

Guest editorial: Gender, entrepreneurship and the digital divide: a global perspective

The concepts and terms defining the thrust of this special issue, i.e. gender, entrepreneurship (Berger *et al.*, 2021), the digital divide (Bowen and Morris, 2019; Millan *et al.*, 2021; Satalkina *et al.*, 2021), Global South (Simaan, 2020) and Global North, are very well established in the literature. Nevertheless, relatively little has been written about (1) the gendered dimension of the digital divide, (2) the digital divide and the gendered dimension of entrepreneurship (Elliott *et al.*, 2021); and finally, (3) the specificity of these topics as they are in the Global South and Global North's peripheries (Ojediran and Anderson, 2020; Wood *et al.*, 2021; Althalathini *et al.*, 2020). Even if research on each of these individual domains exists, relatively little research on the intersection of these three areas exists (but cf. *Visvizi et al.*, 2023, and earlier *Kasusse, 2005; Alden, 2003*). Notably, given the pace and the pervasive impact of digital transformation globally, and their diverse political, social and economic manifestations, it is necessary that the mechanisms underlying these interconnected issues and developments are identified and explored. This special issue sought to encourage this kind of conversation, always in context of the United Nation's (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, the key objective of this special issue was to examine, (1) how the onset of increasingly sophisticated information and communication technology (ICT) influences gender and entrepreneurship in the Global South and in the peripheries of the Global North; (2) what types of interpretive lens and explanatory potential are offered by the existing literature on the subject and (3) whether best practice-sharing and specific business and policy strategies might be helpful in alleviating negative implications of the global digital transformation.

Two assumptions drove our thinking about this special issue. First, ICT may be the source of several advantages and, indeed, a source of individual and entrepreneurial empowerment. However, the downside of technological progress in the form of digital divide, may lead to exclusion, poverty and precarity. Second, while the notions of digital divide and lack of opportunity tend to be associated with the Global South, they remain equally valid in the Global North. Hence the special issue's emphasis on the periphery of the Global North. It is to say that poverty, exclusion and lack of opportunities remain an issue in the developed world too. It is particularly striking when the gender dimension is added to the analysis.

Several papers were submitted to the initial call for papers. Of these, four have been included in this special issue. The collection opens with a paper titled "Trade liberalization and women empowerment in the Arab countries", by Nahil Saqfalthait, Khawlah AbdAlla Spetan, Taleb Awad-Warrad and Mohammad W. Alomari. The objective of this paper is to examine the impact of trade liberalization, measured by trade openness (OPN) and tariffs, on women empowerment, measured by the gender gap index and the gender development index. Two groups, based on their income levels using annual data for the period 1995–2020, of Arab countries were examined for the purpose of the analysis. The study also considers other factors that may influence the gender gap, such as GDP growth and the female unemployment rate. The findings reveal that the impact of OPN on the gender gap varies between the two groups of Arab countries, where more OPN within the higher-income group may increase the gender disparity, while it may reduce disparity within the lower and middle-income countries. In addition, GDP growth may reduce the gender disparity. Moreover, female unemployment increases the gender disparity between the two groups of



countries in the long run. The findings also reveal that more OPN, tariffs and female unemployment may reduce gender development within the two groups, but more GDP growth may support the gender development in the long run.

In the following contribution, titled “Entrepreneurial ecosystem, gig economy practices and Women’s entrepreneurship: the case of Lebanon”, Ali Mohamad Mouazen and Ana Beatriz Hernández-Lara, examine what drives women to become entrepreneurs. To this end the relationships between the entrepreneurial ecosystem, the gig economy and women’s entrepreneurship in a developing country, here Lebanon, are explored. The results show a positive influence of the entrepreneurial ecosystem and gig economy on women’s entrepreneurship, stronger in the case of entrepreneurial ecosystem elements and almost similar for opportunity and necessity entrepreneurship. The following paper included in this collection focuses on Kazakhstan. It is written by Saltanat Akhmadi and Mariza Tsakalerou and is titled “Exploring Gender Imbalances in Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Evidence from a Global South Country”. This study investigates gender diversity within innovation and entrepreneurship teams and the perceptions of gender imbalance in digital skills among team members in Kazakhstan. Primary data were collected from ten leading firms in Kazakhstan’s manufacturing, construction and oil and gas sectors, which have international connections or perspectives. The findings reveal that gender diversity within innovation teams is not as high as anticipated, even though there is a substantial representation of women in the scientific workforce across many firms. Similarly, there is a gender gap in entrepreneurship teams involved in business innovation, although it is slightly less pronounced. Female employees report a greater disparity compared to their male counterparts. Surprisingly, over 60% of both male and female respondents agree that women lack the same level of digital expertise and knowledge as men.

By shifting the empirical focus to the Global North, Aleksandra Gawel and Ewa Mińska-Struzik, examine digitalization and gender in the European Union. In their paper titled “Digitalisation as gender equaliser? The import and export of digitally delivered services in shaping female entrepreneurship in European countries”, the authors examine whether cross-border trade in digitally delivered services (DDSs) has an influence on European female entrepreneurship. The findings of their research suggest that the imports of digitally delivered services positively influence female entrepreneurship in European countries, whilst the impact of the export of digitally delivered services is statistically insignificant. The possibility of being a customer of digitally delivered services through their import may become a gender equalizer in entrepreneurship. However, as differences in digital competencies and growth intentions prevent women from acting as the providers of digitally delivered services, the export of DDSs can sustain the existing gender gap in entrepreneurship.

It is somewhat concerning that relatively few papers were published in this special issue, whereby the topic of the latter seemed to have addressed an issue widely discussed in the public discourse and of key relevance to our societies, globally. While several contributing factors exist, it is worthwhile to mention that researchers representing the Global South face a number of challenges, including access to resources, know-how and skills that prove vital in view of the ability to publish. It is imperative therefore that the voices still silent today join the conversation on gender, entrepreneurship and the global digital transformation any time soon.

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Further reading

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