Women in Entrepreneurship for Sustainability in Ireland's West, North-West and Northern Ireland:

Addressing Gender Disparity through Education

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Abstract. In Ireland, women are under-represented among business owners and self-employed compared with the EU average. Despite initiatives, and modest progress since 2018, in 2024, just 29% of start-up teams supported by Enterprise Ireland, had a woman in the founding team (Enterprise Ireland, 2026). This paper presents findings from a documentary analysis exploring the circumstances behind the lower recorded rates of women's entrepreneurship, relative to male counterparts, focusing specifically on the case of women in entrepreneurship within the North-West and Border, Midlands, West region of the Republic of Ireland and across the border into Northern Ireland. This is classified by Eurostat as a region in transition, with low-income averages in comparison with EU averages and other areas on the island. Findings show intense focus is placed on supporting and educating both men and women towards the pursuit of High Potential Start-Up ventures, and that there is a deficit in policy and educational support for slower growth sustainable, community focused ventures. Research shows rural regions create enterprises vital for long-term rural sustainability and social equity, prevalent in the start-up and growth ambitions of women in these areas. To address the gender imbalance in entrepreneurship in a system biased towards high-growth models, which by extension marginalises women-led, mission-driven ventures, this study recommends greater policy, mentorship and education for sustainability in entrepreneurship and enhanced gender disaggregated data collection focusing on purpose orientated sustainable enterprises that women founders engage with, in peripheral economies.

Keywords: women entrepreneurs, peripheral economy, sustainable enterprise, ESD.

1 Introduction

Entrepreneurship is a catalyst for local and global development. Entrepreneurs create jobs, skills, and opportunities, advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to poverty reduction (SDG 1), education (SDG 4), economic growth (SDG 8) and the reduction of inequalities (SDG 5) as well as making human settlements inclusive and sustainable (SDGs 10 & 11) (SDG, 2015). Geopolitical tensions and recessionary

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pressures can present challenges leading to misalignment with the Sustainable Development Goals; however, the forces of economic growth and sustainable development can also be mutually reinforcing. Research indicates that firms which prioritise social and sustainable procurement grow 10-20% faster than their competitors (Feingold, 2023). Entrepreneurs bring creativity, agility, and innovation required to achieve the SDGs, while the SDGs provide the moral compass and strategic framework to guide businesses toward long-term, sustainable success.

Women's entrepreneurship is a critical area of scholarly inquiry and policy focus globally, recognised for its substantial potential to drive economic growth and employment. Yet, in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI) despite increasing recognition and targeted support initiatives in these areas, such as those provided by Enterprise Ireland, Invest NI, Awaken Hub and Empower Women, systemic gender gaps persist, particularly concerning access to financial capital, growth rates, and participation in high-innovation sectors (ATU IHubs 2025; AwakenHub, 2024; Enterprise Ireland, 2026; Women in Business NI, 2025). Women's entrepreneurship has garnered increased policy attention due to its recognised economic importance (Henry et al., 2023, p. 227) yet persistent gender gaps remain evident, particularly regarding access to financial capital (Awaken Hub, 2025; Henry et al., 2023; Lawless & Coates, 2024).

Sustainable economic development is impossible without the full participation of all populations (McHugh, 2010). Unlocking women's full entrepreneurial potential would add significant economic value to the Irish and the UK economies (Mc Hugh, 2010; Schmid et al., 2025). To illustrate this fact, we can refer to The Gender Equality Index (2025a) which provides evidence of a positive association between gender equality, improved economic activity and greater local productivity (Schmid et al., 2025).

The recommendations which stem from the analysis in this paper highlight the challenges faced by women in entrepreneurship in Ireland's North West, West, Border Midlands West areas (NW&BMW) and the border regions in NI, and they aim to set out recommendations for the support and education for sustainable development required to accelerate more inclusive sustainable and equitable entrepreneurial growth for the kind of enterprises women create in these areas.

2 Study objective

The objective of this paper was to explore, via an exploratory documentary analysis, the underlying dynamics behind the gender disparity in recorded entrepreneurial engagement, focusing on particular peripheral areas on the island of Ireland. Statistics and concerns which relate to the border areas of NI and the ROI's NW&BMW region are compared with the more capital-centric Leinster area of Ireland, and these findings are benchmarked against broader European regions, to understand the extent to which the NW&BMW and NI border areas differ in terms of the representation of women in entrepreneurship. Recommendations are then presented aimed at policy developers, financial agencies and enterprise support agencies across the island of Ireland and the UK, designed to highlight the nature of gender and regional disparities in entrepreneurship in these areas, and to propose that targeted education for sustainability interventions could assist in addressing the institutional gender imbalance in entrepreneurship in a system biased towards the promotion of HPSUs, inadvertently contributing towards the marginalisation of women-led, mission-driven ventures.

3 Methodology

An exploratory documentary analysis of Irish and NI government enterprise policy documents and a literature review of academic texts on challenges facing women in entrepreneurship were undertaken to explore the nature of the entrepreneurial deficits and gender inequalities in the NW&BMW and NI border region of ROI and NI. A review of relevant EU, Irish and United Kingdom (UK) government enterprise websites, relevant to entrepreneurship action and support, was also undertaken. In addition, available statistics on the prevalence of women in entrepreneurship in these areas were compared with average rates across the EU in order to establish a point of reference. Keywords used to search for papers on the Scopus database, included "women founders"; "women entrepreneurs"; "gender in entrepreneurship"; "sustainability entrepreneurship"; "sustainability for entrepreneurship;" "entrepreneurship education for sustainability;" "mission-driven entrepreneurship" and "enterprise policy". These reviews took place between January 2025 and March 2026. Content was coded by theme and the theoretical framework which provided the scaffolding for analysis was Institutional Theory.

Institutional theory, a prominent theoretical framework from sociology, economics and organisational theory, informed this study. Institutional theory offers valuable insights into how organisations and individuals are shaped by the wider institutional environment (Roszkowska-Menkes, 2022). Organisations operate in a social environment and new laws, regulatory norms, and cultural-cognitive routines impact patterns of behaviour and the creation of new structures. Through these lenses we can consider how broader societal institutions and organisations and rules are created and then how entrepreneurial outcomes are influenced.

The following sections define key concepts in entrepreneurship and sustainability and outline the research context. The importance of interventions in the form of targeted initiatives in education for sustainability is outlined. Then institutional theory normative, regulatory, and cultural-cognitive pillars broadly frame the results of this exploratory review and are presented in the form of policy norms and impact on cultural routines in gendered entrepreneurship. Finally, the paper provides recommendations to bridge the gender gap employing education for sustainability interventions as change agents to empower women led mission-driven businesses focused on societal impact and community resilience.

3.1 Entrepreneurship for sustainability: concepts and definitions

Entrepreneurship is broadly conceptualised as a behaviour, a process, or a range of activities that drive economic development (Mc Guinness et al., 2023). Entrepreneurship is defined by the European Commission as acting upon opportunities and ideas, transforming them into values for others, which can be financial, cultural, or social (Bacigalupo et al., 2016). Traditionally, entrepreneurship has been solely profit-orientated, however it has been evolving to tackle challenges such as climate change and social injustice (Ricciardi et al., 2021). Sustainability entrepreneurship is defined as creating a business that solves environmental and/or social problems while being profitable. In this paper, sustainability (or sustainable) entrepreneurship refers to 'a process of seizing opportunities to develop and effectively introduce innovations that simultaneously address environmental/social concerns and economic value' (Dodd et al., 2022), where for example, the business model is focused on addressing a specific environmental or social issue, such as an innovative biodegradable packaging enterprise. Sustainability (or sustainable) entrepreneurship requires a business model focused on solving an environmental or ecological problem.

Sustainable entrepreneurship integrates economic, social, and environmental objectives, balancing profit with responsible stewardship (Farny & Binder, 2021, pp. 605-611). However, entrepreneurship for sustainability, has a broader remit. It can be defined as building and running a business that not only prioritises profits but also the wellbeing of the planet and its people. Entrepreneurship for sustainability (or sustainability in Entrepreneurship) is distinguished from 'sustainability entrepreneurship' by its focus on operational priority rather than on the business model of the venture. This approach ensures that sustainable principles are intrinsic to all activities of the enterprise, acknowledging that environmental protection and economic health are mutually reinforcing. Education for Sustainability in Entrepreneurship refers to a transformative educational model that embeds sustainability innovation and sustainability for entrepreneurship into a set curriculum or training goal, in order to normalise sustainable business models and provide practical mentoring for entrepreneurs to navigate the circular economy and green public procurement, moving beyond theory to help them develop a robust, resilient sustainability plan (Rosário & Raimundo, 2024).

3.2 Context and core concerns – Education for sustainability as a catalyst for change

Critical regional disparities are evident in the statistics relating to women in entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland and the West and Northwest regions of Ireland and Border, Midlands-West area (NW&BMW) when compared to the Leinster area of Ireland or urban economically advantaged areas across Europe. Further, policy intentions to support the peripheral, and comparatively more disadvantaged areas of the NW&BMW and border areas of NI, often fail in operational implementation, given that many of the supports and training initiatives are focused on the High Potential Start Ups (HPSUs) and on the more population dense areas. In the Irish enterprise funding context, a HPSU is generally defined as a start-up that can build a business with strong export potential create around 10 jobs and 1 million sales within 3 to 4 years of start-up (Enterprise Ireland, 2026). Typical HPSUs tend to be knowledge intensive, involved in manufacturing or developing software or deep technology or engineering. While mainstream business support systems are often built on the premise of economic performance and scaling, women in rural areas tend to lead enterprises that are vital for long-term rural sustainability and social equity (Roos et al., 2025).

This area of study is critical to economic and social sustainability in the jurisdictions under review as it aims to expose and seeks to correct deeply rooted gender inequalities that prevent diverse participation in wealth creation. The focus in this paper is on the broader institutional, cultural, regulatory, and normative entrepreneurial obstacles women face in peripheral regions and jurisdictions in the NW&BMW of the ROI and the border areas of NI. Within these jurisdictions, there are largely rural based populations and particularly economically challenged border regions and Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) areas (Henry et al., 2022). Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) which include many women-led businesses are particularly important here in these geographic locations, as they are linked not just to economic growth but also to sustaining the social fabric of communities through job creation and maintaining rural populations (Oireachtas, 2019). These concerns align with SDGs 5, 10 and 11 which focus on reducing inequalities and making human settlements inclusive and sustainable. Further, against the backdrop of ongoing environmental, technological, and economic change such as decarbonisation, digitisation, automation, and Artificial Intelligence, it is important to consider that future formulation of entrepreneurship policy will require intensive strategic interrogation and foresight (Lawless et al., 2024).

As a result of this exploratory review of women's entrepreneurship in Ireland's NWBMW and border regions, the paper recommends utilising Education for Sustainability (EFS) to redefine the rules of the game within regional enterprise ecosystems. By emphasising the strategic value of societal impact, EFS serves as an institutional tool to address the gender disparity inherent in focusing primarily on high-growth, HPSU-centric business models. Information and knowledge gained via EFS will enable founder support programmes (in higher education and beyond); policymakers and support providers to adjust the current narrow profit-focused high growth framework and challenge the systemic gender gap by granting moral and cognitive legitimacy to the mission-driven, community-focused businesses which women often lead, ensuring that women-led, mission-orientated ventures are recognised as legitimate and essential drivers of regional development.

The subsequent sections present findings from the examination of the entrepreneurial challenges unique to Ireland's peripheral and less urban-centric regions. Compounding these structural regional imbalances is the persistent gender disparity in entrepreneurship, which serves as an additional layer of institutional friction for women-led, mission-driven ventures, and frames the need for EFS as an intervention to redefine what is meant by entrepreneurial success and regional value, and to empower sustainability focused enterprise processes in these marginalised ecosystems.

4 Findings: Institutional policy, norms, and regional disparity

The NW&BMW region of Ireland, along with rural, Gaeltacht (Irish speaking), and border areas, face significant geographic challenges. In recessionary periods these regions suffer greater detrimental economic effects than the urban areas (Henry et al., 2022, p. 248). Historically, the western region specifically (Counties Galway, Mayo and Roscommon) see the lowest national jobs growth compared to the rest of the country (e.g., 6.2% national vs. 15.8% in Dublin in Q2 2017) and a 4.3% decline in active enterprises between 2008 and 2016, contrasting with a 3.9% growth rate in the rest of the state (Oireachtas, 2019, p. 41). This inequality is exacerbated by the institutional failure to align policy intent (targeting regions like BMW) with operational practice, resulting in the centralisation of key support measures in Dublin/Leinster areas (Henry et al., 2022, p. 250).

The NW&BMW area under study has been designated as an area under transition by Eurostat. This area, designated as IE04, has significant structural challenges in terms of population size and density and retention – which underscores the importance of retaining community focused sustainable enterprise in the region. Table 1 below highlights a current profound regional imbalance: the GDP per capita of €38,300 lags significantly behind the Irish average of €81,200 (McColgan & Owen, 2025). Though the region's output is comparable to the EU average, this comparison masks the architecture of legitimacy within the state. The domestic gap tells the real story because it points to a potential deficit in current enterprise policies, signaling they may be decoupled from regional realities. If success is measured against an urban-centric national mean, institutions effectively but perhaps inadvertently diminish the social value creation of regional sustainable ventures.

Table 1. Structural differences between the region, IE, and the EU (McColgan & Owen, 2025). Table sourced directly from 2025 Regional Profile Ireland. Directorate General for Research and Innovation, ©European Union 2025, CC BY 4.0.

Table highlighting structural differences between the region, a country, and the EU

Structural Indicator	IE04	IE	EU
Share of employment in (2022-2024 average):			
Agriculture & Mining (A-B)	6.77	3.93	3.73
Manufacturing (C)	13.93	10.87	15.6
Utilities & Construction (D-F)	8.2	7.6	8.4
Services (G-N)	65.6	71.93	64.77
Public administration (O-U)	5.3	5.37	7.1
Average number of employed persons per enterprise (2021-2022 average)	4.56	5.75	4.86
GDP per capita (PPS) (2023)	38,300	81,200	38,100
GDP per capita growth (PPS) (2019-2023)	0.11	0.08	0.05
Population density (2023)	37.6	77.4	109.3
Urbanisation (2024)	25.09	59.28	76.09
Population size (000s) (2024)	945.56	5,351.68	449,306.2

The challenges facing women entrepreneurs in these regions are exacerbated by the failure of national policy articulation to match regional operational practice (Henry et al., 2022, pp. 250, 257). Although the Irish entrepreneurship policy document explicitly includes regional signifiers such as 'BMW' and 'rural' (Henry et al., 2022, pp. 235, 250), the practice documents for key financial support, such as the Competitive Start

Fund for Female Entrepreneurs, reveal no mention of these regional signifiers (Henry et al., 2022, p. 250). Many of the key high value national training initiatives are Leinster centric, the following section elaborates further on this divergence.

4.1 Regulatory and policy norms favour centralisation

"Despite its small size, Ireland's economic geography is characterised by significant differences in the vitality of the local entrepreneurship ecosystems underpinning SME and entrepreneurship development across the country." (OECD, 2019, p. 214).

In contrast to the peripheral BMW region, the Leinster area, specifically the capital Dublin, acts as a centralised hub, often benefiting institutionally even when policies intend to support regional balance (Henry et al., 2022, p. 257). This centralised region dominates a large part of the economy, and the NW/BMW region is economically below the state average (OECD, 2019, p. 215).

Northern Ireland and the border regions also suffer from their peripheral location, comparative to other UK regions as the UK Government's Enterprise Investment Scheme and Seed Enterprise Investment Scheme "overwhelmingly benefit businesses in London, which account for just 18 per cent of the business population and 21 per cent of the UK's high-growth enterprises, yet received 46 per cent of these reliefs" (IPPR, 2017).

To illustrate the operationalisation of this bias towards urban more centralised enterprises in the ROI, one example is provided of the ROI Competitive Start Fund for Female Entrepreneurs. This start fund demonstrated a clear geographic bias toward the capital (Henry et al., 2022, p. 250). Information evenings for applicants were held in Dublin, and support for successful applicants was centralised to the Dublin Business Innovation Centre (BIC) accelerator program (Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, 2019; Henry et al., 2022, p. 250). This practice reinforces the perception that entrepreneurship is the privilege of those based in the capital or large cities (Henry et al., 2022, p. 257).

Furthermore, national policy in the ROI prioritises support for High Potential Start-ups (HPSUs), focusing on high-growth, high-tech, and export-oriented ventures (Henry et al., 2022, p. 246). Historically, analysis of Enterprise Ireland's client base showed only 5% of HPSU startups were led by female entrepreneurs over a 10-year period (Department of Jobs, Enterprise, and Innovation 2014, p. 22). While this rate improved significantly to 41 female-led projects in 2013, up from 16 in 2012 (Department of Jobs, Enterprise, and Innovation 2014), the overall concentration of HPSU support is embedded within the centralised ecosystem which favours the capital region and turns a blind eye to the community orientated businesses in peripheral regions of the island. This locked in focus on support of HPSUs ignores the regionally and community-based service orientated sustainable micro enterprises so many rural women in entrepreneurship have developed, and/or need support to establish. In addition, there is less significant funding focus on the sustainable, service orientated microbusinesses which support and retain communities in rural areas.

Therefore, as current enterprise policies often exhibit a normative and regulatory bias toward technology-driven, export-oriented models, creating an institutional void for community-based sustainable microbusinesses, implementing Education for Sustainability (EFS) as a form of institutional training intervention could support and nurture a redefinition of entrepreneurial legitimacy—moving from a logic of mere profit value capture to one of 'social value creation'. This intervention might support a shift towards a framework necessary to recognise and prioritise the integrated value of people, planet, and profit.

4.2 Comparative gender disparity and institutional data collection bias

Compared with the EU and other countries and the more urban regions in the Leinster province of Ireland, the gender disparity in entrepreneurship activity within NI and the ROI's BMW region can be elucidated by examining the economic constraints experienced, cultural factors which have impact, and by reviewing the institutional incoherence between policy articulation and practice (Henry et al., 2022, p. 246).

In the context of Irish enterprise policy, there are gaps in available gender-disaggregated statistics. This could be interpreted as not merely a data gap, but a reflection of the architecture of legitimacy within the Irish state's support structures and indicates where value is placed. Where gender disaggregated data is available, it is generally related to HPSU supported enterprise. By failing to track data related to the regional sustainability orientated lower growth businesses, institutions signal that the lived realities of women-led, community-focused businesses are not yet viewed as legitimate objects of knowledge. Further, the limited statistics relating to Enterprise Ireland HPSU support show that in 2024, just 29 per cent of Enterprise Ireland supported start-ups included a woman in the founding team and that, just 22% of Enterprise Ireland seed and venture capital supported companies were women led (Enterprise Ireland, 2026).

Gender disaggregated statistics are available for self-employed persons, collected by the NI governing authority in 2023 and for the ROI, they were collected by Eurostat Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2017. These statistics demonstrate significant gender disparity. In NI in 2023, the number of self-employed males was almost three times the number of self-employed females (Department for the Economy, 2024). An older, but similar statistic for the ROI, from the 2017 Eurostat LFS analysed by Lawless et al (2024) shows 26.1 % females were in self-employment as opposed to 73.9% of males (Lawless et al., 2024 p12). "[In 2017] Males account[ed] for two-thirds of the self-employed across Europe and almost three-quarters in Ireland" (Lawless et al., 2024, p. 12).

4.3 Gendered institutional norms related to economic and financial challenges

Access to financial capital is repeatedly cited as a primary obstacle for women entrepreneurs at all stages of firm development (Awaken Hub, 2025; Henry et al., 2022,). Women consistently receive significantly lower levels of equity capital, relying predominantly on personal and bank funds (Henry et al., 2022, p. 227).

In NI, female-led companies securing secured debt stood at the fourth lowest proportion across the United Kingdom (UK) in 2024, at 14.3%, reflecting a year-on-year decline (The Gender Index, 2025b, p. 28). This low uptake of debt finance is notable, especially since more recently, a higher proportion of female-led companies in NI are experiencing fast growth compared to almost every other UK region (The Gender Index, 2025a, p. 28). This more recent growth may be attributed to greater attention in NI to recording gender disaggregated entrepreneurship data and/or the growth of focused tailored supports (Women in Business NI, 2025). There is also a more recent surge in networking and Shared Island funding focus on initiatives targeted specifically at women in entrepreneurship across borders and in Northern Ireland. However, this is undermined by low debt financing uptake and unique demographic gaps in leadership possibly attributable to historical conflict (The Gender Index, 2025b, pp. 28, 27). In effect, there is a significant disparity in income across NI similar in effect to the disparity highlighted earlier across the regions in the ROI. The Northern Ireland Poverty and Income Inequality Report, 2024/25, shows clearly that the most deprived areas of NI are the border areas and the extreme west of the jurisdiction (Department for Communities, 2026).

4.4 Cultural-Cognitive and Soft Obstacles

Underlying the economic barriers are pervasive cultural and cognitive issues rooted in the institutional environment (Mc Ginn & O Connor, 2019; Henry et al., 2022). Women entrepreneurs are often categorised as a disadvantaged group, and policies frequently imply a deficit model, suggesting that barriers can be overcome by "fixing" the women through more education, training, or experience (Henry et al., 2022, pp. 246, 255). This viewpoint is reinforced by studies which show that women frequently exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy, financial knowledge, and confidence, leading them to avoid the funding process or accept unfavourable terms (European Commission, 2008, p. 115; Henry et al., 2022, p. 229;). For instance, a historical survey in 2006, showed that less than half of Irish women believed they possessed the necessary skills and knowledge to start a business (European Commission, 2008, p. 56). Furthermore, Wyman (2021) found that women are less likely to articulate aspirations and tend to underpromote accomplishments relative to male peers (Oliver Wyman, 2021, p. 4).

5 Discussion and reflection

This study highlights a stark gender disparity in entrepreneurship that is profoundly shaped by geography, cultural, normative and institutional systems across NI and the ROI. This challenge needs to be addressed to ensure support for regional business startups and make growth more inclusive and sustainable in these jurisdictions.

Gender Gap Prevalence and Perception of Value: The available statistics in both NI and the ROI exhibit a substantial gender gap in entrepreneurship (Henry et al., 2022, p. 233; Oireachtas, 2019, p. 43; The Gender Index, 2025a, p. 17). In the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report, Ireland specifically recorded the lowest female to male TEA rate (Total Early-Stage Entrepreneurial Activity Rate) rate (0.50 in 2020) among the developed economies (Henry et al., 2022, p. 233). However, it is important to note that statistics are collected with a focus on HPSUs and businesses with an export orientation, and that the sustainable locally based enterprises in fields like the creative industries, services, and traditional sectors where women often predominate, may not be accounted for in these statistics. HPSU's are seen as the predominant value creators. Value which is focused predominantly on rapid growth and profit. Societal impact and sustainability factors are not accounted for in these statistics.

Systemic Barriers and the problematic deficit narrative: A critical point of discussion in contemporary entrepreneurship research is whether existing policy frameworks, which frequently frame women as a deficit group in need of remedial fixing, are fundamentally misaligned with the actual objectives of female-led regional ventures (EIGE, 2025; Henry et al., 2022, pp. 229, 246). Across the island of Ireland and European jurisdictions, systemic barriers (low access to equity capital/secured debt), continue to drive gender disparities. However, a significant gendered mismatch exists between the support provided and the support needed; while public systems remain prioritised toward high-growth, STEM-focused, and masculinist standard business models, women often lead enterprises centred on long-term rural sustainability, social equity, and community integration.

Policy- practice Disconnect: The challenges facing women entrepreneurs in these regions are exacerbated by the failure of national policy articulation to match regional operational practice, highlighting a perhaps inadvertent deficit in implementation which could be addressed by an educational or training intervention. There is a need for a paradigm shift in the business support system. This would involve enhancing extant funding models to value and support long-term circular economy models and the unique role that women play as agents of change in the transition to more sustainable enterprise development and growth.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

To address the persistent gender disparity in entrepreneurship across the border areas of NI and the NW&BMW regions of the Republic of Ireland, this study utilises institutional theory as a broad theoretical scaffold to examine how current frameworks systematically undervalue women-led, mission-driven ventures. By analysing the economic, financial regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars via qualitative documentary analyses, we can identify how the existing rules of the game prioritise urban-centric, high-growth models at the expense of regional, community-oriented sustainability focused enterprise, the kinds of enterprises that women in peripheral regions have a greater tendency to engage with. The following recommendations focus on countering these well-established structural and cognitive challenges in a bid to address the challenges and work towards institutional equity at a regional level.

Central to this transformation is Education for Sustainability (EFS), which has the ability to serve as a primary catalyst for institutional change. By fostering a robust sustainability orientation, EFS provides the mechanism to facilitate the institutional work necessary to redefine entrepreneurial success, shifting the dominant logic from a restricted capturing of value based on profit, towards a wider collective perception of social value creation.

This educational intervention is particularly critical in peripheral regions, as research demonstrates that a strong sustainability orientation among actors can “more than offset” the negative impact of lower-quality formal institutions and institutional voids (Audretsch et al., 2023). By integrating EFS into regional policy and mentoring frameworks, stakeholders can extend further beyond the current bias toward high-potential start-ups (HPSUs) and additionally grant moral and cognitive legitimacy to the community-focused, sustainable businesses where women often lead. These recommendations empower policymakers to restructure the rules of the game, ensuring that sustainable economic growth is inclusive, resilient, and aligned with the specific developmental needs of NI and Ireland’s border and NW&BMW regions.

This series of recommendations have been developed to counter cultural-cognitive challenges, to address financial and economic obstacles and achieve equity at institutional and regional levels.

6.1 Countering Cultural and Cognitive Barriers

Via a targeted education for sustainability programme, promote diverse role models and grassroots networks and continue to actively promote female entrepreneurship through the identification and celebration of female role models, targeted events, and dedicated awards.

Increase the visibility of successful women in high-tech and fast-growth sectors. These role models must include the local sustainable service orientated and circular economy enterprises women entrepreneurs create, which are invisible in the data, and that do not fit into the HPSU or high-tech categories. These categories of entrepreneurship are not captured adequately in GEM data. This values the women entrepreneurs at grassroots level, and these are one of the few distinct groups in the context of emerging sustainable entrepreneurship research (Henry et al., 2023).

Engage in further research into education for sustainability in entrepreneurship targeted at shifting towards policy measures which strengthen the ecosystem: Enhance entrepreneurship policy, moving away from a cultural-cognitive assumption of the entrepreneurial deficit model. Instead of a focus on fixing women’s entrepreneurial character deficits, policy should focus on strengthening the ecosystem to support locally based diverse business models in addition to the high-growth HPSUs (Henry et al., 2022, p. 230; Oireachtas, 2019, p. 77). Continue to develop leadership skills and self-confidence within a pedagogy for sustainability.

6.2 Addressing Financial and Economic Obstacles

Aim to diversify financial instruments and training: Strategic interventions are required to overcome the economic obstacles created by deficits in provision by formal institutions, particularly the inadequate availability of financial capital for mission-driven ventures. Developing specialised women-friendly financing and tax relief is a vital regulatory response to remove barriers to equity investment. To complement these measures, EFS could serve as a catalyst to shift normative and cognitive standards within the investment community, addressing the systemic structures which perpetuate the gender gap. By fostering a robust sustainability orientation, EFS interventions can encourage investors to move beyond short-term returns to value the triple bottom line of people, planet, and profit. This alignment would create a future orientated pathway for women-led sustainable innovations to secure pragmatic legitimacy and greater visibility, enabling them to thrive as legitimate drivers of regional economic development.

Contest Lending Biases: Work towards countering any extant gender biases in lending and work towards addressing preconceptions in relation to financing ventures for women entrepreneurs. More female financial consultants and analysts should be assigned to deal with loans and investment.

6.3 Achieving Institutional Fit and Regional Equity

Alignment of Regional Policy with Practice: Work towards ensuring that policy intentions that support peripheral regions are effective in practice by promoting greater decentralisation of support functions and ensuring key EFS entrepreneurship mentoring programmes for the distinct types of circular economy and community orientated businesses are available in the regions.

Integrate regional gender disaggregated data monitoring: Work towards enhanced collection and publication of gender disaggregated data and explicitly segregate these by region. This targeted data collection should not focus alone on HPSUs but on regional sustainably focused enterprise. This level of data disaggregation will enable deeper understanding of regional gender gaps and allow for tailored interventions (European Commission, 2008).

6.4 Focusing on education for sustainability as a catalyst for change

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that addressing persistent regional and gender disparities in Ireland's NW&BMW and NI border regions requires a departure from one-size-fits-all enterprise policies towards tailored supports for women-led, mission-driven ventures. Utilising institutional theory as a theoretical scaffold, the paper argues that the current privileging of HPSUs creates a legitimacy gap for smaller, community-focused businesses. EFS is proposed as the primary catalyst for institutional work, enabling policymakers to transition from a narrow logic of value capture toward collective social value creation.

By fostering a robust sustainability orientation, these interventions can effectively offset the negative impact of regional institutional voids, aligning with SDGs 5, 8, and 10 to improve rural economic well-being and population retention. Ultimately, by redefining the rules of the game to value the triple bottom line of people, planet, and profit, we create a more equitable economic distribution across the island of Ireland.

Future research should focus on localised circular economy ventures as a mechanism to further address these regional imbalances in sustainable entrepreneurship.

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