased innovation, and improved economic performance.

This monograph is devoted to analyzing what we know so far about female engagement in academic entrepreneurship and the main theories and methodologies adopted. It then uses these analyses to delineate future research on the topic. The objective of this literature review is to synthesize existing research on gender issues in academic entrepreneurship. Despite the growing interest in this topic, the current body of literature is fragmented and lacks a comprehensive overview. This review aims to fill this gap by providing a narrative review built on a comprehensive framework derived from the process-based definition of academic entrepreneurship: from mindset to intention and finally

to action. First, we focus on the entrepreneurial mindset of academic entrepreneurs by investigating specific differences in cognitive attributes and personality traits between men and women. Second, we consider the entrepreneurial intentions of academic entrepreneurs who can perceive academia as more or less supportive depending on their gender.

Third, the entrepreneurial action phase is deeply analyzed by disentangling the formal, informal, and noncommercial mechanisms of academic entrepreneurial activities. Divergences in men's and women's participation in each activity are discussed. Moreover, as academic entrepreneurship is made up of both student and faculty entrepreneurship, we maintain these two streams separately to understand the main findings from the respective literature and suggest either complementary or substitute keys of interpretation. Finally, special attention is devoted to the role of context, as special elements at the university level and at a finer-grained level can moderate the gender gap in academic entrepreneurship, providing ideas for future research. By doing so, this review aims to provide a clearer picture of what is currently known about gender issues in academic entrepreneurship, what questions remain unanswered, and what areas require further investigation. This will not only contribute to the academic understanding of this topic but also provide practical insights for policymakers, educators, and entrepreneurs.

The remainder of the monograph is structured as follows. The next section provides definitions and background literature on the entrepreneurial phases, with particular attention to academia. Section 3 introduces the main theories adopted in the context of academic entrepreneurship, specifically encompassing gender issues. Section 4 proposes the theoretical framework that we adopted to organize the literature and the general descriptive statistics of the examined corpus of articles. Section 5 details several research areas identified in our scheme. The paper concludes with a discussion of future research avenues and the implications of the findings for theory, practice, and policy.

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