

Entrepreneurial Education as a transition driver from informal to formal entrepreneurship in complexity context: the AWE program

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Abstract

This working progress research investigates the role of entrepreneurial education in fostering the formalization of informal female entrepreneurship. The modalities of this type of transition are analyzed through a focus on the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs program (AWE). Addressing the complexity of women's informal business practices, especially in socio-economically challenging contexts, the research utilizes qualitative method to explore the transformative impact of the AWE program. Preliminary findings suggest that the AWE's comprehensive approach, emphasizing education, mentorship, and networking, may alleviate multifaceted barriers faced by women entrepreneurs. The paper offers implications into the dynamics of transitioning from informal to formal business, and how entrepreneurship education can be a catalyst for women businesses empowerment.

Key words: *Informal Entrepreneurship; Women Entrepreneurship; Entrepreneurship; Complexity*

Framing of the research. *Informal entrepreneurship refers to the globally widespread economic activities, especially prevalent in underdeveloped and developing countries, operating outside official channels. While these activities are legal in every other aspect, they are not formally recognized by institutions, and their growing importance in complex contexts necessitates targeted strategies for understanding and managing them (Williams, 2014). Moreover, informal entrepreneurship also manifests in more developed geographical areas, taking the form of emerging entrepreneurial realities. Although these comply with the reference that frameworks, they often rely on precarious and provisional structures in the initial phases, which do not provide a solid foundation for sustainable growth and development of new entrepreneurial initiatives. Within the realm of female entrepreneurship, this phenomenon is particularly widespread, especially in complex and less developed socio-economic contexts (Welter et al., 2015; Rashid and Ratten, 2020). Female entrepreneurship represents a vital and multifaceted area of the global economy (Muhammad et al., 2020; Greco et al., 2023), with a presence in various sectors. Its analysis requires a critical examination of the socio-economic and cultural factors influencing its development, including market entry barriers, educational and professional restrictions, gender and ethnic discrimination, and other forms of complexity.*

Entrepreneurial Education.

Education is a fundamental characteristic of entrepreneurial development (Honig and Martin, 2014). In a context where it is necessary to interface with a more dynamic and complex market, entrepreneurship education has become an extremely interesting subject of study as a fundamental element of doing modern business (Vanevenhoven, 2013). In entrepreneurship studies, there have therefore been numerous studies that have focused on the factors that influence entrepreneurship itself, highlighting a close relationship between what is defined as entrepreneurial creativity, with entrepreneurial education (Shahab et al., 2019), just as this last element is related to the development of human capital linked to entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship intention (Passaro et al., 2018), characteristic of subjects who already carry out studies with the precise intention of becoming entrepreneurs (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015). However, entrepreneurial intention can also be formed during studies, thus underlining once again the role of entrepreneurship education in the formation of entrepreneurial behavior (Rauch & Hulsink, 2015). Some studies have focused on the typology of entrepreneurial education concerning studies, differentiating between optional education and compulsory education concerning the training offer, showing how both these typologies contribute to the entrepreneurial skills of students during their training process; however, the impact of entrepreneurship education in compulsory courses is closely related to how students perceive their parents' entrepreneurial performance, thus also highlighting a family

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technology on empowering women entrepreneurs, particularly in developing economies. Similarly, Coleman and Robb (2009) explore how online platforms have allowed women entrepreneurs to overcome traditional barriers and access new markets.

Despite the opportunities presented by technology, women entrepreneurs still face unique challenges. The work of Jamali (2009) reveals that women entrepreneurs often struggle with issues such as limited access to funding, societal stereotypes, and balancing work and family responsibilities. These challenges are echoed in the research of Carter et al. (2007), who argue that these barriers can significantly impact the growth and sustainability of women-owned businesses.

The complexity of women's entrepreneurship is further evidenced by its economic impact. Terjesen and Amorós (2010) examine the contribution of women entrepreneurs to economic development and job creation, highlighting the positive effects of supporting women in business. Brush et al. (2012) also emphasize the role of women entrepreneurs in innovating and driving economic growth in both developed and developing countries.

In conclusion, women's entrepreneurship, like food delivery, is a complex and evolving phenomenon. The diverse models and approaches within women's entrepreneurship contribute to its intricacy, making it a non-linear and dynamic field. From the existing literature, it is clear that women's entrepreneurship is not just about starting and running a business; it encompasses a broader spectrum of activities influenced by various socio-economic and cultural factors

Purpose of the paper. This study aims to highlight the importance of a holistic approach that considers the specificities of informal female entrepreneurship and the pivotal role of education in promoting a transition towards more formal and recognized entrepreneurial practices. The research hypothesis is predicated on the role of entrepreneurial education as crucial in providing women with the necessary tools to navigate and thrive in such complex contexts. The cornerstone of this research paper will be the detailed analysis of the case study based on the AWE program, aimed at outlining the dynamics of informal female entrepreneurship and the contribution of entrepreneurial education in facilitating the transition towards formalized and well-structured entrepreneurial activities. The research intends to offer a deeper understanding of how entrepreneurial training can act as a catalyst for the economic and entrepreneurial emancipation of women in contexts marked by complex challenges and opportunities. In summary, this study will contribute to the academic debate on female entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial education, offering practical insights for policies and programs aimed at supporting female entrepreneurs in contexts of high complexity.

RQ: How can entrepreneurial education influence the transition of informal female businesses towards their formalization in complex contexts?

Methodology. Through an exploratory qualitative analysis, this research seeks to analyze the case of the AWE (Academy for Women Entrepreneurs) program, particularly focusing on the edition held in Naples, an initiative dedicated to supporting female entrepreneurship through targeted educational pathways.

Through semi-structured interviews and narrative analysis, tools already employed in the literature on women's entrepreneurship (Garcia, 2013; Topimin et al., 2023), this study will explore the experiences of the participants and organizers of the course. The aim is to understand the type of support offered and the effect that this support has in addressing specific gaps previously dictated by complex starting situations and backgrounds.

The methodology section of this research paper will introduce a structured framework of questions designed to elicit detailed insights into the experiences of participants and organizers within the AWE program.

The interviews encompass a dual-layered approach. The first layer has already been conducted with the program's board in Naples. The second layer of interviews will take place subsequently and will be administered to the same students of the program in order to compare the initial outcomes with the subsequent feedback from the students of the Naples course. The inquiry will explore the diverse backgrounds of the participants and the envisioned development trajectories for their businesses, paying particular attention to the initial conditions and backgrounds that underscore the complexities of their originating contexts.

Identification of the questions of interviews are based on "complexity elements" based on the literature on complexity:

E.1 Social economic barriers (De Bruin, 2007) such as the need to carry out extra-entrepreneurial work to ensure the satisfaction of primary needs. This can limit the time and energy available to engage in entrepreneurial activity

E. 2 Cultural Barriers (Chiplunkar & Goldberg, 2021). Gender stereotypes, social expectations, and discrimination can negatively influence perceptions of women's entrepreneurial skills and limit access to business opportunities.

E. 3 Barriers to accessing support, mentoring, and advice (Minniti and Naudé, 2010). The lack of support networks, both formal and informal, and mentoring opportunities specifically geared toward women entrepreneurs can limit their access to advice, resources, and networking opportunities.

E. 4 Barriers to accessing credit (Jamali, 2009). Gender discrimination can lead to fewer opportunities to obtain loans, investments, or other forms of financial support.

E. 5 Level of knowledge and access to new technologies (Coleman and Robb, 2009). Lack of confidence in using Digital platforms and other technologies has emerged as a fundamental tool for women entrepreneurs that do not facilitate market access and business management.

This table encapsulates the primary questions that will be posed to the participants of the AWE course and the organizing body. The questions are linked to the respective five elements identified previously.

Tab. 1: Key Questions to pose to Learners and Members of the AWE Program in Naples

1. *Socio-economic Barriers: "How do your extra-entrepreneurial responsibilities, such as work to ensure basic needs, affect the time and energy you can dedicate to your entrepreneurial activities?"*
2. *Cultural Barriers: "In what ways have gender stereotypes, social expectations, or discrimination impacted your perception as an entrepreneur and access to business opportunities?"*
3. *Barriers to Accessing Support, Mentoring, and Advice: "Can you describe any challenges you've faced in finding support networks, formal or informal mentoring, and advice specifically geared towards women entrepreneurs?"*
4. *Barriers to Accessing Credit: "Have you experienced challenges in securing loans, investments, or other forms of financial support due to gender discrimination? Please share your experience."*
5. *What challenges have you encountered using digital platforms and new technologies for market access and business management?*

Results. *In the preliminary results, we introduce the main contents of the case study under examination.*

The Academy for Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) gives enterprising women the knowledge, networks and access they need to launch and scale successful businesses.

This program aims to support women in creating and developing entrepreneurial ventures by providing online and onsite training, mentorship, pitch competitions, and networking opportunities. Targeting women between the ages of 18 and 40, AWE emphasizes the importance of innovation and women entrepreneurship on the social or environmental impact of businesses, in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The program's three primary objectives are: 1) To offer online educational resources and local support from U.S. exchange alumni, academics, and entrepreneurial leaders. 2) To foster partnerships and collaborations through mentoring, business contacts, and opportunities with Italian and U.S. enterprises. 3) To provide access to a network of Exchange Alumni and resources for women's economic empowerment.

The selection process of the Academy for Women Entrepreneurs consists of two phases: initially, aspiring entrepreneurs submit a written description and, if they wish, a video of their business project. Subsequently, an oral interview assesses the applicant's motivation, proficiency in English, digital skills, and the viability of the business idea. Candidates, who may apply individually or as a group, are selected based on the commitment and innovative and sustainable potential of their entrepreneurial proposals.

The primary and most significant aspects of the AWE program and its manifestation in the first Italian edition held in Naples, in collaboration with the University of Naples Federico II, are presented. These initial descriptive findings will be subsequently supported by the outcomes of interviews, which will be conducted as already described in the methodology section.

The Academy for Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) is an initiative of the U.S. Department of State managed in Italy by the University of Naples Federico II, where it also held its first edition.

Building upon the foundational description provided, the remainder of our results will be primarily derived from the responses obtained through interviews with AWE participants, complemented by insights from the program's organizational members. This qualitative data will illuminate the study in two critical areas:

Firstly, we will delve into which specific dimensions of complexity are perceived to be alleviated through the participants' engagement with the AWE educational pathway. This exploration aims to identify how the program's components - spanning online and onsite training, mentorship, and networking opportunities - might reduce the multifaceted challenges women entrepreneurs face.

Secondly, the research will assess the extent to which participation in the AWE program is seen as a catalyst in transitioning toward the formalization of business endeavors. By examining the participants' perceptions and experiences, this part of the study seeks to ascertain whether the AWE initiative effectively supports women in moving their entrepreneurial projects from the informal to the formal sector.

This structured inquiry is designed to offer a nuanced understanding of the impact of entrepreneurial education in fostering the growth and formalization of female-led enterprises, especially those emerging from complex and diverse backgrounds. Through this lens, we aim to contribute valuable insights into the effectiveness of initiatives like AWE in empowering women entrepreneurs and promoting sustainable economic development in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Research limitations. *In order to investigate how entrepreneurship education can influence the transition of informal women's businesses towards their formalization in complex contexts, this work analyzed participants in the AWE programme. Although this program is specific to this topic, it takes on a specific aspect also linked to an equally specific territory, where the course is carried out. The work could then be extended by analyzing participants from other similar programmes, in different contexts.*

Managerial implications. *Based on the initial dialogue with the scientific board and the preliminary questions that we posed to them we expect this research to highlight a series of factors linked to informal female entrepreneurship within the analyzed program, attributable to a generic scope of the topic. First of all, to highlight how many participants have never had entrepreneurial experience before. We expect that a substantial number of subjects will have had informal entrepreneurial experiences, which in some cases later became formal. The need for participating subjects to benefit from preparation underlying their activities will be underlined, showing that this could lead to positive impacts on activities*

influence (Hahn et al, 2020). But a determining factor in entrepreneurship education linked to training courses is also given by the stakeholders on whom the subjects who propose these courses can count, through their involvement, coaching and mentoring, the sharing of experiences and good practices as well as networking (Bischoff et al, 2018). This therefore confirms how Education often makes a difference because it is linked to access to resources and networks (Cannon, 2008). Some studies show that it not only concerns the creation of a business but also affects managerial skills (Albornoz Pardo, 2013). It is also highlighted that entrepreneurship education is an extremely useful tool to reduce gender differences for women with entrepreneurial aspirations, given that, in the context of studies on career intentions, entrepreneurship is still declining as a field “ male” and that women, particularly young women, may limit their career aspirations because they mistakenly believe they do not possess the necessary skills and abilities (Wilson et al., 2007).

Informal Entrepreneurship

Informal entrepreneurship represents a type of business, common globally, which involves the creation and management of the business without it being registered with the competent legal authorities (Mallon & Fainshmidt, 2022). According to the OCED, “informal entrepreneurs are defined as those starting a business or are the owner/manager of a business who engage in monetary transactions not declared to the state for tax, benefit and/or labor law purposes when they should be declared but which are legal in all other respects” (Williams, 2014). The concept of informal entrepreneurship is therefore profoundly linked to that of the informal economy: in informal entrepreneurship, the monetary transactions are all, or largely, not traced, and therefore not declared to the competent authorities, even though they are legitimate goods or services. , given that the conditions described, in the case of illicit goods and services, we are talking about a criminal and non-informal economy, where some populations who do not seem to be predisposed to entrepreneurial dynamics, in reality, are regularizing these businesses would bring economic development to those countries (Williams & Nadin, 2010). If many studies recognize the cost or level of difficulty as the predominant factor in the choice to set up an informal business, other studies instead highlight how the choice is linked, in a more generic way, to the conditions of that market: certainly, the costs of registration and formalization have an impact, but the level of poverty and infrastructure also make the informal aspect more attractive (Siqueira et al., 2016). The level and type of education is also a factor that has a significant impact on the development of informal entrepreneurship, where the presence of secondary and tertiary education favors formal entrepreneurship (Jiménez et al., 2015). However, the university, if supported by correct government policies, can also have a decisive role in attracting economic support for the informal microeconomy (Madichie & Agu, 2023). It is therefore confirmed that the level of quality of political and economic institutions are also factors that influence the type of entrepreneurship, increasing formal entrepreneurship and decreasing informal entrepreneurship (Autio & Fu, 2015), just as the sociodemographic level is closely linked to the level of informal entrepreneurship present (Santos et al., 2021). It is therefore underlined how correct government policies have an impact on informal entrepreneurship, reducing this phenomenon (Omri, 2020). In emerging markets, where the presence of informal entrepreneurship is strong, the very presence of foreign companies and their interaction with local ones is a factor of change towards a greater presence of forms of formal entrepreneurship (Bu & Cuervo-Cazurra, 2020). The factors that influence the development of informal businesses are therefore varied, from access to the market and the role of the family to the sharing of capital and resources, with a view to a true ecosystem of informal entrepreneurship (Igwe et al., 2020). The literature therefore underlines the importance of analyzing this phenomenon. Knowledge of the dynamics linked to informal entrepreneurship can also help managers to better understand the market in which they operate and in particular the nature of a company’s supply chain, thus making it more effective to formulate strategies, but since the informal businesses operate outside the regulatory system, their dynamics and activities are difficult to trace compared to formal businesses (Thai & Turkina, 2014).

Complexity in Female Entrepreneurship

Women’s entrepreneurship (WE) represents a dynamic and multifaceted segment of the global economy. Similar to the broad scope of food delivery, women’s entrepreneurship encompasses a wide range of activities and sectors. This complexity and non-linearity render the topic of women’s entrepreneurship a highly intricate subject for academic study. Brush et al. (2009) define women’s entrepreneurship as the process where women organize all types of businesses, including micro, small, and medium enterprises. Hughes et al. (2012) further expand this definition by emphasizing the role of women entrepreneurs in both formal and informal economies, consequently, this necessitates the redirection of scholarly inquiry towards new directions.

The concept of women’s entrepreneurship is not monolithic but varies significantly across different cultural, economic, and social contexts. De Bruin et al. (2007) highlight the diversity in women’s entrepreneurship, noting that the motivations, challenges, and successes of women entrepreneurs can be vastly different depending on the geographic and socio-economic setting. Minniti and Naudé (2010) add that the complexity of women’s entrepreneurship is also influenced by the differing levels of support and barriers faced by women in various regions like limited market information, low levels of education and skills, and discrimination based on gender and ethnicity are the major barriers that IFE struggle with throughout their business lifecycle (Chiplunkar & Goldberg, 2021).

In recent years, there has been a discernible shift, and scholarly research is increasingly demonstrating the profound impact that innovation is exerting in this domain. Digital platforms have emerged as a critical tool for women entrepreneurs, facilitating market access and business management. Langowitz and Minniti (2007) discuss the impact of

already underway. We will also highlight the main barriers linked to entrepreneurship, which often discourage the transition from informal to formal: the weight of taxation and bureaucracy should push young entrepreneurs to want to experiment with the dynamics linked to an informal market first, taking on fewer risks on invested capital. Given the complex scenario in which the program participants operate, i.e. that of the South, there should be a lack of skills and competencies capable of exploiting the resources made available by the institutions to face the difficulties of these complex environments: a paradox given that bureaucracy and administrative complexities often prove to be the first obstacles to overcoming the difficulties of these markets. In this sense, the usefulness of programs such as AWE is therefore underlined, capable of allowing formal and informal female entrepreneurs to access resources specifically dedicated to them. As regards informal entrepreneurial activities, the program should develop the will to formalize these activities, seize a greater number of entrepreneurial opportunities, respect the development of a network of stakeholders, and above all respecting being able to receive resources, including economic ones, which can have a strong impact on the growth of their entrepreneurial realities, abandoning a dimension of informality in favor of recognized entrepreneurship

Originality of the paper. Several works have analyzed informal education and entrepreneurship, especially through university-type training courses. This work instead offers a more specific vision, focused on the transition from informal to formal entrepreneurship, through such a training course.

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