



An interactional framing approach to the design and delivery of export support for women entrepreneurs

International Small Business Journal:
Researching Entrepreneurship
1–23

© The Author(s) 2026



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/02662426261437999
journals.sagepub.com/home/isb



Norin Arshed 
University of Strathclyde, UK

Carolina Marin Cadavid
University of Strathclyde, UK

Stephen Knox 
University of Stirling, UK

Abstract

Drawing on the theory of interactional framing, this study explores the institutional mechanisms shaping export support for women entrepreneurs. Focusing on Scotland, we adopt a qualitative single-case study design, based on semi-structured interviews with 35 participants, including enterprise agencies, support organisations, and women entrepreneurs (exporters and non-exporters) and by analysing policy documents. Our findings analyse two dominant frames: a gender-neutral frame assuming one-size-fits-all support and a gender-sensitive frame addressing women's specific needs. We theorise how these frames are constructed and sustained through framing work and identify four mechanisms that show how frames are institutionalised: maintaining frame dominance, institutional distancing, frame plurality, and internal reframing. This research contributes to the women's enterprise policy literature by showing the micro-level dynamics that act to shape enterprise support delivery. It also offers practical insights into how more inclusive institutions can be facilitated by bridging dominant and gender-sensitive frames, thus helping to reduce systemic barriers and enhance women's access to global markets.

Keywords

enterprise policy, women's entrepreneurship, exporting, internationalisation, framing

Introduction

Women have historically been underrepresented in entrepreneurship and have consequently been a frequent focus of enterprise policy interventions (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Foss et al., 2019; Greene and Brush, 2023; Jennings and Brush, 2013). Yet, despite sustained efforts to close the gender gap,

Corresponding author:

Norin Arshed, Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G4 0QU, UK.
Email: n.arshed@strath.ac.uk

women continue to face institutional constraints that limit their entrepreneurial participation (Carter et al., 2015; Foss et al., 2019). Policy recommendations are typically vague, conservative, and focused on identifying and fixing presumed skills deficits in women entrepreneurs (Mallett et al., 2024). As a result, explaining the underlying institutional constraints that position women within existing policy becomes a crucial concern for researchers in women's enterprise policy (WEP) (Arshed et al., 2019). Although the institutional constraints faced by women entrepreneurs are well-documented at the macro-level (Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Carter et al., 2015; Foss et al., 2019; Mallett et al., 2024), there is comparatively less insight into the micro-level policy processes that shape the design and delivery of business support (Arshed et al., 2019). This is especially the case for understanding the institutional mechanisms that constrain, or promote, how women's exporting activities are framed by policy actors (Anggadwita and Indarti, 2025; Alves et al., 2017; Banno and Filippi, 2024). Micro-level processes operate bi-directionally through both top-down and bottom-up interactions and serve to structure institutionalised cultural norms across both the meso-level, the organisation and delivery of business support, and the macro-level, the broader field of WEP formulation and implementation (Gray et al., 2015). It is therefore important to capture the components and mechanisms at the micro-level of institutions to understand how women become disadvantaged at a macro-level (Arshed et al., 2019).

This article aims to deepen our understanding of the micro-level policy dynamics that perpetuate structural and contextual barriers limiting women entrepreneurs' participation in exporting through the lens of interactional framing (Gray et al., 2015). Specifically, we explore the institutional mechanisms that shape export support for women entrepreneurs. As Gray et al. (2015: 35) note, it is crucial to understand how 'micro dynamics concatenate to yield an institutionalised social order. This perspective is particularly salient in the context of women's entrepreneurship, where women operate in pluralistic institutional environments that play a pivotal role in shaping their entrepreneurial experiences (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Mallett et al., 2024; Yousafzai et al., 2019). Accordingly, we ask: *'How do frames become institutionalised in the context of export support for women entrepreneurs?'* To explore this question, we conducted a qualitative single case study focusing on women entrepreneurs' export support in Scotland. Our research adopted an in-depth, inductive approach to examine how different policy actors shaped the frames that capture the experiences and perceptions of women entrepreneur's export support. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 35 participants, grouped into four cohorts: (1) enterprise agencies; (2) enterprise support organisations; (3) women entrepreneurs currently engaged in exporting; and (4) women entrepreneurs not engaged in exporting. To further strengthen our findings, we also analysed 19 relevant policy reports to capture the dominant framing in enterprise and trade policy (Coleman et al., 2019). Our findings focused on the underlying mechanisms that shaped two key frames for the delivery of export support. The dominant frame positioned export support as gender-neutral, which advocated that support addresses the needs of both men and women equally. In contrast, the counter-frame of gender-sensitivity acknowledged that the support needs of men and women differ. We theorise how these frames are constructed through framing work and detail the four institutional mechanisms that structure this: maintaining frame dominance, institutional distancing, maintaining frame plurality, and internal reframing and merging.

Our study extends the current literature focused on WEP by examining how micro-level policy processes shape meso-level business support design (Arshed et al., 2019). This responds to recent calls for a more integrated approach that connects gender issues with support for women business owners (Greene and Brush, 2023). Our first contribution extends understanding of how policy discourses 'other' women by framing entrepreneurship through a male normative lens (Ahl and Nelson, 2015), which isolates women and limits policy impact (Greene and Brush, 2023).

We further identify two framing efforts, ‘restricting’ and ‘deflecting’, that reinforce dominant assumptions and sustain institutional plurality. Our second contribution builds on Mallett et al. (2024) by showing how institutional pluralism may be bridged through ‘assimilating,’ which helps reconcile tensions between mainstream and gender-aware approaches. While advocacy can legitimise alternative frames (Arshed et al., 2019), we argue that assimilation could be a crucial micro-level mechanism for enabling meso-level institutional change. Finally, we apply Gray et al.’s (2015) theory of interactional framing to WEP, demonstrating that maintaining frame dominance or plurality tends to establish institutional tensions, whereas efforts to merge frames can facilitate policy adaptation and effectiveness. This advances our understanding of how framing dynamics influence the institutionalisation of gender-sensitive enterprise policies. Overall, our study addresses the calls for more research and understanding into how policy is supporting and/or constraining women to internationalise their businesses (Jafari-Sadeghi et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2019) by theorising the framing mechanisms that institutionalise export support frames for women entrepreneurs (Snihur et al., 2022).

Theoretical background

WEP and internationalisation

On a global basis, governments are increasingly committed to supporting WEP as part of broader efforts to promote gender equality and inclusive economic growth (Chatterjee et al., 2022). WEP initiatives aim to create a more enabling environment for women to start, sustain, and scale their businesses by addressing the structural and systemic barriers that disproportionately affect their efforts (Arshed et al., 2019; Treanor et al., 2025). These policies encompass a wide range of support mechanisms, including targeted business development services, improved access to finance and credit, mentorship programmes, and capacity-building initiatives (Terjesen et al., 2016). In addition, governments are working to reform regulatory frameworks and reduce gender bias in policy design and implementation to ensure that women entrepreneurs are not disadvantaged (Orser, 2022). Given the importance placed on WEP, the issue of women’s under-representation in international trade is currently experiencing a high level of policy attention from governments (Krenz, 2026). Concerted efforts are being made by institutions such as the World Trade Organization (2017) who launched the Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women’s Economic Empowerment and declared that it is crucial to take actions to better integrate women into the international trading system; the International Trade Centre who launched the ‘SheTrades Initiative’; and the World Bank who provides data and policy advice on reducing gender-based trade barriers. Yet, studies in exporting, business support, and gender are scarce with some discussing gender and export behaviours (Garg and Shastri, 2022; Ratten and Tajeddini, 2018) and others investigating the exporter productivity premium for women-owned and – managed firms (Marques, 2015). Limited research has examined the international trade experiences of women entrepreneurs and the nature of support they receive, despite evidence that their experiences differ significantly from those of their male counterparts (Alves et al., 2017; International Trade Centre, 2015; Muñoz-Bullón et al., 2015).

Although research specifically focused on women entrepreneurs and internationalisation remains limited, existing studies reveal a complex set of barriers that hinder engagement in export markets. These challenges primarily stem from structural, contextual, institutional, and resource-related constraints (Anggadwita and Indarti, 2025; LiPuma et al., 2013; Mesquita and Lazzarini, 2008; Narooz and Child, 2017; Stoian and Mohr, 2016; Tang et al., 2014). More specifically, women entrepreneurs often face difficulties in securing finance and accessing critical resources,

information, and networks (Sui et al., 2022). Part of the observed export gap may also be attributed to firm-specific characteristics, such as sectoral focus and size; women-led enterprises tend to be smaller than those led by men and are consequently, less likely to possess the requisite resources for international expansion (Lee et al., 2016; Korinek and van Lieshout, 2023; World Bank and World Trade Organization, 2020). Cultural and societal barriers further compound these challenges. For example, Orser et al. (2004) and McClelland et al. (2005) found that female international entrepreneurs frequently reported experiencing sexist attitudes and a general lack of credibility in foreign markets. Moreover, additional studies have noted the intensified pressures associated with managing family responsibilities across geographically dispersed operations (Welch et al., 2008). Collectively, these factors help explain the lower export propensity among women-owned firms, as Alves et al. (2017: 900) argue ‘women entrepreneurs have fewer opportunities to export’, illustrating persistent structural and societal barriers. However, it is noteworthy that once women-led enterprises engage in export activities, they can perform strongly when appropriate support structures are in place (Sui et al., 2022). This reflects the deeper institutionalised perceptions of women entrepreneurs where societal norms continue to frame women as less capable or risk-averse compared to their male counterparts, often limiting their access to funding, networks, and leadership opportunities (Arshed et al., 2023). Given that many of these studies focus on the macro-level of WEP (Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Carter et al., 2015; Foss et al., 2019), this detracts focus away from the micro-level processes that can help shape the cultural norms that influence how business support is institutionalised, as well as how women’s enterprise policies are put into practice more broadly (Arshed et al., 2019).

Theory of interactional framing

As Gitlin (1980: 6) notes, frames are: ‘composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters’, serving as interpretive structures that guide the individual’s understanding of the world. Entman (1993: 52) elaborates upon this by identifying frames as mechanisms that promote problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. Furthermore, framing is understood as ‘the use of rhetorical devices in communication to mobilise support and minimise resistance’ serving as a critical mechanism through which individuals construct and convey meaning around novel ideas (Werner and Cornelissen, 2014: 185). Within policy discourse, particularly concerning women’s access to support, frames become essential tools through which stakeholders construct and negotiate the nature of the problem, its causes, its ethical implications, and potential solutions (Orgad, 2025).

Frames are understood within the policy studies literature as cognitive schema which effectively enable individual policy actors to make sense of a shared issue (Van Hulst and Yanow, 2016). Indeed, Schön and Rein’s (1994) seminal work on policy frames advocates for greater frame reflection in the policy process, where policy actors effectively consider how their own frames might contribute to contestation and, through internal reflection, may be prompted to reframe issues. Extending this, Van Hulst and Yanow (2016) highlight that it is important to move beyond contesting individual preferences and capture the contest over shared meaning by understanding policy processes as dynamic and political. To capture this, they advocate for greater attention to the rhetorical devices that enable framing or types of framing work (e.g. storytelling) as well as understanding more about the framers. However, the existing policy framing literature predominantly focuses on the micro-level and is ultimately unable to explain how these important processes create shared meaning and structure. Gray et al.’s (2015) theory of interactional framing offers a valuable lens, explaining how collective meaning evolves from micro-level interactions to the meso-level

organisation of business support. It integrates the interactional approach to framing (Blumer, 1969), which suggests that the symbolic aspects of meaning are continually negotiated through interactions, with a structuration lens (Giddens, 1984). Thus, emphasising that micro-level interactions form the building blocks of meso- and macro-level actions that come to be ‘taken for granted as institutional structures’ (Gray et al., 2015: 116). Therefore, it can offer understanding beyond how individuals construct frames to understand how frames are collectively shaped to structure policy issues.

Gray et al. (2015: 118) present this understanding by emphasising the interactional nature of framing, wherein frames are dynamically ‘constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed’ through everyday interactions. Individuals engage in this process by drawing upon culturally embedded repertoires, which not only inform behaviour but also reaffirm shared institutional interpretations (Goffman, 1974). This reaffirmation stabilises prevailing frames, contributing to their persistence; yet, actors can also ‘work’ to challenge and reconfigure these frames (Collins, 2004). Furthermore, frames materialise through enactments in patterned interactions that reflect established rules of conduct and foster shared meanings, expectations, and coordinated actions (Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1967). At the micro-level, such interactions reproduce broader meaning structures, reinforcing institutional norms and power dynamics through the process of structuration (Poole et al., 1985). Thus, interactional framing not only shapes how issues are perceived and addressed but also operates as a conduit through which institutional power and norms are maintained and occasionally transformed.

Key to Gray et al.’s (2015) theory of interactional framing are the institutional mechanisms through which frames persist or change. They refer to mechanisms as explaining patterns of action and response that reveal causal or sequential processes (Gross, 2009) (Table 1). They are used by focal interactants in communication to construct, maintain and challenge frames. The focal interactant refers to the main stakeholder in an interaction; however, their framing is not independent of the framing of others (Gray et al., 2015). As such, an interactant’s stance is not independent of politicised environments and is subject to different and situational power relations.¹

Considering the institutional mechanisms through which frames are maintained or transformed, the framing lens offers a valuable perspective for analysing processes of major change (Zimmermann and Kenter, 2023). However, as a precursor to understanding frame change it is important to understand the framing mechanisms within the context of WEP. As such, organisations involved in WEP implementation operate in contexts of institutional pluralism (Mallett et al., 2024). That is, as institutions are broadly understood as ‘the rules of the game’, organisations involved in implementing policy are subsequently playing in ‘two or more games at the same time’ (Kraatz and Block, 2008: 243). Organisations that implement WEP, for example, are subject to multiple normative orders and cultural logics, which can create contestation and different interpretations of what constitutes a successful policy (Mallett et al., 2024). Furthermore, considering the policy process is understood as being shaped by multiple different policy actors in networks, such as government organisations, public-private partnerships, citizens, corporations, advocacy organisations, and third-sector organisations (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007), these organisations are not all going to be aligned in their motives and actions. Consequently, this creates a situation where multiple frames and framing efforts are competing to shape a dominant policy position. Indeed, within a given field for example, women’s enterprise export support, multiple frames can co-exist (Gray et al., 2015). Therefore, understanding the mechanisms through which these frames become institutionalised, and the specific work done by actors to contribute to this, within the context of women’s enterprise export support can provide illuminating insights into how policy is structured.

Table 1. Institutional mechanisms.

Mechanism	Definition
Externally induced reframing	Focal interactant promotes new frame imposed on focal field.
Internal reframing	Focal interactant promotes revising frame of focal field.
Importing a master frame	Focal interactant promotes higher-order frame in focal field.
Maintain frame dominance	Focal interactant reinforces existing frame on focal field.
Institutional distancing	Focal interactant insulates itself from existing frame of focal field.
Merging frames	Focal interactant participants in constructing a new frame in the focal field from existing ones.
Situated improvising	Focal interactant gradually creates new frame in the focal field.
Maintaining frame plurality	Focal interactant supports coexistence of frames in the focal field.

Adapted from Gray et al. (2015).

Methods

We conducted a qualitative single case study to explore our research question. A single-case study design is able to capture the complex, holistic nature of the phenomenon, where support is framed in a pluralistic environment through various mechanisms and stakeholders (Bretas et al., 2025). The research adopted a qualitative approach to capture perspectives centred on individual actors, allowing for the exploration of subjective, dynamic, and context-dependent experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Reuber and Fischer, 2022).

Research context

We selected Scotland as the research context, where, despite significant investment and policy efforts to promote both exports and women’s enterprise over the last decade or so, initiatives have not fully achieved their objectives, and women remain underrepresented among exporting SMEs (Arshed et al., 2025). In 2023, only 10.1% of female-led firms in Scotland were engaged in exporting, compared with a UK average of 12.6% (The Gender Index, 2024). This made Scotland the lowest-performing region in the UK in terms of the proportion of female-led exporting businesses (The Gender Index, 2024). It has been argued that by reducing the gender export gap in Scotland, significant economic benefits can be achieved (Arshed et al., 2025). The Scottish Government has been keen to invest in increasing the start-up rates and growth of women-led businesses and has identified the need to address the gender export gap in Scotland (Arshed et al., 2025). Appendix 1 provides a recent history and timeline of women’s enterprise and export policy in Scotland, including how this positions women’s enterprises.

Data collection and sampling

A purposeful sampling approach was used, selecting participants based on their theoretical relevance while also considering specific contextual factors (Poulis et al., 2013). To respond to the research question, we conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with four groups of policy actors: women entrepreneurs who are exporting, women entrepreneurs who are not exporting, enterprise support organisations, and public enterprise agencies in Scotland. Additionally, 19 policy reports were included to gain insights into how the government framed women entrepreneurs’ exporting activities (Coleman et al., 2019). Data from semi-structured interviews and archival sources were

triangulated to examine the research phenomenon from multiple methodological perspectives, thereby strengthening the validity and credibility of the findings (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2020; Nielsen et al., 2020). To enhance validity, we cross-verified data both within individual sources and across multiple sources (Yin, 2014). Data collection took place between May and June 2024. The number of interviews and archival sources was determined by the principle of saturation, with data collection ending when new information no longer provided additional insights or contributed to refining existing categories (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). The semi-structured interviews were conversational in nature and were conducted using two closely aligned protocols (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The first protocol was designed for women entrepreneurs, both exporters and non-exporters, and aimed to explore the external factors and support mechanisms that enable or constrain the internationalisation of their businesses. The second protocol targeted representatives from public enterprise agencies and enterprise support organisations in Scotland, with a focus on understanding their roles, perspectives, and the types of support available to women-led businesses seeking to engage in export activities.

Participants were informed in advance about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality/anonymity terms. They were invited to take part in online interviews conducted via the video conferencing platform MS Teams. The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes. All sessions were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Archival data was also incorporated through the collection of policy documents spanning over a decade (2014–2025). The archival data provided essential context for the interviews, offering insights into the recent public policies supporting women entrepreneurs in exporting (Appendix 1). An overview of our informant groups, their role in business support, and data collection is presented in Table 2.

Data analysis

We adopted an abductive analytical approach, iteratively moving between unexpected findings and underlying tensions to generate theoretical insights (Van Hulst and Visser, 2025). Several scholars in public administration and policy studies have advocated for the use of abductive analysis (Ashworth et al., 2019). This is due to abductive analysis fostering an awareness of real-world complexity, highlighting discrepancies between theoretical assumptions and empirical findings, and the gaps between formal policy documents and how policies are enacted in practice (Yanow, 2000).

It became evident very early-on in our analysis that there were two overall frames that dictate how export support is delivered to women – a gender-neutral frame and a gender-sensitive frame. From then on, our analytical efforts sought to identify the types of framing work and institutional mechanisms that structured these frames. Recall from our theoretical background that frames contain ‘problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation’ (Entman, 1993: 52). It is through these problems, interpretations, evaluations, and recommendations that we can discern framing work in our analysis. Through identifying the framing work that informants conducted, we can subsequently identify the mechanisms that shape and structure the delivery of export support to women entrepreneurs.

To conduct our analysis, we commenced with the transcripts and policy documents, capturing codes by using Gioia et al. (2013) templates. Templates serve as structured frameworks that guide qualitative scholars in analysing and presenting their data, helping to ensure methodological rigour (Harley and Cornelissen, 2022). Themes related to the data were identified through an open-coding process (Patton, 1990). Subsequently, first-order codes were refined into second-order conceptual categories through continuous comparison between the codes and the raw data (Gioia,

Table 2. Informant groups, role in business support, and data collection.

Informant groups	Role in business support	Power*	Data collection (id)
Policymakers	Set the agenda for delivering business support to entrepreneurs.	High formal authority and extensive financial resources.	19 × documents across economic, international trade, and enterprise policy.
Enterprise agencies	Deliver public sector support to priority groups.	High formal authority, financial resources, and intangible resources such as specialist knowledge on how to deliver support.	4 × semi-structured interviews with EA.
Enterprise support organisations	Third-sector organisations that deliver support to women entrepreneurs looking to export.	High discursive legitimacy in specific policy contexts and intangible resources such as specialist knowledge on how to deliver support.	5 × semi-structured interviews with ESO.
Women exporters	Women business owners who currently export their products or services and who have used business support.	Low power.	16 × semi-structured interviews with exporters from the manufacturing, technology, services, and media sectors (Exp).
Women non-exporters	Women business owners who currently do not export their products or services and who have used business support services.	Low power.	10 × semi-structured interviews with non-exporters from the technology, media, and services sectors (Non-exp).

EA: Enterprise agencies; ESO: Enterprise support organisations.

*Based on Purdy's (2012) power dimensions.

2021; Gioia et al., 2013). This iterative comparison led to the development of a hierarchy of constructs that represent the eight types of framing work identified in our data. We compared these types of work across our informant groups to enhance reliability (Magnani and Gioia, 2023). We then theorised abductively by comparing our second-order conceptual categories to Gray et al.'s (2015) institutional mechanisms (identified previously in Table 1). This led us to identify four overall mechanisms that structure women's export support in Scotland – maintaining frame dominance, institutional distancing, maintaining frame plurality, and internal reframing and merging. Our data framework is presented in Table 3, which illustrates how we got from the raw data to the overall dimensions.

Findings

Our analysis revealed two frames that shaped how export support was delivered. The dominant frame was that export support is 'gender-neutral,' which assumes support addresses both men and women equally. This frame was predominantly a top-down frame conveyed by powerful actor groups – policymakers and enterprise agencies. The counter-frame was of gender-sensitivity, which involves acknowledging that the support needs of men and women vary, and these need to be considered with the design and delivery of business support.² This counter-frame's predominant

Table 3. Data structure and illustrative evidence.

Illustrative quote	1st order coding	Focal informant groups	2nd order construct (framing work)	Aggregate dimension (mechanisms)
'Through our Enterprise Agencies we provide a substantial package of business support which can help businesses to become more productive; grow, innovate and export' (Scotland's Economic Strategy, 2015). 'The women need to understand these are the organisations where I can find support. These are the organisations where I can get my answers from, which will then bridge their knowledge gap. And like I said, sometimes it's lack of awareness, but DBT I think recently I find is doing a phenomenal job' (Exp05). '[i]f they do fit into the SE sectors that we've identified as our priority, and it can be from anywhere in those in those sectors. If they can demonstrate that they have a significant opportunity outside of that, then we would consider it too, though we do recognise that there is a bit of a challenge because women-led businesses do not always tend to be in the sectors' (EA01). 'It creates issues around kind of gender neutrality and, you know, sex discrimination because it can work both ways as well. So, you know, I dare say if there wasn't an equivalent programme for males to get into, that would be discriminatory as well' (EA04). 'The ecosystem in Scotland doesn't really talk about exporting. I, and this is going to sound ridiculous coming from the CEO of ESO01, think we spend too much time talking about investment. And if you look at the reality of it, it's a small proportion of businesses that go on and raise investment' (ESO01). 'I think in terms of the export piece... It's not clear what sort of support there is for that, right? ... I'm a little bit kind blind in that respect... We have got some revenue from internationalisation and 'Scottish Enterprise are always really keen to see that, but in terms of how we get that next like I don't really know, I don't really know how we do that, right? So, it's a bit difficult' (Exp04). 'When you go to these exhibitions, it's all male. It's all males that are there. That's what you see, you know who are. And I think as well because you're a woman and you're building your stand and you're creating it and making it, you know you're building pallets, you're doing a lot of manual work. It's harder for a woman to go and do that' (Exp06). 'I think. It's a more difficult thing for a woman to do because they've just got family. Then you need to have the support make you need to have all of that support going on if you want to go abroad to go and do a trade show, so it's not like in a man's world you know the majority, just say, yeah, I'm going to this country, I'm going to. If a woman's going, she's got to organise the whole thing, the whole of her life. So that she can go somewhere and focus on the business' (Exp06).	Emphasising that public enterprise agencies are delivering effectively, and they do not need to change their approach. Legitimising help received from public agencies. Stating that there is a specific type of business and certain markets which offer opportunity for exports. Stating that women choose not to participate, and specific programmes aimed at women would exclude men. Oversimplifying or reducing the barriers to a specific problem (i.e. access to finance). Lack of awareness of support and perceived gaps in current support options. Support exclusion that generates a barrier for exporting products and delivering services abroad. Perception of gender bias acts to discourage participation and amends behaviour.	Policy makers, Enterprise agencies Exporters Policy makers, Enterprise agencies Policy makers, Enterprise agencies Policy makers, Enterprise agencies, ESO, Exporters, Non-exporters Exporters, Non-exporters Exporters, Non-exporters ESOs, Exporters, Non-exporters	Confining Deflecting Isolating Discouraging	Maintaining frame dominance

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

Illustrative quote	1st order coding	Focal informant groups	2nd order construct (framing work)	Aggregate dimension (mechanisms)
'Women will be in certain sectors, which might allude to being a bit easier for them to be accessing different markets through basically web and digital online platforms' (EA03). 'So even though there might be a push towards trying to get more female Global Scots, it's only going to come from the pond that you're fishing. And if the pond is full of guys, then you know you're not going to find a lot of females in that' (EA04). The contribution of women-led businesses to the Scottish economy is substantial. Estimates suggest that women-led businesses contribute (at a minimum) £5 billion GVA. If rates of women-led businesses equalled those of men, the contribution to Scotland's GVA would increase by £7.6 billion to nearly £13 billion. This equates to a 5.3% growth in the size of the Scottish economy' (Women in Enterprise: A Framework and Action Plan, 2014). 'There is also a growing body of evidence which highlights the benefit of providing a gender-focused approach to business advice and support for women' (Scottish Framework and Action Plan for Women in Enterprise, 2017). 'Women just don't really want to export. Don't know if I believe that. I just think they don't probably see the opportunities or it's really difficult for them to do because there's not really... I think there's still quite a lot of barriers' (EA03). 'I came to realise by speaking with other women entrepreneurs who also set up service provider businesses... It allowed me to understand that there is very little support offered to service providers. That is always an assumption that if you are service provider, you can actually earn money as soon as you start the business, because you just deliver a service. You don't need to create a product, so there is no need for business support' (Exp02). 'We're kind of positioning ourselves there now has been a bit of a gateway into the ecosystem, so we often get approached by other organisations. You know, we're running this, we want to get more women on it. We'll try to find a way to finance that' (ESO01).	Framing women's businesses as different, distinct, less important, and separate. A perception that there is a male norm for exporting. Emphasising legitimacy of women entrepreneurs. Emphasising need for gender-specific support and inclusion of women. Questioning taken-for granted beliefs and practices within current activities. Emphasise on the need to expand horizons on opportunities to support different sectors and types of businesses (contra-narrative to confining). Emphasising opportunities to connect and link different parts of policy together.	Enterprise agencies Enterprise agencies, ESOs Policymakers, ESOs, Exporters, non-exporters Policymakers, ESOs, Exporters, non-exporters Policymakers, Enterprise agencies, ESOs, Exporters, Non-exporters Exporters Policymakers, Enterprise agencies, ESOs	Othering Advocating Reflecting Integrating	Maintaining frame plurality Internal reframing and merging

EA: Enterprise agencies; ESO: Enterprise support organisations.

actors were ESOs who represented gender issues in the public sphere (discursive legitimacy). However, both frames were shaped by multiple actor groups. In this section, we present our analysis of the framing work that informants utilised to construct and deconstruct these frames.

Maintaining frame dominance through confining and deflecting

The first type of framing work that was evident was ‘confining’. This aimed at restricting the focus of business support and the need to adapt or change practice. The focus was on conveying a ‘business as usual’ approach with an emphasis that there were no problems in current practice, as often shown in policy documents. This was also evident through emphasising a restricted set of priority markets and business sectors in which support was directed towards: *‘encouraging a greater proportion of our businesses to export, a key aspect of our strategy will be supporting particular sectors where we have an international comparative advantage’* (Scottish Government, 2015).

Within the gender-neutral frame, there was an acknowledgement that increasing the reach of mainstream support would be beneficial, albeit without the need to make any adaptations to the means of delivery: *‘more companies might benefit from advice and support, with a wider core offering around increasing productivity, innovation, digital support and exporting’* (Scottish Government, 2016). A key part of confining was to express the viability of mainstream support deterministically, while expressing the need to expand reach ambiguously using modal verbs such as ‘could’ or ‘might’. While policymakers and enterprise agencies were the primary interactants working to ‘confine’, reluctance to change gender-neutral public support was also reinforced by exporters who had received public sector business support and would champion its benefits, acting to convey legitimacy:

I’ve had time with a representative from SDI who’s based in America, so she helped me understand the market, and I also got Scottish Enterprise to do some. . . It’s not necessarily competitive analysis, but I got them to do some international research for California. . . But they pulled together a huge plan of stuff. It’s been really helpful (Exp11).

‘Deflecting’ was aimed at diverting problems to diminish the responsibility of those delivering gender-neutral support. This was done through expressing that participation was a choice, and women choose not to take part: *‘Within SDI I don’t see a particular gender aspect to that, because it’s open to everybody’* (EA04). This was predominantly expressed by policymakers and enterprise agencies. Another part of deflecting was to reduce problems to something specific while avoiding other systemic issues. This was typically expressed through access to finance:

A lot of the stuff that we’re doing is about trying to reduce the gap that women face when trying to raise investments. So, we know from the pathways report that there is a significant gap in terms of institutional investment going into female-led businesses (EA01).

I think most of the women have the same challenges that I had, but one of the biggest challenges they all talk about is having access to finance. . . Many women that I have met, they feel that, you know, when they approach a venture capitalist or private equity, they feel that there is a gender bias because they are women. . . (Exp05).

Accordingly, this oversimplified the problems women entrepreneurs experienced when accessing support. Oversimplifying was evident across all stakeholders. Efforts to confine and deflect ultimately resulted in contributed to maintaining the dominant gender-neutral frame.

Institutional distancing through isolating and discouraging

Many exporters and non-exporters would distance themselves from the dominant frame of gender-neutral support through efforts to convey their isolation and discouragement. Work to highlight 'isolating' involved emphasising a lack of awareness of current support options:

It seems to be [business support] has disappeared. I mean. . . I get millions of emails and all things going on and business advice and all of this. But I just think if there was something dedicated to awareness and I'm sure that they are doing that. There still are things going on with Scottish Development International, but I don't know that they've widened their nets to pick up people that are starting out or businesses that are already run (Exp06).

Isolating also involved emphasis on being excluded from receiving support: 'there are no grants or funds available for my sector or size of business' (Non-exp05). This evoked a narrative that there are barriers for exporting products and services and involved accounts of experiencing discrimination when participating in gender-neutral support:

I have had like blatant discrimination on that basis. Then there is like, there's the unconscious bias. If you want to call it that, that I do feel we suffer from definitely and the lack of being in old boys' networks (Exp04).

'Discouraging' was closely linked to these accounts of gender discrimination and involved expressing the negative consequences of receiving such discrimination and how behaviour had to be amended because of this, ultimately discouraging participation in export activity:

I always from the very beginning took a mental note that I will have to work twice as hard to prove myself than any other man in the industry. So, I used to make sure that any meeting I attended I was very well prepared. I knew everything so I couldn't be dismissed on any ground. . . (Exp05).

From a woman's perspective, I always find that in a lot of these situations it's mostly males that you're dealing with at exhibitions, and sometimes they perhaps don't take you seriously. They think that you're the secretary or you're there to take notes. . . that still goes on in the world. It still goes on in the UK, never mind the world. . . (Exp06).

This was used by ESOs as well as exporters and non-exporters. Ultimately, narratives that expressed isolation and discouragement acted to distance women psychologically from the dominant 'gender-neutral' frame and mainstream institutional support.

Maintaining frame plurality through othering and advocating

Our analysis found two types of framing work that contributed to institutional plurality – that is the separation of gender-neutral (dominant) and gender-sensitive support frames. The first type of framing work was 'othering', which has been highlighted before in WEP research (Ahl and Nelson, 2015). While this was highlighted by Ahl and Nelson (2015) as a policy frame that reinforces a dialogue of women's inadequacy, we find evidence of this being used at a micro-level in a purposeful effort to maintain frame plurality. Efforts to 'other' framed women's businesses as different, distinct, less important, and separate from those of men's: 'Women tend to be more involved with exporting on the online payment side, you know, the e-commerce, international e-commerce side' (EA02). Othering worked together with confining as it reduced women's entrepreneurship to being 'service-related' and 'domestic', which were denoted as being less important:

I think part of the sectors that women typically focus on tend to be much more service related, which typically leads to being more domestic, more focused in Scotland rather than international markets – that can be a bit of a barrier to helping women find different opportunities (EA01).

Concurrently, this also involved emphasising male-domination in support activities: *‘I probably made it sound less normal than it was, but it’s definitely massively skewed towards male on any of our meetings, whether that’s online or whether that’s delegations’* (ESO03). This helped to reinforce that exporting was a male activity and created separation from women’s entrepreneurial activity. Othering women was particularly evident amongst enterprise agencies and ESOs.

In our analysis, there was evidence of advocating for gender-specific support services, exclusive to women. While this was predominately done by ESOs representing women, and exporters and non-exporters, this type of framing work which would champion women entrepreneurs as providing economic benefits was frequently shown by government actors, such as policy documents promoting the need for WEP activity:

This is despite copious evidence that the entrepreneurial and related capabilities of women are equal to those of men. This state of affairs represents both an enormous loss of talent from Scotland’s start-up economy and a denial of opportunity on, literally, an industrial scale. At the same time, it also presents a compelling case for Scotland to leverage this untapped pool of talent to drive and grow the entrepreneurial economy (Stewart et al., 2023).

However, this advocacy was not consistently demonstrated across policy documents (Appendix 1). The legitimacy of women was also promoted by ESOs: *‘Female founders produce a better return on investment. They’re more likely to hit the targets. They say they’re less likely to default on bank loans’* (ESO01). Advocating also emphasised a need for gender-specific support:

I think delegations are very important in export. . . ensuring that there were more women entrepreneurs who were part of those delegations because delegations are actually safe, safer because you’re travelling in a group. So, I think delegations dedicated to women entrepreneurs can really help and also delegations are often subsidised. . . that can be very encouraging for women to go together and will give them the confidence to go further afar (Exp05).

While there were instances in which exporters emphasised gender-neutral support was functional to the needs of women, largely, the narrative was that women exporters felt support was ineffective at meeting the distinct needs of women and was not viable in the long-term: *‘Everybody’s trying to be gender neutral nowadays that you can’t deny the fact that women behave and think a very different way to men’* (Exp10). This was also emphasised by non-exporters: *‘Female founders just don’t get enough support; we need sustainable support which is ongoing and not these short bursts of courses and support here and there’* (Non-exp03).

Interactions in which women were othered contributed to creating plural institutional frames, gender-neutral versus gender aware. Efforts to advocate for women-specific support also acted to maintain this plurality.

Internal reframing and merging through reflecting and integrating

While Gray et al. (2015) propose internal reframing and merging frames as distinct mechanisms, in our context, we interpreted them as part of the same micro-process. That is, while efforts to reflect challenged perceptions of how support was being delivered did not offer a new frame,

efforts to integrate did offer a new option for business support by merging the gender-neutral frame with gender-specific frames and emphasising inclusion and opportunity. 'Reflecting' was a type of work where interactants would question the dominant frame:

So that skills, training and education, they do tend to be male dominated here in Scotland. I guess that's kind of the way it is. I think there is also a perception that I think is largely wrong, but I understand why it's there, that. . . it's going to be a male dominated market in Africa. And it's quite a difficult one in on a quite a few levels. If you look across Africa, you know like Rwanda, I think is the most gender balanced government in the world. You look at any of the top the governments that you know, a lot of the top ministerial positions, it's fairly well-balanced gender wise. . . on any given call that we have, we'll probably have more female business leaders from Africa than we will from Scotland (ESO03).

It was evident across all interactant groups and was often used in combination with integrating to merge frames. Integrating involved efforts by exporters to highlight that women can participate and benefit in support, simultaneously challenging the perception that women were excluded and expanding it through efforts at stressing that support was available and reinforcing the capabilities of women:

I don't mean to educate, but just to make other women aware that you can do this. It's not so difficult. There are organisations who will lead you and who will guide you and who will support you to go and do these things. Yeah, I think it's just the barriers that you think that are there. . . so 'oh God, that's frightening. I'm not going away to Japan. I'm not going'. . . But it was a supported group, which was important. I wasn't going doing it on my very own (Exp06).

The importance of breaking-down barriers encountered by women was also clear in efforts to integrate women into current support activity. Enterprise agencies emphasised the need to make their services more accessible:

We're working in other partnership with our agencies, governments to tackle some of the barriers that women face in terms of participating in labour markets, such as childcare. . . we wish to see management leadership capability and strong entrepreneur culture embedded in our business and communities. And we are specifically targeting young leaders and female leaders for our programmes of support. We do try to ensure that we break down any barriers that may preclude women from participating in our programmes and services. This includes ensuring that options are available for people to participate remotely (EA01).

Integrating also involved emphasising compatibility between activities and the importance of collaboration. This was emphasised in policy documents as important to connect policy strands together to afford opportunities to women:

We have also started work to build links between trade and domestic policies in support of gender equity. The breadth of the Scottish Government's policy development on gender equity provides a range of opportunities to do this (Scottish Government, 2022).

It was also expressed by an ESO who emphasised that they had a key role in linking different organisations together to help achieve the best outcomes for support, through signposting to other services and working together:

I guess increasing collaboration, reducing competition, reducing duplication of effort. And then the last part is probably more directly aligned with businesses. So, if a business needs help when it comes to exporting a lot of what Scottish chambers can do is signposting (ESO02).

Both reflecting and integrating were able to help position the need for gender-aware business support by offering a means in which frames could be merged.

Discussion

Most research has explored the macro-level institutional constraints that directly influence women entrepreneurs (Carter et al., 2015) or how the design of business support affects them (Arshed et al., 2023). We contribute to this research by detailing how micro-level framing contributes to institutionalising the design of business support; thus, directly contributing to analysing how enterprise policies position women's entrepreneurship (Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Arshed et al., 2019). This provides 'an approach that links gender gap issues and women business owners in a coherent manner' which has been considered missing from current understanding (Greene and Brush, 2023: 15).

Specifically, our research makes three contributions to existing literature and advancing theory. Our first is to the literature that highlights how the framing of women's enterprise policies 'other' women by establishing a male norm for entrepreneurship and acknowledging women's entrepreneurship as different (Ahl and Nelson, 2015). This effectively leaves women isolated and individualised, contributing to less effective policies (Greene and Brush, 2023). We extend this literature by highlighting other efforts at framing work that act to constrain WEP, including confining, deflecting, isolating, discouraging, and advocating. These types of framing work add to the repertoire of various policy actors attempting to shift the delivery of enterprise support (Farooqi and Knox, 2025; Mallett et al., 2024). Furthermore, we shed light on how 'othering', alongside efforts to advocate for gender-aware support, seemingly acts to maintain institutional plurality, mainstream versus gender aware. This adds to the existing literature that looks at changing institutional frames for WEP (Berglund et al., 2018) by identifying specific institutional mechanisms acting to structure these frames. Our study also identifies how efforts to 'confine' and 'deflect' seemingly acted to maintain frame dominance, while efforts to 'isolate' and 'discourage' acted to create institutional distance. These mechanisms, therefore, add detail to existing research that looks at the micro-processes which position women entrepreneurs disadvantageously within policy discourse (Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Arshed et al., 2019; Berglund et al., 2018).

Our second contribution lies in extending Mallett et al.'s (2024) work on institutional pluralism by providing an understanding of how institutional plurality can be bridged. While advocating is important for increasing the legitimacy of WEP (Arshed et al., 2019), an unintended outcome of this is the creation of plural, and sometimes conflicting, frames, such as mainstream versus gender-aware business support. We highlight the importance of reflecting and integrating to alleviate constraints and merge frames. We postulate that the use of these frames is a key micro-process for meso-level institutional change. The implication of this finding being to challenge existing practice by questioning whether various policy actors need to deliberately advocate to create or legitimise multiple frames before they can successfully pursue institutional integration or change.

Our final contribution lies in the application of Gray et al.'s (2015) theory of interactional framing, which has novel implications for understanding WEP support. Like Wapshott and Mallett (2025), who highlight, in the wider context of enterprise policy formulation, importing a master frame does little to alleviate institutional tensions; efforts to maintain frame dominance, institutional distancing, and maintain frame plurality seemingly exacerbate tensions in the context of WEP. Efforts to merge frames, however, did seemingly facilitate policy or support adaptation and are thus, we postulate, more effective in instigating institutional change. These insights also provide understandings into the interaction between different mechanisms which structure institutionalised practices, contributing empirical insights to the application of the mechanisms in Gray et al.'s (2015) theory of interactional framing.

Our findings have several important practical implications. First, by highlighting the impact of micro-level policy dynamics on the design and delivery of business support, it urges policymakers to move beyond a narrow focus on macro-level institutional constraints. It shows that everyday interactions and framing by policy actors play a critical role in shaping how support is experienced by women entrepreneurs. This means that reform efforts must not only target formal policy structures but also the informal practices and dialogues that influence implementation. Second, the identification of various types of framing work, such as advocating, isolating, confining, and integrating offers a nuanced understanding of how policies can either perpetuate or challenge gender biases (Harrison et al., 2020). These help illuminate the mechanisms through which gendered norms are either reinforced or challenged within enterprise support systems. Finally, the study highlights the potential of reflecting and integrating frames to bridge institutional plurality; thereby, facilitating more inclusive and coherent policy environments (Walby, 2005). This has critical implications for practice as it suggests that policy actors should not only advocate for gender-aware support but also engage in reflective practices that enable the integration of diverse perspectives. Such integration is posited as a vital micro-process for achieving institutional change, which could lead to a more cohesive and effective support system.

While the study contributes valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the empirical context of the research may constrain the generalisability of our findings. The analysis is situated within a specific national, institutional setting within a specific condensed time frame, and as such, the frames identified may manifest differently across diverse sociopolitical environments. Comparative research across different regions or policy contexts would be necessary to assess the broader applicability of these findings, while research across time will be able to better gauge processes of institutional change.

Second, while the emphasis on interactional framing provides rich theoretical insights, it may overlook structural and systemic barriers that affect women entrepreneurs, including limited access to finance, education, networks, and market opportunities. Although this study acknowledges the unintended consequences of advocating for gender-aware policy, such as the entrenchment of institutional plurality, it provides limited empirical exploration of how these tensions can be managed or resolved in practice. Future research could therefore draw upon feminist theories to examine how framing processes are embedded within gendered institutional contexts. Approaches such as feminist institutionalism or standpoint theory could offer valuable insights into how power, identity, and voice shape frames that gain legitimacy over others.

Finally, the methodological approach relies predominantly on qualitative data and interpretive analysis. While appropriate for exploring complex social processes (Lim, 2025), this approach may limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised or quantified. Future research could benefit from quantitative designs that incorporate more expansive data to corroborate the presence and effects of the identified interactional frames. Such an approach would enhance the robustness of the findings and support their application across varied policy contexts.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the policy frames underpinning the design and delivery of women's enterprise export support, with a specific focus on the Scottish context. Drawing on the theory of interactional framing (Gray et al., 2015), our analysis reveals the mechanisms that shape gender-neutral and gender-sensitive frames. These frames are not static; rather, they are dynamically shaped by plural and contesting institutional mechanisms that either reinforce existing structures or create opportunities for change. Our findings demonstrate that the dominance of gender-neutral frames persists through mechanisms such as confining and deflecting, which serve to legitimise existing

practices while marginalising the specific needs of women entrepreneurs. Concurrently, institutional distancing manifested through isolating and discouraging experiences further alienates women from mainstream support systems. While advocacy for gender-specific support has contributed to increased recognition of women's distinct experiences, it has also inadvertently reinforced frame plurality; thus, entrenching divisions between mainstream and gender-sensitive approaches.

Significantly, the study identifies the potential of internal reframing and frame integration as potential mechanisms for institutional change. These mechanisms could offer a pathway through which conflicting frames can be reconciled, enabling the development of more inclusive and responsive support structures. In this regard, our research extends current understandings of institutional pluralism in WEP (Mallett et al., 2024) by illustrating how underlying micro-level framing work can potentially contribute to meso-level change. On a final note, this research highlights the importance of moving beyond rhetorical commitments to gender equity toward a more nuanced engagement with the structural and symbolic dimensions of policy design and implementation. Addressing the gender export gap requires a deliberate effort to challenge entrenched institutional logics and to foster the conditions necessary for frame convergence. Future research should continue to explore these micro-macro linkages by comparing varied international and cultural contexts to inform more effective, equitable, and grounded enterprise support policies that include women in different countries, across longer time periods.

Disclosure

ChatGPT was used for language editing and improving clarity of the manuscript for some paragraphs. All intellectual content, research design and data analysis were conducted solely by the authors.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Norin Arshed  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6775-1840>

Stephen Knox  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7319-0189>

Notes

1. We refer to 'power' as involving authority (socially acknowledged right to exercise judgement determined by relative status in an institutional context), resources (ability to deploy tangible or intangible resources), and discursive legitimacy (ability to represent a discourse or speak on behalf of an issue in the public sphere) (Purdy, 2012). A policy actor or organisation will have different levels of power in different situations. For example, a women's enterprise support organisation's discursive legitimacy may be high during policy interaction around specific issues that women face but substantially lower in interactions surrounding other economic development policy (e.g. efforts to promote a technology sector).
2. These frames loosely align with the types of WEP support approaches identified by Braidford et al. (2013). Where they differentiate between gender mainstreaming policies, which involve assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, and gender equality policies, which introduce special measures to support women's enterprise, we identified a single frame that advocates for increased sensitivity to the specific needs of women (be it through specific intervention or gender mainstreaming).

References

- Ahl H and Marlow S (2021) Exploring the false promise of entrepreneurship through a postfeminist critique of the enterprise policy discourse in Sweden and the UK. *Human Relations* 74(1): 41–68.

- Ahl H and Nelson T (2015) How policy positions women entrepreneurs: A comparative analysis of state discourse in Sweden and the United States. *Journal of Business Venturing* 30(2): 273–291.
- Alves MFR, Galina SVR, Macini N, et al. (2017) Internationalization and innovation in nascent companies: Does gender matter? *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development* 24(4): 887–905.
- Anggadwita G and Indarti N (2025) Thematic analysis of women entrepreneurship in the internationalization of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies* 17(1): 45–72.
- Arshed N, Chalmers D and Matthews R (2019) Institutionalizing women's enterprise policy: A legitimacy-based perspective. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 43(3): 553–581.
- Arshed N, Knox S and Marin-Cadavid C (2025) Gender export gap in Scotland. *Scottish Government*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/gender-export-gap-scotland/documents/>
- Arshed N, Martin G and Knox S (2023) Ties that bind or blind? The role of identity and place in understanding women entrepreneurs' support needs. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 47(6): 2205–2232.
- Ashworth RE, McDermott AM and Currie G (2019) Theorizing from qualitative research in public administration: Plurality through a combination of rigor and richness. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 29(2): 318–333.
- Bannò M and Filippi E (2024) Women in top echelon positions and firm internationalisation strategies: What do we know? How do we know? Where should we be heading? *Journal of Management and Governance* 28(4): 1257–1302.
- Berglund K, Ahl H, Pettersson K, et al. (2018) Women's entrepreneurship, neoliberalism and economic justice in the postfeminist era: A discourse analysis of policy change in Sweden. *Gender, Work & Organization* 25(5): 531–556.
- Blumer H (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Braidford P, Stone I and Tesfaye B (2013) Gender, disadvantage and enterprise support—lessons from women's business centres in North America and Europe. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development* 20(1): 143–164.
- Bretas VP, Tippmann E and Levie J (2025) Networks for scaling businesses: Accessing international support webs for critical support resources. *Journal of World Business* 60(4): 101645.
- Carter S, Mwaura S, Ram M, et al. (2015) Barriers to ethnic minority and women's enterprise: Existing evidence, policy tensions and unsettled questions. *International Small Business Journal* 33(1): 49–69.
- Chatterjee I, Shepherd DA and Wincent J (2022) Women's entrepreneurship and well-being at the base of the pyramid. *Journal of Business Venturing* 37(4): 106222.
- Coleman S, Henry C, Orser B, et al. (2019) Policy support for women entrepreneurs' access to financial capital: Evidence from Canada, Germany, Ireland, Norway, and the United States. *Journal of Small Business Management* 57: 296–322.
- Collins R (2004) *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cuervo-Cazurra Á, Doz Y and Gaur A (2020) Skepticism of globalization and global strategy: Increasing regulations and countervailing strategies. *Global Strategy Journal* 10(1): 3–31.
- Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (eds) (2011) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Entman RM (1993) Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 51–58.
- Farooqi S and Knox S (2025) Maintaining collective legitimacy during crisis: A case of social enterprise intermediaries in Scotland. *Public Administration* 103: 874–889.
- Foss L, Henry C, Ahl H, et al. (2019) Women's entrepreneurship policy research: A 30-year review of the evidence. *Small Business Economics* 53: 409–429.
- Garg K and Shastri S (2022) Export behaviour of firms in India: Does gender of the firm owner matter? *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* 14(3): 417–434.
- Giddens A (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Gioia DA (2021) A systematic methodology for doing qualitative research. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 57(1): 20–29.
- Gioia DA, Corley KG and Hamilton AL (2013) Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods* 16(1): 15–31.
- Gitlin T (1980) *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Glaser B and Strauss A (2017) *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Goffman E (1967) *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Goffman E (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. London: Harper & Row.
- Gray B, Purdy JM and Ansari S (2015) From interactions to institutions: Microprocesses of framing and mechanisms for the structuring of institutional fields. *Academy of Management Review* 40(1): 115–143.
- Greene PG and Brush CG (2023) Exploring the gender gap in women's entrepreneurship: A narrative policy analysis. In: Henry C, Coleman S and Lewis K (eds) *Women's Entrepreneurship Policy: A Global Perspective*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp.14–39.
- Gross N (2009) A pragmatist theory of social mechanisms. *American Sociological Review* 74(3): 358–379.
- Harley B and Cornelissen J (2022) Rigor with or without templates? The pursuit of methodological rigor in qualitative research. *Organizational Research Methods* 25(2): 239–261.
- Harrison RT, Leitch CM and McAdam M (2020) Woman's entrepreneurship as a gendered niche: The implications for regional development policy. *Journal of Economic Geography* 20(4): 1041–1067.
- International Trade Centre (ITC) (2015) *Unlocking Markets for Women to Trade*. Geneva: International Trade Centre. Available at: <https://www.intracen.org/resources/publications/unlocking-markets-for-women-to-trade>
- Jafari-Sadeghi V, Sukumar A, Pagán-Castaño E, et al. (2021) What drives women towards domestic vs. international business venturing? An empirical analysis in emerging markets. *Journal of Business Research* 134: 647–660.
- Jennings JE and Brush CG (2013) Research on women entrepreneurs: Challenges to (and from) the broader entrepreneurship literature? *The Academy of Management Annals* 7(1): 663–715.
- Korinek J and van Lieshout E (2023) Women entrepreneurs and international trade. In: Adema W and Patrini V (eds) *Joining Forces for Gender Equality: What is Holding us Back?* Paris: OECD Publishing, pp.294–334.
- Kraatz MS and Block ES (2008) Organizational implications of institutional pluralism. In: Greenwood R, Oliver C, Sahlin K, et al. (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*. London: SAGE, pp.243–275.
- Krenz A (2026) Does gender matter for export behavior? Evidence for German companies. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* 18(1): 86–106.
- Lee IH, Paik Y and Uygur U (2016) Does gender matter in the export performance of international new ventures? Mediation effects of firm-specific and country-specific advantages. *Journal of International Management* 22(4): 365–379.
- Lim WM (2025) What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal* 33(2): 199–229.
- LiPuma JA, Newbert SL and Doh JP (2013) The effect of institutional quality on firm export performance in emerging economies: A contingency model of firm age and size. *Small Business Economics* 40: 817–841.
- Magnani G and Gioia D (2023) Using the Gioia Methodology in international business and entrepreneurship research. *International Business Review* 32(2): 102097.
- Mallett O, Wapshott R and Wilson N (2024) Institutional pluralism and the implementation of women's enterprise policy. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 30(7): 1950–1968.
- Marques H (2015) Does the gender of top managers and owners matter for firm exports? *Feminist Economics* 21(4): 89–117.
- McClelland E, Swail J, Bell J, et al. (2005) Following the pathway of female entrepreneurs: A six-country investigation. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 11(2): 84–107.

- Mesquita LF and Lazzarini SG (2008) Horizontal and vertical relationships in developing economies: Implications for SMEs' access to global markets. *Academy of Management Journal* 51(2): 359–380.
- Miles MB and Huberman AM (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Moreira J, Marques CS, Braga A, et al. (2019) A systematic review of women's entrepreneurship and internationalization literature. *Thunderbird International Business Review* 61(4): 635–648.
- Muñoz-Bullón F, Sánchez-Bueno MJ and Vos-Saz A (2015) Nascent entrepreneurs' personality attributes and the international dimension of new ventures. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal* 11: 473–492.
- Narooz R and Child J (2017) Networking responses to different levels of institutional void: A comparison of internationalizing SMEs in Egypt and the UK. *International Business Review* 26(4): 683–696.
- Nielsen BB, Welch C, Chidlow A, et al. (2020) Fifty years of methodological trends in JIBS: Why future IB research needs more triangulation. *Journal of International Business Studies* 51(9): 1478–1499.
- Orgad S (2025) Women who quit: Media and policy discourse about gender and work. *LSE Public Policy Review* 3(4): 1–11.
- Orser B, Riding A and Townsend J (2004) Exporting as a means of growth for women-owned Canadian SMEs. *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship* 17(3): 153–174.
- Orser B (2022) Building back better through feminist entrepreneurship policy. *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* 14(4): 468–488.
- Patton MQ (1990) *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Poole MS, Seibold DR and McPhee RD (1985) Group decision-making as a structural process. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 71: 74–102.
- Poulis K, Poulis E and Plakoyiannaki E (2013) The role of context in case study selection: An international business perspective. *International Business Review* 22(1): 304–314.
- Purdy JM (2012) A framework for assessing power in collaborative governance processes. *Public Administration Review* 72(3): 409–417.
- Ratten V and Tajeddini K (2018) Women's entrepreneurship and internationalization: Patterns and trends. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 38(9/10): 780–793.
- Reuber AR and Fischer E (2022) Putting qualitative international business research in context(s). *Journal of International Business Studies* 53(1): 27–38.
- Schön DA and Rein M (1994) *Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies*. New York: Basic Books.
- Scottish Government (2015) Scotland's Economic Strategy. Available at: <https://timeline.hie.co.uk/media/mqkfigvm/hie-story-scotlands-economic-strategy-2015.pdf>
- Scottish Government (2016) Enterprise and Skills Review: report on Phase 1. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/enterprise-skills-review-report-phase-1/>
- Scottish Government (2022) Scotland's Vision for Trade: Annual report. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-vision-trade-annual-report-march-2022/>
- Snihur Y, Thomas LD, Garud R, et al. (2022) Entrepreneurial framing: A literature review and future research directions. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 46(3): 578–606.
- Sørensen E and Torfing J (eds) (2007) *Theories of Democratic Network Governance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stewart A, Logan M and Milne K (2023) Pathways: A New Approach for Women in Entrepreneurship. *An Independent Review Commissioned by the Scottish Government*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/pathways-new-approach-women-entrepreneurship/documents/>
- Stoian C and Mohr A (2016) Outward foreign direct investment from emerging economies: Escaping home country regulative voids. *International Business Review* 25(5): 1124–1135.
- Sui S, Morgan HM and Baum M (2022) Differences between women-and men-owned export businesses: Are women-owned export businesses more financially successful when they adopt an intensive export strategy? *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship* 34(5): 578–595.
- Tang J, Tang Z and Katz JA (2014) Proactiveness, stakeholder–firm power difference, and product safety and quality of Chinese SMEs. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 38(5): 1–29.

- Terjesen S, Bosma N and Stam E (2016) Advancing public policy for high-growth, female, and social entrepreneurs. *Public Administration Review* 76(2): 230–239.
- The Gender Index (2024) *The Gender Index Report 2024*. Available at: <https://www.thegenderindex.co.uk/reports>
- Treanor L, Tiwasing P and Chapman G (2025) *Growing Pains: Supporting Inclusive Growth Through Understanding Women-led Business Exporting* (Research Paper No 122). Enterprise Research Centre. Available at: <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/ERC-ResPap-122.-Supporting-Inclusive-Growth-Through-Understanding-Women-led-Business-Exporting.final.pdf>
- Van Hulst M and Visser EL (2025) Abductive analysis in qualitative research. *Public Administration Review* 85(2): 567–580.
- Van Hulst M and Yanow D (2016) From policy “frames” to “framing” theorizing a more dynamic, political approach. *The American Review of Public Administration* 46(1): 92–112.
- Walby S (2005) Gender mainstreaming: Productive tensions in theory and practice. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 12(3): 321–343.
- Wapshott R and Mallett O (2025) Small business stories in the formation of enterprise policy: A narrative policy analysis of the UK Bolton Committee. *Small Business Economics* 64(4): 2223–2238.
- Welch CL, Welch DE and Hewerdine L (2008) Gender and export behaviour: Evidence from women-owned enterprises. *Journal of Business Ethics* 83: 113–126.
- Werner MD and Cornelissen JP (2014) Framing the change: Switching and blending frames and their role in instigating institutional change. *Organization Studies* 35(10): 1449–1472.
- World Bank and World Trade Organization (2020) *Women and Trade: The Role of Trade in Promoting Gender Equality*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- World Trade Organization (WTO) (2017) *Gender Aware Trade Policy: A Springboard for Women’s Economic Empowerment*. 2017. Available at: https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news17_e/dgra_21jun17_e.pdf
- Yanow D (2000) *Conducting Interpretive Policy Analysis*, vol. 47. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yin RK (2014) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 5th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Yousafzai S, Fayolle A, Saeed S, et al. (2019) The contextual embeddedness of women’s entrepreneurship: Towards a more informed research agenda. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* 31(3–4): 167–177.
- Zimmermann A and Kenter JO (2023) Framing the change and changing frames: Tensions in participative strategy development. *Politics & Policy* 51(1): 81–113.

Author biographies

Norin Arshed is a Professor of Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the University of Strathclyde. Her work focuses on enterprise policy – the formulation, implementation and exploitation of the policy itself. She explores women’s enterprise policy, unconventional entrepreneurship, scale-ups, the entrepreneurial ecosystem and contextual entrepreneurship. Much of her works draws on institutional theory.

Carolina Marin-Cadavid is a Knowledge Exchange Fellow at the Stephen Young Institute for International Business at the University of Strathclyde. Her research in International Business and Strategy, focus on strategy implementation and the role of diverse stakeholder groups in shaping internationalisation outcomes. Drawing on experience across industries, she has worked closely with SMEs to support and advance their internationalisation processes, bringing a practitioner-informed lens to her scholarship. Her research is committed to generating real-world impact by engaging with public policy in international contexts and amplifying underrepresented perspectives in global trade.

Stephen Knox is a Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the University of Stirling. His research investigates the social psychological dimensions of entrepreneurship, particularly in relation to small business and entrepreneurial development. He examines the conditions that support entrepreneurial activity, including the role of public policy and institutional support.

Appendix I

Table A1. Relatively recent history of women's enterprise and export policy in Scotland.

Year	Policy document	Policy field	Key details
2013	Scotland CAN DO – Becoming A World-Leading Entrepreneurial And Innovation Nation	Enterprise policy	Exports highlighted as key for growth. Improving business support key for growth. Plans to create a women's enterprise policy strategy separate from other activity.
2014	Scotland CAN DO action framework	Enterprise policy	Exports a key desired outcome but no actions identified. Supporting women a key pillar but no links with exporting.
2014	Women in Enterprise: A Framework and Action Plan	Enterprise policy (women's)	Outlines strategy for reducing entrepreneurship gender gap but no specific mention of exporting.
2015	Scotland's Economic Strategy	Economic policy	Strong export focus within strategy. No specific mention of women export – but expresses need diversify export base, although mainly focused on sectoral diversity as opposed to ownership diversity. Link made to policies to support women's enterprise.
2016	Enterprise & Skills Review: Report on Phase 1	Enterprise policy	Reference to exporting as a key pillar of Scotland's Economic Strategy 2015 but no specific mention of gender.
2017	Scottish Framework and Action Plan for Women in Enterprise	Enterprise policy (women's)	Refreshed strategy with exporting added to Growth & Finance pillar of the framework.
2017	Scotland's Innovation Performance Enterprise & Skills Review: Report on Phase 2	Enterprise policy (innovation)	No mention of exporting or women.
2019	A Trading Nation – A plan for growing Scotland's exports	Enterprise policy	Exporting support central part of strategy but no mention of export gender gap Specific objectives to increase growth potential of women-led enterprises (even though export significantly associated with growth in other docs the two are yet connected)
2021	Scotland's Vision for Trade	Export policy Trade policy	No specific mention of women, female, gender, although specifically states that exporting can grow the economy, which in turn can support a more inclusive economy. Acknowledgement women were disproportionately influenced by trade challenges of Covid-19, and women are disadvantaged by working in different sectors and have greater care responsibilities. Acknowledgement that women and other disadvantaged groups could benefit from targeted support and calls on UK Government to account for gender equality in a greater manner. Calls to mainstream the impact on women through trade deals and acknowledgement women are disadvantaged by trade policy. Commitment to ensure that investment is fairly distributed, including to female founders.
2021	Investing with Purpose: global capital investment plan	Trade policy	

(continued)

Table A I. (continued)

Year	Policy document	Policy field	Key details
2022	Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation	Economic policy	Export significant part of programme of action but non-gender specific links between entrepreneurial thinking and exporting (lack of connection); (2) Clear effort to advance gender gap in some sectors e.g. STEM
2022	Scotland's Vision for Trade Annual Report	Trade policy	Identify a need to build links between trade and domestic policies to support gender equity. Identify need to hold UK Government responsible for gender inclusiveness in trade.
2022	A Trading Nation – An export Plan for Scotland's Technology Sector	Trade policy	No specific mention of women or gender inclusivity.
2022	A Trading Nation – Progress Review	Trade policy	Stresses importance of inclusive growth but no specific mention of women.
2023	Scotland's Vision for Trade Annual Report	Trade policy	Commit to advancing more equal access to international trade opportunities Recognition of the need to integrate policy agendas Stress a need to take a gendered approach to export opportunities.
2023	Pathways: A New Approach for Women in Entrepreneurship	Enterprise policy (women's)	No specific recognition of exporting.
2023	Taking A Feminist Approach To International Relations	Trade policy	Recognition that women are systemically disadvantaged but no clear approach to gender export gap.
2024	Scotland's Vision for Trade Annual Report	Trade policy	A clear effort to understand the gender export gap. Support of gender impact assessment in trade agreements. Progress on women participating in trade as a deliverable.
2025	Gender Export Gap in Scotland. Scottish Government	Export and enterprise policy	Stress a need to understand the systemic issues that influence women trade. The report developed an economic case for addressing a known gender export gap in Scotland. Proposed effective avenues to address the gender export gap be and implementation solutions.