

GENDER DYNAMICS INFLUENCING INNOVATION PROCESS IN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESSES IN INDIA

Roopal Gupta¹

Dr. Tanuja Sharma²

Dr. Madhushree Nanda Agarwal³

^{1, 2, 3} Management, Development Institute, Gurgaon, India

ABSTRACT

Studies on innovation and gender, separately, have seen a lot of scholarly interest in the past. However, combined, the genderedness in innovation is a less explored, yet critical, area. With the dawn of a new world after pandemic and the various challenges that humankind faces as a repercussion of over-exploited natural resources in the form of famines, draughts, earthquakes and other natural calamities, entrepreneurship in sustainability has been suggested as a possible solution and seen an increase over the world, as in India. In this paper, we attempt to conceptualize gendered innovation in sustainable businesses in India on the basis of extant literature, drawing from various disciplines such as innovation, gender studies and following the feminist critical theory. Taking inspiration from seminal work on gendered innovation by Alsos et. al [1], we posit that gender plays out as a variable, a construct and a process, each with its own manifestations on the different stages of innovation agenda of these entrepreneurial ventures and each posing different challenges to the women in such ventures. Implications of these three kinds of genderedness are discussed for future scholarship on this area.

Keywords: *Gender, Innovation, Sustainable Businesses, Gendered innovation, India*

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Jehangir Khan narrates a compelling story. So, when he narrates one, we all listen. This one is about a Commander in Portuguese Army, fighting battles in Goa, India – Commander Balthazar – who joined the army as a young man and rose up the ranks to be a Commander. One day Cdr. Balthazar declares his love for a man and reveals that he – Balthazar - is actually a woman – Dona Maria – disguised as man to fight in the army.

Adapted from Bollywood movie: “Dear Zindagi”, 2016

Maybe the moral of the story, as used in the movie, was to drive home a different point. The real Balthazar and Dona Maria happened in the India of 1700s. However, they exist even today, in the 21st century India and across the world. This rings a more distraught bell for the academics and practitioners in today’s times. In a role dominated and dictated by men, aspiring and competent

women must completely forgo their authentic feminine selves at work if they wish to achieve great heights. This construction of gender, where the dynamics is construed as a variable, is the most tangible form of genderedness [1]. Along with this type of genderedness, we discuss the other forms in which genderedness is experienced and produced in the economic fields in the subsequent sections of the paper.

Balthazars, who really are Marias, may not present themselves in such vivid forms today. Yet, there are spaces where existence of non-masculine gender is dictated by masculine norms, or worse even, ignored altogether. In this paper, we discuss about how a concept such as innovation comes to be gendered in a traditionally female-dominated space of sustainable entrepreneurial ventures in India.

Increase in globalization has led to increase in consumerism and mindless consumption which has further resulted in depleting natural resources and generating waste at a much faster pace than was witnessed in the history of mankind. The real challenges of the world today are being discussed at global levels and forums - the most prominent one being the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - are working towards finding solutions. To quote Einstein, "we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." Resultantly, need for innovation in ideas, products, or processes arose to mitigate the issues the world is facing today.

Ecologically conscious individuals have, therefore, risen to the occasion and with a for-profit intent, started ventures to contain, if not reverse, the impact of such mindless consumption and waste generation. In case of India, women are marking their presence in this economic realm. Although a modest 13.76% of entrepreneurial ventures are owned by women, they lead 20.37% of the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in India [2]. Sustainable businesses, which aim to work towards mindful use and restoration of natural resources-including the eco-preneurship ventures on environment, climate, the planet – are largely registered as MSMEs in India. Women, especially, being more tuned in to nature, have more empathetic outlook and are better at 'caring' for environment and their ecosystems due to their social conditioning. In India, where the gender roles are dictated by a tight patriarchy, these attributes become heightened for middle-class, well-educated women who aspire to engage in entrepreneurial activities. And yet, they face myriad challenges.

Despite a rise in female entrepreneurship in India, scholarly work falls short on problematizing and discussing the myriad dimensions of gender-labelling when it comes to innovation. The paper aims to document the altered reality of gendered presence in sustainability space in India. While work and careers exist in predominantly masculine forms globally, sustainability has been conceptualized as a feminine undertaking because of reasons enumerated later in the paper. Nonetheless, gender manifests in various forms in a space which is

traditionally women-dominated- sustainable businesses in India. We attempt to study innovation in specifically entrepreneurial ventures because we postulate that entrepreneurship is an innovation-intensive undertaking.

Discourse on innovation started in as early as in 1930s when Schumpeter [3] defined innovation as new combinations of factors of production, including new goods production, new processes' introduction, new markets' identification, new sources of raw materials procurement, and even reconstitution of an industry. However, the research on innovation from the perspective of gender was first published in 2013 [1]. Research areas in gender and innovation had predominantly been around **gender as a variable**, ie. female representation in organizations for innovation. Subsequently, scholars initiated their inquiry about innovation itself being a gendered concept [1] because of the gendered understandings of the phenomenon brought in by the actors involved in innovation. Better understood as **gender as a construction**, this form of gender and innovation research studies the influence on innovation process and outcomes because of the gendered understandings of the participants. Finally, Pecis [4] studied the impact of doing and undoing gender in innovation, observing "innovation research has been characterized by a gender blindness that conceals the gendered nature of innovation processes" (p2117), thereby introducing **gender as a process** in innovation literature. This was further augmented by Nahlinder et.al. [5] arguing that innovation studies rarely, if at all, successfully manage to employ gender perspectives, and that gender is produced and reproduced in everyday interactions of the actors involved and influences the innovation process. This points towards a pertinent issue of acknowledging the role that femininity and masculinity play in innovation process. The paper aims to conceptualize genderedness in innovation process by presenting a discourse on the gender dynamics influencing innovation process in entrepreneurial ventures operating in the sustainable business segment in the idiosyncratic context of India.

Literature reveals gender blindness in innovation in two broad ways. First, that industry classification ascribes adjectives to the gender where industry is labelled masculine/feminine. As Nahlinder et.al. [5] note, "a consequence of this focus on manufacturing sectors is that it makes men appear to be more innovative than women [6]. (p67)"

Second, men and women engaged in the process of innovation tend to get different understandings assigned to them due to their gender [7].

The paper addresses the visible classification of industries and also conceptualizes the more nuanced, invisible, yet powerful exchanges between men and women engaged in innovation processes to unearth the dynamics that result into gender assignment to the process of innovation. Therefore, we conceptualize innovation in a normatively female-dominated industry- the sustainable entrepreneurial ventures in India.

In this paper, firstly, we enquire about entrepreneurship and innovation. We then draw from the literature to present a discussion on gendered innovation, followed by a discussion on the gendered nature of entrepreneurship in India. Next, we discuss the theoretical lens used and finally close the paper with conclusion.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP & INNOVATION

Having discussed the gendered nature of work, in general, we move to the realm of our paper- entrepreneurial ventures. Entrepreneurship undertaking is primarily a drive towards innovation [8]. Studying innovation in this type of career and work choice posits an implicit understanding that the entrepreneur possesses the quality identical to being an innovator: the ability to combine already existing products in new ways to provide better value [8]. Hence in our discourse, we consider entrepreneurship as being an innovation-intensive and innovation-demanding profession.

GENDERED INNOVATION

In literature, gender in innovation has been conceptualized in three distinct forms: as a variable, as a construction and as a process [1]. As a variable, it can be seen as the participation of men and women in innovation process or entrepreneurial ventures or ascribing gender to the participants of an innovation process. We already mentioned the meagre number of women entrepreneurs in MSMEs and sustainable business in India, reinforcing the **gender-as-a-variable** gap. As a construction, gender gap is understood as the biases that relate to doing business. Business undertakings, work and career are recorded in the literature as being a masculine hegemony. The attributes of aggression, ambition and drive as seen as entrepreneurial in men, while unfavorable in women. These biases not only discourage women from venturing into such undertakings, but also pose hurdles when they seek help – financially and institutionally. The process and outcomes of innovation suffer when the context disables one strata of actors from contributing due to their biases of gender. These biases accrue to **gender-as-a-construction**. Finally, for men and women engaged in sustainability ventures, the everyday exchanges produce and reproduce narratives of gendered discourses. These arise because of the construction of gender as dichotomous (male and female, masculine and feminine) along with the biases that are ingrained due to gender-as-a-construction but play out in the most trivial and almost-invisible forms of exchanges [4].

Overall, men dominate the formal work sector over the world. It is because of this reason, that more innovations are attributed to men. For example, a linear interpretation of male dominated innovation could be to say that if there are x% of men in workforce (and generalized to the population in roles causing innovation), x% (or closer number) of innovations would be attributed to men. Much of this dynamic primarily occurs because of the patriarchal nature of

society. However, Nyberg [9], in an early study in this field, suggests that because innovation has been labelled as a male-gendered concept and linked to technology, women's innovations become invisible. This point has been further studied by Ljunggren et al. [6] and similar conclusions have been drawn [5]. Therefore, conclusive studies attributing / analyzing innovation with respect to the role played by contributing member's gender are far and few.

Alsos et al. [1] reviewed the literature on gender, entrepreneurship and innovation to uncover the operationalization of innovation in terms of input, process and output; gender in terms of the epistemological stances of a construct that represented dichotomy (male-female). The authors studied the influence of gender on innovation variables at firm level, revealing a serious lack of theoretical, qualitative and quantitative studies establishing relationship between innovation and masculinity / femininity or to simply speak gender [10].

Innovation as a process has multiple steps, invention, development and implementation [11]. The final attribution of innovation to an individual or a group of individuals versus the actual contribution by members is also a debatable subject. Taking into consideration the dominance of male gender in the decision-making roles / leadership roles and the innovation being categorized and attributed to them vs. an actual female contributor is questionable. The next classification amplifying the problem above is the duration of contribution. For example, an innovation which took 36 months to fructify, having a contribution by a female member for 20 months (who then had to take a break due to planned maternity) got lost. Some literature on this is in [5] as "In the review, we saw entrepreneur gender being operationalized as the gender of the decision-maker, sole entrepreneur, or at the least one female entrepreneur. Prior research indicates that enterprises with mixed-gender teams do better at financial performance than firms with homogenous entrepreneurial teams."

The paper reviews exclusive literature on gendering practices that subliminally impact innovation process. Taking cue from Pecis [4] and her work on feminism in innovation studies, our paper considers the Indian context in the feminist narrative of innovation research. This will not only add to the existing, yet scant, literature on innovation genderedness, but also be a pioneer work in Indian context to understand gender dynamics in innovation.

GENDER IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Research indicates that there is a higher inclination among educated women in India to adopt environmentally-conscious entrepreneurial activities with least inducements due to characteristics such as their inherent mindset, social conditioning, entrepreneurial inclination and drive, the innate proclivity to be caring towards the environment, their aspiration for education and ambition to provide employment opportunities. According to the term 'ecofeminism' [12], woman and nature are similar in that their forms are similar- nurturing, caring,

giving; and also due to the societally conferred upon roles that are by virtue of the physiological processes that set them apart from the male form. This philosophy, thus, goes on to emphasize how both the nature and women are treated by a society build on patriarchy and is male-centered. The philosophy demonstrates the ways in unjust dominance is exerted on both the nature and women by these social forces and norms. Research validates that a nature/culture dichotomy conceptualizes women as being “closer to nature” [13] and men being “closer to culture” [14]. Research substantiates that a woman possesses a more empathetic and nurturing mindset than a man and that women vastly differ from men in showing concern towards the environment - the historical “Chipko Movement” in India is one such instance. There have been studies on gender and inclination to pursue social ventures over economic ventures, where women have been reported to be 1.17 times more likely to undertake social ventures than economic ventures. Women were also reported to be 1.23 times more motivated towards environmental ventures as compared to economic ventures [15]. Another study claims that women have played more significant roles than men in positively transforming the lives of people and the planet with social welfare and taking conscious steps to reduce carbon emissions. So, we see how “ecopreneurial” ventures are a female-dominated space.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING & CONCEPTUAL LENS

We use the feminist critical theory to conceptualize our research inquiry. Feminist theories explain the gender relations in terms of their origins and consequences, taking a hegemonic position that privilege men. The theory helps in studying the ways in which individuals, both men and women, experience gender being produced, reproduced, defied and transformed in their everyday interactions and experiences [4].

Alsos et al [1], in first of its kind of a study on innovation from a gender perspective, put forth the constructions of gender in innovation as “variable, construction and process” (p 244). When gender in innovation is studied as a variable, the study focusses on the frequency and differences in participation rates of gender in innovation. When gender in innovation is studied as a process, the focus is on the changes in construction of gender impact the innovation process and outcomes. When gender in innovation is studied as a construction – which is what this paper considers to be the case – the focus is to understand how the concept of innovation becomes gendered, and how these gendered understandings of innovation influence the innovation process.

These constructions are produced, reproduced and constructed in everyday use of language of the individuals. Since these are experienced in everyday living, we aspire to understand ways in which gender is “done” through lived experiences which, in turn, impacts innovation process in a female-dominated profession.

CONCLUSION

Genderedness in innovation is not a new phenomenon. However, the breaking down of kinds of genderedness one experiences in the innovation process of sustainability entrepreneurship is a concept which holds much value to the scholarship on gender and innovation and the practice alike. The need for more such sustainable entrepreneurs cannot be denied, considering the current scenario. We discussed, in the paper, that gender-gap may take any and all of the three forms and gender can be seen playing out as a variable, a construct or a process, stymying the women of India to achieve their true potential in business space. The study holds phenomenal potential to inform the policymakers who hold substantial grout in being the enablers of such ventures in India. The authors suggest scholars to undertake empirical studies to validate the three forms of genderedness we have conceptualized in the paper. Scholars and practice will also benefit from bringing in nuanced facets of the challenges across these three conceptualizations in the typical Indian scenario marked by growing number of middle-class educated and aspiring women, dynamics of women being the primary caregiver to their families and children, corruption in business and political scenario, institutional challenges of funding and government grants faced especially by women, and above all, women business being taken less seriously than men's.

Gender is produced, reproduced and constructed in everyday lives of individuals through language. For the purpose of understanding how gender is “experienced” by women ecopreneurs in India, we suggest scholars to employ an appropriate methodology such as grounded theory or phenomenology to capture the in-betweens that are produced in seemingly trivial experiences of everyday lives.

The paper, thus proposed, endeavours to conceptualise the gendered construction of innovation in a female-dominated profession of sustainable entrepreneurship in India.

REFERENCES

[1] Alsos, G.A., Ljunggren, E. and Hytti, U., Gender and innovation: state of the art and a research agenda, *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp. 236-256, 2013

[2] Forbes India, Women Make Up For 13.76 Percent Of Entrepreneurs In India; Own 20.37 Percent Of MSMEs. Forbes India. <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/news-by-numbers/women-make-up-for-1376-percent-of-entrepreneurs-in-india-own-2037-percent-of-msmes/71731/1>, 2021

[3] Schumpeter, J.A., *The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1934

[4] Pecis L., *Doing and undoing gender in innovation: Femininities and masculinities in innovation processes*, Human Relations, 2016

[5] Nahlinder J., Tillmar M., Wigren C., *Towards a gender-aware understanding of innovation a three-dimensional route*, International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship, 2014

[6] Ljunggren, E., Alsos, G., Amble, N., Ervik, R., Kvidal, T. and Wiik, R., *Gender and Innovation: Learning from Regional VRI-projects*, NF-report 2/2010, Nordland Research Institute, Bodö, 2012

[7] Duberley, J. and Cohen, L., *Gendering career capital. An investigation of scientific careers*, Journal of Vocational Behavior, Vol. 76 No. 2, pp. 187-197, 2010

[8] Schumpeter, J. A., *Entrepreneurship as Innovation*, Papers.ssrn.com. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1512266, 2000

[9] Nyberg, A.C., *Making ideas matter: gender, technology and women's invention*, Dissertation, Department of Human Work Sciences Division of Gender and Innovation, Luleå University, Lulea, 2009

[10] Arun, T. M., & Joseph, R. P., *Gender and firm innovation-A systematic literature review and future research agenda*, International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research, 2020

[11] Van de Ven AH, Polley DE, Garud R and Venkataraman S., *The Innovation Journey*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999

[12] Françoise D' Eaubonne, Bahaffou, M., & Gorecki, J., *Le féminisme ou la mort. Le Passager Clandestin*, DI, 2020

[13] Tøllefsen, I.B., *Ecofeminism, religion and nature in an Indian and global perspective*, Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp.89–95, 2011

[14] Agarwal, B., *The gender and environment debate: lessons from India*, Feminist Studies, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp.119–158, 1992

[15] Hechavarria, D.M., Ingram, A., Justo, R. and Terjesen, S., *Are women more likely to pursue social and environmental entrepreneurship*, in Hughes, K.D. and Jennings, J.E. (Eds.): *Global Women's Entrepreneurship Research: Diverse Settings, Questions and Approaches*, pp.135–151, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA., 2012