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UNDERSTANDING WOMEN-CENTERED NETWORKS

ABSTRACT: Despite women's increasing participation in entrepreneurship, gender inequalities persist in business survival, growth, and access to resources. Existing research has largely relied on individual-level or gender-neutral approaches, offering limited insight into the organizational and relational structures that support women entrepreneurs. This study addresses this gap by developing a taxonomy of women-centered networks in Brazil. Using an exploratory internet-based mapping and an inductive taxonomy development process, the study identifies and systematizes key dimensions that differentiate these networks, including purpose orientation, governance, target audience, value proposition, access logic, geographic scope, cost structure, and capital outcomes. The taxonomy reveals the heterogeneity of women-centered networks and the distinct roles they play in supporting entrepreneurial trajectories. By organizing networks according to their defining attributes, this study contributes to feminist entrepreneurship and social capital literature and provides a foundation for future empirical research.

Key words: Women-centered networks. Gender. Entrepreneurship. Taxonomy.

1 INTRODUCTION

Despite the growing participation of women in entrepreneurship, persistent gender inequalities continue to shape access to resources, opportunities, and long-term business outcomes (GEM, Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2024; Jennings & Brush, 2013). These disparities cannot be explained solely by individual characteristics, as women often possess similar levels of education, motivation, and experience as men (Cohoon et al., 2010), yet face more complex and multidimensional barriers rooted in structural and institutional conditions (Brush et al., 2009; Marlow & Patton, 2005). In response, research has increasingly emphasized the role of intangible capital: psychological, human, and social capital (meaning who the person is, what the person knows and whom the person knows, respectively), in shaping entrepreneurial trajectories (Jo et al., 2024; Luthans et al., 2004; Villanueva-Flores et al., 2023). Among these, social capital has been identified as an important mechanism through which entrepreneurs access information, resources, and opportunities (Claridge, 2020; Granovetter, 2011; Lin, 2001), including contexts where women are excluded from dominant networks (Shaw et al., 2008).

Social capital operates through the structure and quality of social relations that enable resource mobilization across different stages of the entrepreneurial process (Greve & Salaff, 2003; Lin, 2001). The formation and maintenance of ties, especially weak ties, expand the reach of information flows and act as bridges between different social contexts, facilitating opportunity recognition (Granovetter, 1973; Shane & Cable, 2002). At the same time, patterns

of network embeddedness shape not only access to resources but also how individuals interpret opportunities, construct identities, and navigate entrepreneurial environments (Moran, 2005). Thus, social capital is structurally conditioned, reinforcing differences in how entrepreneurs benefit from their network positions.

Women-centered networks have been recognized as important relational spaces that facilitate resource mobilization, identity construction, and collective empowerment among women (Ely et al., 2011; Lopez Hernandez et al., 2022). And networks can enable access to information, opportunities, and support through both structural and relational embeddedness (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 2001; Moran, 2005). Despite this growing interest, existing studies often treat such networks as homogeneous entities or focus primarily on their outcomes, such as performance or empowerment (Lopez Hernandez et al., 2022), without examining how they are internally structured and differentiated. As a result, there is limited understanding of how variations in network configurations influence the types of capital generated and the entrepreneurial processes they support.

To address this gap, this study examines what types of women-centered networks exist and how they can be systematically classified based on their key dimensions and characteristics. To do so, we adopt an exploratory and inductive approach to develop a taxonomy of women-centered networks in Brazil, based on internet-based mapping and content analysis of 87 networks, capturing the heterogeneity of an emerging structured phenomenon.

Contribution to literature moves in three main ways. First, it advances research on women's entrepreneurship and social capital by moving beyond individual-level analysis and providing a structured classification of women-centered networks. Second, it contributes to taxonomy development in entrepreneurship research by empirically grounding dimensions and characteristics that capture the diversity of network configurations. Third, it provides a foundation for future research to examine how different network types relate to capital accumulation and entrepreneurial outcomes, strengthening the connection between network structures and women's entrepreneurial development.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Despite women's longstanding participation in economic life, mainstream entrepreneurship research has historically rendered their contributions invisible or peripheral. Early studies predominantly centered on male entrepreneurs, often constructing a universal entrepreneurial archetype based on masculine traits such as risk-taking, competitiveness, and independence (Ahl, 2006). This male-normative lens not only excluded women's entrepreneurial experiences but also framed them as deviations from the norm, resulting in biased assumptions about their capabilities and motivations. As Brush et al. (2009) argue, entrepreneurship scholarship for much of the 20th century failed to account for the structural and gendered conditions that shape entrepreneurial entry, support, and outcomes. It was not until the 1990s and 2000s that a more sustained scholarly interest emerged in understanding

entrepreneurship as a gendered process rather than a neutral economic activity (Jennings & Brush, 2013).

Women face a more complex and constrained path to entrepreneurship than men, shaped by structural inequalities and gendered expectations embedded in both the economy and society. Barriers such as unequal access to financing, underrepresentation in key networks, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work severely limit women's entrepreneurial potential (Jennings & Brush, 2013). Even when women possess the same levels of human capital as men, they are often perceived as less credible entrepreneurs, particularly in male-dominated sectors like technology or finance. These disadvantages are not merely incidental but are the result of deeply rooted institutional norms that devalue women's labor, restrict their mobility, and constrain their access to power and capital (Marlow & Patton, 2005). As a result, becoming an entrepreneur is not only a business decision but a socially and politically situated struggle for legitimacy and resources.

In this sense, Carli(2018)'s work on women, power, and the career labyrinth provides an important conceptual lens for understanding why women's advancement remains constrained despite formal gains in education and labor market participation. Carli argues that women's careers do not follow a linear "pipeline" but rather a labyrinthine path, characterized by cumulative, context-dependent obstacles related to gender stereotypes, power dynamics, and leadership expectations. Power is not distributed neutrally within organizations; instead, it is embedded in social norms that associate leadership and authority with masculine traits, placing women in a double bind where they must demonstrate competence without violating prescriptive gender norms. This perspective helps explain why women often face greater scrutiny, limited access to influential networks, and slower progression to positions of authority.

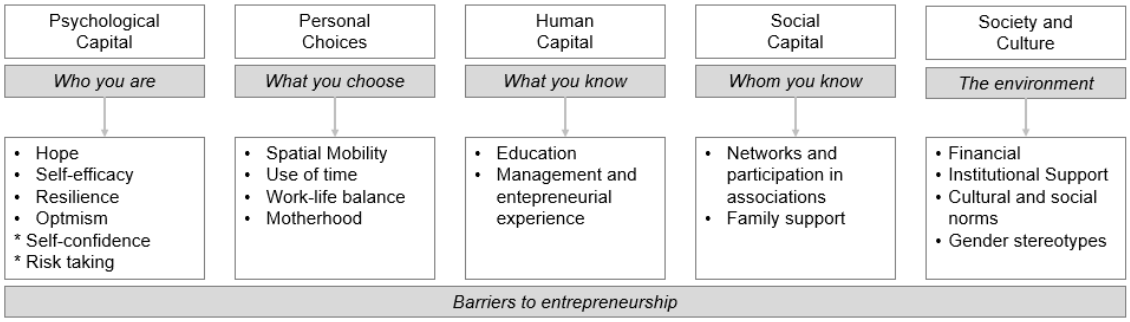
Entrepreneurial ecosystems are frequently portrayed as meritocratic environments where success depends solely on individual effort and innovation. However, this assumption of neutrality masks the gendered dynamics that shape participation and recognition within these systems (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). The ideal entrepreneur is constructed through a masculine discourse, which positions women as inherently lacking or deficient in entrepreneurial traits (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). This framing reinforces the notion that women must adapt to male-defined standards to succeed, rather than challenging the systemic biases that exclude them. Deconstructing gendered ascriptions challenges the myth that differences in entrepreneurial innovation between men and women are rooted in biological sex, revealing instead that they stem from gender role stereotypes perpetuated by key actors and institutions involved in the venture creation process (Sundermeier, 2024).The myth of gender neutrality thus obscures how entrepreneurial opportunities are differentially distributed and legitimized along gendered lines.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need for gender-sensitive approaches that critically interrogate the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which

entrepreneurship occurs. Scholars are increasingly drawing on feminist theories to deconstruct dominant assumptions and to reframe entrepreneurship as a site of gender negotiation and identity construction (Henry et al., 2016).

However, despite these advances, much of the literature continues to fragment or individualize women's challenges, often failing to explicitly link them to the broader gendered structures that produce them (Greene & Brush, 2018) . To address this limitation, we have analytically organized the barriers faced by women entrepreneurs explored in the literature (Alecchi, 2020; Brush et al., 2009; Cooke & Xiao, 2021; Jennings & Brush, 2013; Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2019) into five interrelated categories : (i) Psychological Capital, related to individual perceptions and self-efficacy; (ii) Personal Choices, associated with decision-making processes shaped by constraints and expectations; (iii) Human Capital, referring to education and prior experience; (iv) Social Capital, reflecting access to networks and relational resources; and (v) Society and Culture, encompassing structural and institutional conditions. While the first four categories are frequently treated as individual-level factors, such a distinction risks obscuring how they are themselves shaped by gendered norms and inequalities (Kabeer, 2016). The final category makes these structural dynamics explicit, highlighting how societal and market contexts constrain access to resources and opportunities. The composition of each group is presented in Figure 1, and together demonstrate that women's entrepreneurial barriers are multidimensional, interconnected, and deeply embedded in broader systems of inequality, with direct implications for business endowment and performance (Jennings & Brush, 2013).

Figure 1. Barriers faced by women entrepreneurs



This division reflects the different analytical levels through which entrepreneurship has been studied. At the individual level, research focuses on entrepreneurs' traits, behaviors, and trajectories, examining factors associated with success or failure (Jalil et al., 2023; Liyanagamage et al., 2024). At the structural level, attention shifts to organizational and institutional conditions that shape entrepreneurial opportunities and the sustainable development of enterprises (Carli, 2018). At the social level, studies emphasize the broader cultural and societal environment, particularly the norms and values that enable or constrain entrepreneurial activity within communities (Cooke & Xiao, 2021).

Wang et al. (2024) have conducted a review of the literature on social networks and entrepreneurship published over the past twenty years. They highlighted that entrepreneurial networks are central to how entrepreneurs identify opportunities, access resources, and drive innovation, relying on both structural characteristics like size, diversity, tie strength and centrality, and relational mechanisms like trust, reciprocity and information flow. Their effectiveness is shaped by broader entrepreneurial environments, including institutional, cultural, and digital contexts, which influence how networks are formed and used, with growing relevance of digital platforms and cross-cultural differences. Additionally, networks evolve the venture life cycle, from opportunity recognition to growth and maturation, reflecting a dynamic rather than static resource. Ultimately, these network configurations impact key entrepreneurial outcomes such as venture performance, innovation, legitimacy, and resilience (Wang et al., 2024).

In the context of social capital, the concepts of structural embeddedness, referring to the configuration of a manager's network of work relationships, and relational embeddedness, referring to the quality of those relationships, provide a comprehensive lens to examine how networks influence entrepreneurial behaviour and access to resources (Moran, 2005). While structural embeddedness captures how network positions and configurations enable or constrain access to opportunities, relational embeddedness emphasizes the role of trust-based, frequent, and reciprocal interactions in facilitating the mobilization of resources (Claridge, 2020). In line with Granovetter (1973), the strength and nature of social ties are particularly relevant, as they shape the flow of information, support, and opportunities within networks. For women entrepreneurs, these dynamics can be especially salient, as the quality and structure of their social ties can significantly affect their ability to access resources, share knowledge, and navigate gendered constraints in entrepreneurial environments (Shrestha et al., 2024).

Interpersonal connections within networks are not just social; they are also fundamental to how individuals make decisions, build trust, and engage in economic activity. Structural embeddedness tends to play a more significant role in explaining routine, execution-oriented tasks, such as managerial performance in sales, whereas relational embeddedness is more influential in driving new, innovation-oriented tasks, including managerial performance in product and process innovation (Moran, 2005).

When networks are strategically configured (structural embeddedness) and built on trust-based, reciprocal relationships (relational embeddedness), they create environments that facilitate access to resources, information, and support systems essential for business development (Horak & Taube, 2016). Purpose-based networks with diverse and well-positioned ties may enhance visibility and resource mobilization, while cause-based networks with strong relational bonds can foster psychological resilience and solidarity (Horak & Taube, 2016). The interaction between these dimensions may determine whether networks act as enablers or constraints in women's entrepreneurial journeys. Well-configured and trust-rich networks could be effective in helping women overcome psychological, structural, and cultural

barriers, ultimately contributing to increased agency, innovation capacity, and long-term entrepreneurial success.

Women-centered networks can enable the formation and utilization of social capital by supporting both strong, embedded ties that reinforce trust and solidarity, and weaker, bridging ties that expand access to diverse resources and opportunities. The social relationships that women entrepreneurs develop within these networks can vary in their effectiveness depending on the level of effort, engagement, and interaction invested, factors that influence both the accessibility and mobilization of the network's embedded resources, as outlined in Lin's (2001) theory. These relational dynamics operate across different levels of social structure and intersect with broader institutional processes.

The lower-level dimension (individual/networks) must be considered within the context of higher levels (communities/societies), considering their influence on lower levels. In the meso environment, intermediate structures/institutions such as occupational networks and business associations function between the macro society or the economic wild level and the micro/individual level (Brush et al., 2009). Social relations are affected by the nature of interpersonal interactions, the micro level, and different aspects of their social setting, that is, meso and macro levels (Claridge, 2020). Therefore, understanding how to build and mobilize social capital requires a multi-level analytical lens that captures the interplay between individual agency and institutional structures.

The complexity of building a sustainable exchange relationship in some kind of association, such as at the grassroots level, becomes a challenge considering all the layers of situatedness, from cultural identity to knowledge construction and sharing, that must be overcome (Shrestha et al., 2024). While practices of structural recombination and resource configuration through collective learning are limited to a few associations, they have yielded positive results for continuous knowledge co-creation for the women who are part of these associations (Shrestha et al., 2024).

This literature review shows that women's entrepreneurship is not a neutral or purely individual process but is shaped by structural, cultural, and institutional constraints. It highlighted that barriers are multidimensional, spanning psychological, human, and social capital, personal choices, and broader societal conditions, and that social networks may play a mediating role through structural and relational embeddedness. Key insights show that different network configurations can enable access to resources, legitimacy, and support, influencing entrepreneurial outcomes, and the literature still lacks a clear understanding of how these networks are empirically configured and differentiated.

3 METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to systematically identify, classify, and describe the key dimensions and configurations of women-centered networks in Brazil. Taxonomies provide structured classification frameworks that organize complex phenomena into distinct

dimensions and characteristics, enabling the systematic identification of similarities and differences across empirical entities (Bailey, 2003; Nickerson et al., 2013). In management and organizational research, taxonomies are particularly useful for structuring emerging or heterogeneous fields, where concepts and forms are not yet clearly defined or standardized. Unlike theoretically grounded typologies, taxonomies are derived inductively from empirical entities, offering a more detailed and exhaustive representation of the phenomenon under investigation (Steininger et al., 2021). As such, they are appropriate for capturing the diversity and configurational nature of organizational forms, such as women-centered networks, where multiple dimensions interact to shape their structure and function.

Following Steininger et al. (2021), this study applies the six-step taxonomy development process to construct a taxonomy of women-centered networks, adopting an inductive approach that combines content analysis and cluster analysis. Content analysis enables systematic and rigorous examination of empirical entities, such as organizations, networks, programs, or practices, by coding and categorizing their observable characteristics, manifestations, and frequencies, thereby producing structured qualitative data. This process helps identify recurring patterns, dimensions, and attributes grounded in empirical evidence rather than predefined theoretical categories. Subsequently, cluster analysis can be applied to the coded data to group entities with similar profiles, revealing internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous clusters. Together, these procedures support the construction of empirically grounded taxonomies that reflect the underlying structure and diversity of the phenomenon under investigation, enhancing analytical rigor and theoretical development in business research.

Steininger et al.'s (2021) taxonomy development process comprises six main steps grounded in content and cluster analysis.

(i) First, the phenomenon of interest is clearly defined and a representative sample of empirical entities and their textual descriptions is selected.
(ii) Second, raw characteristics of the phenomenon are inductively derived from these entities through content analysis.
(iii) Third, these raw characteristics are consolidated into higher-level, main characteristics using cluster analysis.
(iv) Fourth, deductive content analysis is applied to systematically code each entity and measure the manifestation and density of the identified characteristics.
(v) Fifth, entities are grouped into internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous classes (taxa) through cluster analysis based on their characteristic profiles.
(vi) Sixth, the resulting taxonomy is evaluated using quality criteria — such as mutual exclusiveness and comprehensiveness — to ensure rigor, validity, and usefulness for theory building in business and management research.

3.1 Website sample

To identify women-centered networks, an exploratory and iterative internet-based search strategy was adopted. The initial search was conducted using the Portuguese keyword

"rede de mulheres empreendedoras" on Google, selected to reflect the terminology most commonly used in Brazil to describe networks and initiatives supporting women entrepreneurs. The official websites of identified networks, programs, and initiatives were systematically accessed and analyzed. Additional networks were subsequently identified through references, partnerships, hyperlinks, and mentions within these websites, enabling a snowball-like expansion of the sample. This iterative approach allowed the search to move beyond the initial results and capture a broader and more diverse set of networks. The final sample comprised 87 women-centered networks, with data collection continuing until no new dimensions or characteristics emerged, indicating theoretical saturation and supporting the adequacy of the sample.

All identified networks were systematically recorded in a structured database, where a set of descriptive attributes was collected for each case, including access channel, platform, website, network name, founder, purpose/mission, value proposition/services, objectives, participation mechanisms, reported outcomes, target audience, geographic scope, location (state), and cost structure. This step served as a pre-analytical phase, enabling the organization and standardization of heterogeneous empirical data.

The study then advanced to the coding phase, in which the collected data were analyzed using an inductive content analysis approach. During this stage, empirical attributes were iteratively translated into analytical dimensions and characteristics, allowing patterns, similarities, and distinctions across networks to emerge. This process constituted the foundation for the taxonomy development.

From the empirical analysis, Table 1 presents the resulting dimensions and characteristics that underpin the taxonomy of women-centered networks.

Table 1 – Dimensions and characteristics of women-centered networks

Dimension	Characteristic	Definition / Operational Description
Core Purpose / Orientation	Economic empowerment	Networks primarily focused on income generation, entrepreneurship, access to markets, and financial autonomy
	Professional development	Emphasis on career advancement, leadership development, and employability
	Advocacy & representation	Focus on gender equity, institutional voice, and policy or societal change
	Hybrid empowerment	Integrated economic, professional, and social empowerment objectives
Primary Value Proposition	Training & education	Formal or informal educational programs, courses, schools, or accelerators
	Mentorship & role modeling	Guidance through mentors, senior peers, or inspirational role models
	Networking & social bonding	Relationship building, peer support, and community belonging
	Access facilitation	Connection to capital, corporations, institutions, or public actors

Governance & Origin	Founder-led civil initiatives	Networks created and led by individual women entrepreneurs or activists
	Grassroots collectives	Volunteer-driven or community-based collective initiatives
	Corporate-linked programs	Networks embedded in corporations or corporate foundations
	Public or para-public initiatives	Networks created or supported by government or state-owned institutions
Target Audience Specificity	Broad women population	Open to women across sectors, stages, and backgrounds
	Entrepreneurs/startups	Focus on early-stage or growth-oriented women entrepreneurs
	Professionals/leaders	Targeting corporate professionals, managers, or executives
	Vulnerable or underrepresented groups	Focus on low-income, marginalized, or regionally excluded women
Access & Participation Logic	Open access	Free or low-barrier participation without formal selection
	Application-based	Entry through selective processes or cohort-based programs
	Membership-based	Ongoing participation through registration or membership
	Institutionally mediated	Access contingent on affiliation with firms, banks, or institutions
Geographic Scope	Local / regional	City- or state-level operations
	National	Country-wide reach
	Transnational / global	International or cross-border operations
Cost Structure	Free	Fully subsidized participation
	Partially subsidized	Mixed funding with limited user costs
	Paid programs	Participation fees, tuition, or memberships
Dominant Capital Generated	Social capital	Bonding, bridging, and linking relationships
	Human capital	Skills, knowledge, and professional competencies
	Psychological capital	Confidence, agency, resilience, and self-efficacy
	Integrated capital	Synergistic development of social, human, and psychological capital

Table 1 systematizes the heterogeneity of women-centered networks by organizing them into analytically distinct yet interrelated dimensions.

The dimension Core Purpose / Orientation captures the underlying rationale guiding the formation and activities of women-centered networks, revealing a diversity of orientations grounded in empirical descriptions. Networks focused on economic empowerment frequently emphasize financial autonomy and income generation, as illustrated by statements such as "*promoting the economic inclusion of women in vulnerable situations by providing autonomy and financial independence*." Others prioritize professional development, highlighting career advancement and skill-building, for example, "*training and connecting women to accelerate careers and results*." Advocacy and representation-oriented networks explicitly address structural inequalities and gender inclusion, as reflected in expressions such as "*promoting*

women's entrepreneurship as a tool for social and economic inclusion." Finally, hybrid orientations combine multiple objectives, blending economic, professional, and social goals, as seen in initiatives that aim to "*strengthen women's protagonism in the corporate environment and foster the growth of women entrepreneurs*."

The dimension Primary Value Proposition refers to how networks operationalize their purpose through concrete activities and services. Training and education emerged as a dominant mechanism, frequently described through offerings such as "*courses, workshops, and training programs focused on entrepreneurship, marketing, and finance*." Mentorship and role modeling are also central, often articulated as "*free mentorship programs connecting women entrepreneurs with experienced mentors*." Networking and social bonding appear in descriptions such as "*creating an entrepreneurial community with networking, knowledge exchange, and engagement*" or "*events and meetings to foster connections among women entrepreneurs*." Access facilitation is reflected in initiatives that explicitly connect participants to markets and resources, for instance, "*connecting women entrepreneurs with large companies and multinational organizations*" or "*providing access to credit, markets, and technology*." These patterns show that networks differ not only in their goals but in the mechanisms through which they generate value.

The dimension Governance & Origin captures the structural foundations of networks, reflecting differences in how they are created and sustained. Founder-led civil initiatives are often explicitly tied to individual trajectories, as seen in descriptions such as "*an organization founded by an entrepreneur…*" or "*created by [name], an entrepreneur and specialist in women's development*." Grassroots collectives emphasize collective identity and horizontal organization, illustrated by statements such as "*a community that brings women together for knowledge exchange and mutual support*." Corporate-linked programs are associated with private sector initiatives, often described as "*a program developed by [company] to support women entrepreneurs*." Public or para-public initiatives, in turn, reflect institutional backing and policy orientation, as seen in "*a government initiative aimed at promoting women's entrepreneurship*."

The remaining dimensions, Target Audience Specificity, Access & Participation Logic, Geographic Scope, Cost Structure, and Dominant Capital Generated, capture more operational aspects of women-centered networks. These dimensions complement the core structural elements by specifying how networks define participation, scale their activities, and generate different forms of capital, thereby linking network configurations to their practical implications.

4 DISCUSSION

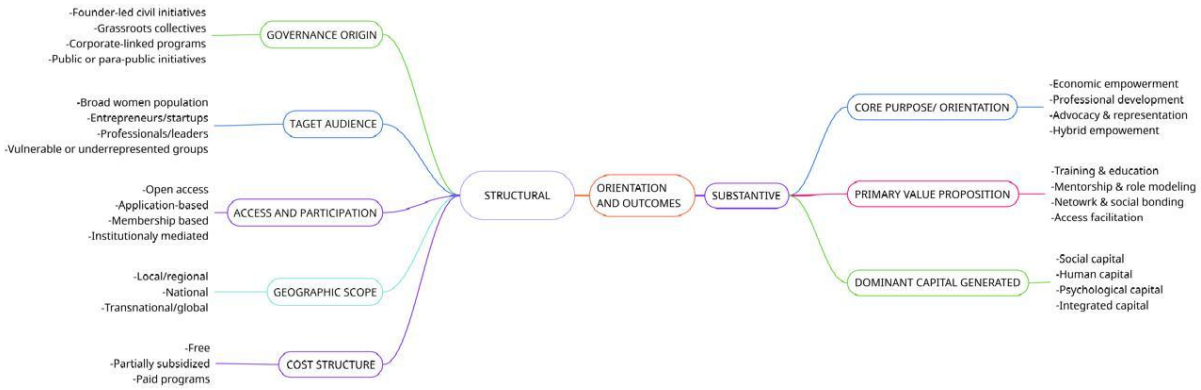
The taxonomy developed in this study speaks to long-standing critiques in entrepreneurship research of the treatment of gender as a mere control variable rather than as a structuring condition of entrepreneurial processes (Ahl, 2006; Jennings & Brush, 2013). While evidence from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2024) shows that women are

approaching parity with men in business creation, gender inequalities remain pronounced in business survival, growth, and consolidation. By systematizing women-centered networks according to dimensions such as purpose orientation, governance, access logic, and capital outcomes, the taxonomy moves beyond individualistic explanations of entrepreneurial success and foregrounds the institutional and relational environments in which women entrepreneurs are embedded. In doing so, it aligns with Brush et al.'s (2009) argument that entrepreneurship can promote equity only when the surrounding ecosystem is explicitly designed to counter structural disadvantages rather than assuming a neutral playing field.

The taxonomy can be analytically organized into two complementary domains: structural dimensions and substantive dimensions. Structural dimensions, including governance and origin, target audience specificity, access and participation logic, geographic scope, and cost structure, define how women-centered networks are organized, accessed, and sustained. Substantive dimensions, comprising core purpose orientation, primary value proposition, and dominant capital generated, capture what these networks aim to achieve and the types of value and outcomes they produce. This distinction emphasizes that the outcomes generated by women-centered networks cannot be understood independently of the structural conditions that shape participation and access to resources.

Figure 2 visually represents this relationship, illustrating how these domains interact within the overall configuration of women-centered networks.

Figure 2. Orientation and outcomes of women-centered networks



The taxonomy highlights that women-centered networks frequently operate as compensatory mechanisms for psychological and human capital barriers that disproportionately affect women entrepreneurs. Prior research shows that entrepreneurial engagement is shaped not only by objective skills but also by self-perceptions of competence and legitimacy, which tend to disadvantage women and minority groups (Chen et al., 1998; Marlow & Patton, 2005). Within this framework, substantive dimensions such as value proposition, like mentorship, role modeling, and training, and capital outcomes directly address these gaps, while structural dimensions, such as target audience specificity and access logic, condition who can benefit from such mechanisms. This helps explain why women who have

been empowered during their trajectory are more likely to mentor others, reinforcing virtuous cycles of psychological capital accumulation (Khoo et al., 2024). This dynamic is also reflected in the governance and origin of women-centered networks, particularly in founder-led and grassroots initiatives, where previously empowered women assume active roles in creating and sustaining networks that reproduce these support mechanisms for others.

A central theoretical contribution of the taxonomy lies in its explicit linkage between network configurations and social capital generation. Entrepreneurship research has long emphasized that access to information, resources, and opportunities is mediated through social networks (Greve & Salaff, 2003; Shane & Cable, 2002). However, women's exclusion from influential networks limits their exposure to weak ties that act as informational bridges (Granovetter, 1973; Shaw et al., 2008). By distinguishing between substantive and structural dimensions, the taxonomy clarifies how social capital is both produced and constrained: while substantive dimensions define the types of relational value created, structural dimensions shape the configuration and accessibility of these ties, capturing both structural embeddedness and relational embeddedness (Moran, 2005; Uzzi, 1997).

The taxonomy also addresses a limitation in mainstream gender and entrepreneurship research: the tendency to replicate male-centered models and produce generic recommendations such as "acquire more education" or "expand networks," without interrogating why women's access to these resources is structurally constrained (Brush et al., 2009). By organizing women-centered networks into substantive and structural domains, the taxonomy reveals that entrepreneurial support is not homogeneous. Instead, different configurations combine what networks offer with how they are structured, enabling distinct pathways for capital accumulation. This configurational perspective avoids deficit-based narratives and reframes women's entrepreneurial challenges as outcomes of institutionalized gender norms and power asymmetries rather than individual shortcomings (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Sundermeier, 2024).

Finally, the taxonomy positions women-centered networks as meso-level institutions that mediate between individual agency and broader societal structures. Drawing on multilevel perspectives of social capital (Woolcock, 1998; Claridge, 2020), Figure 2 illustrates how substantive individual-level outcomes (psychological, human, and social capital) are shaped within networked environments that are themselves influenced by macro-level cultural and institutional contexts. These networks function as intermediate structures (Brush et al., 2009), enabling collective learning, trust-based exchanges, and resource recombination that are otherwise difficult to achieve in fragmented or exclusionary ecosystems (Shrestha et al., 2024). By conceptualizing capital generation as an emergent outcome of the interaction between substantive and structural dimensions, the taxonomy provides a stronger foundation for future empirical testing of how different network configurations contribute to entrepreneurial sustainability, agency, and long-term success.

5 CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand and systematize the diversity of women-centered networks in Brazil and the roles they play in supporting women's entrepreneurial trajectories. By developing a taxonomy grounded in an exploratory internet-based mapping and guided by a rigorous taxonomy development process, the paper seeks to respond to long-standing critiques in entrepreneurship research regarding the invisibility of gendered structures and the overreliance on individual-level explanations. Rather than treating women entrepreneurs as deviations from a male norm, the taxonomy reframes women-centered networks as distinct organizational forms embedded in social, institutional, and cultural contexts that actively shape access to resources, legitimacy, and opportunity.

The taxonomy demonstrates that women-centered networks cannot be understood as homogeneous support mechanisms. Instead, they are configurations of interdependent dimensions, including purpose orientation, governance and origin, target audience specificity, value proposition, access logic, geographic scope, and cost structure, that jointly condition the types of benefits they generate. These dimensions can be analytically grouped into structural (governance, access, audience, and operational conditions) and substantive (purpose, value proposition, and capital outcomes) domains. This distinction highlights that what networks offer cannot be separated from how they are organized and accessed, reinforcing the need to understand women-centered networks as configurational systems rather than isolated interventions.

A key theoretical contribution of this study lies in explicitly linking women-centered networks to the accumulation of intangible capital. Drawing on research on social, human, and psychological capital, the findings show that these forms of capital are not merely individual attributes but emergent outcomes of network participation. However, these outcomes are contingent upon the level of engagement of participants, as the extent to which entrepreneurs actively interact, contribute, and mobilize network resources influences their ability to access and convert available opportunities into tangible benefits. Women-centered networks facilitate both bonding and bridging ties, foster learning and experiential knowledge, and contribute to confidence, resilience, and entrepreneurial agency, but these effects are unevenly distributed depending on the depth and quality of participation. Moreover, these dynamics are not neutral: they are often embedded in the governance and origin of networks, particularly in founder-led and grassroots initiatives, where previously empowered women play an active role in creating and sustaining structures that reproduce and scale these benefits for others.

By moving beyond gender-neutral prescriptions and deficit-based narratives, this study contributes to feminist entrepreneurship scholarship by emphasizing context, power, and relational dynamics. Women-centered networks emerge not only as support structures but also as spaces of collective identity construction, power redistribution, and institutional mediation. Conceptualizing these networks through the interaction of substantive and structural dimensions provides a more nuanced understanding of how entrepreneurial ecosystems can either reproduce or mitigate gendered inequalities, positioning women-centered networks as important meso-level mechanisms within broader socio-economic systems.

Future research could build on this taxonomy by empirically testing how different configurations of women-centered networks influence entrepreneurial outcomes across contexts and over time. Quantitative studies could examine the relationships between structural and substantive dimensions and the accumulation of social, human, and psychological capital. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable to capture dynamic processes of empowerment, learning, and network evolution. Additionally, comparative studies across countries or regions could assess how institutional environments shape the emergence and effectiveness of women-centered networks, further advancing a multilevel and intersectional understanding of gender, entrepreneurship, and social capital.

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