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RESEARCH REPORT



FEMALE AGRI-FOOD ENTREPRENEURS PERCEPTION OF MENTORSHIP PROGRAMMES



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PURPOSE



The aim of the present study was to gain an increased understanding of the various barriers which female agri-food entrepreneurs situated in rural areas perceive as hindrances to their entrepreneurial growth and development. This is with particular focus on their awareness, perception, openness, and acceptance to mentorship programs.

METHODOLOGY



A total of five focus group discussions were carried out with agri-food entrepreneurs throughout Europe. Discussions were semi-structured and revolved around individuals' perceptions of the support received from their surrounding infrastructure and their opinions on mentorship programmes. A reflective thematic analysis was conducted utilizing the resulting transcripts from these focus groups. A total of five separate focus groups (n=29 participants; 18 females) were carried out with agri-food entrepreneurs throughout Europe (Ireland, Belgium, Poland, Italy). Discussions were semi-structured and revolved around individuals' perceptions of the support received from their surrounding infrastructure and their opinions on mentorship programmes. A reflective thematic analysis was conducted following verbatim transcription of the conversations from the focus groups


FINDINGS



Through reflective qualitative analysis of the focus group discussions, 3 major subthemes became apparent; 1. Business Initiation and Development. 2. Perceived Barriers, and 3. Mentorship Programmes. Of the central themes identifies, Perceived Barriers contained the largest number of sub-themes, suggesting that a large variety of issues remain rather than a small amount of bigger issues.

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial activity is a significant measure of a country's vitality (Stice and Desjardins, 2018). One of the primary characteristics for success in entrepreneurship is that of having a willingness to seek out new information in order to expand one's knowledge and skills (Anand Singh and Krishna, 1994). However, previous research has suggested that entrepreneurs feel supportive resources such as training and skill development programmes are lacking. This has been cited as one of the main barriers early-stage entrepreneurs face across Europe (Iakovleva et al., 2014). One skill in particular has gained significant and growing attention in recent years. Technology is rapidly evolving and being sufficiently skilled in this area can impact entrepreneurs' business expansion through things such as creative marketing to attract target consumers or using analytical software to investigate product success (Azevedo and Almeida, 2021, Oberländer et al., 2020, Vial, 2019). Females specifically have been suggested as among the most vulnerable of entrepreneurs and therefore understanding their experiences within the entrepreneurial realm is critical for the development of counteractive supports (Gangadhar, 2020, Rajendran and Indapurkar, 2020, Kumari and Eguruze, 2022). Both in developing and developed countries, males dominate the entrepreneurial realm and of those who are female, their business's are oftentimes smaller and less productive than that of their male counterparts (Nsengimana et al., 2017; Rijkers and Costa, 2012). Part-taking in mentorship programmes has been suggested as an activity to support the gender equality throughout entrepreneurship. Providing both physical information and skill development advice, as well as supporting psychological growth, integrating entrepreneurial role models as mentors holds a myriad of benefits (Kelley, 2013).



Entrepreneurs have previously stated facing a variety of barriers, both at the initial start-up phase and further developmental phases. Of these, issues with adequately financing their business is among the most common, particularly in the earlier stages of their endeavour (Hoogendoorn et al., 2019). The perception of inadequate financial support for entrepreneurs is a shared perception throughout European Union regions (Grilo and Thurik, 2005). In addition to this, entrepreneurs situated in rural areas experience a range of barriers unique to their geographical location which are not issues for those situated in urban areas. Entrepreneurs have described in previous research, their awareness of potential hinderances to their business success and the pressure they feel to prepare for upcoming financial struggles, indicating that the viewpoint of entrepreneurship as a financial insecure employment still exists (Nyström, 2021). In addition to physical supports, it has previously been established that peers and entrepreneurs degree of emotional support from their surrounding infrastructure can substantially impact their behaviours and activity (Klyver et al., 2018, Downing, 2005). Suggestions to counteract the negative emotions resulting from a psychologically unsupportive environment include increasing the availability of training courses not only to support entrepreneurs physical business development and success, but also to improve their inner self-talk, -belief, and -confidence (Roper and Scott, 2009). Other barriers often cited include difficulties with the administrative processes behind applying for financial support, females experiencing gender discriminatory behaviour both from those at higher levels, peers, and customers, and having difficulties navigating technology in a manner to efficiently market and expand their business (Kirkwood, 2009; Llie et al., 2021; Sjøby, 2013).

A potential method to decrease the stressors of starting an entrepreneurial endeavour, integrating role models from similar backgrounds into training programmes has previously been recommended (Kelley, 2013). Previous findings suggest that longer-term relationships may be more beneficial than once-off interactions (Humberd and Rouse, 2015). However, the majority of existing research focuses on these single interactions and overlooks long-term relationships (van Werven et al., 2023). Research regarding entrepreneurs' willingness to partake in a mentorship programme, whether as the mentor or mentee, is sparse, making it difficult to investigate entrepreneurs' desires when taking on either of these roles.

Research investigating agri-food entrepreneurs' perception of their supporting infrastructure as well as their opinions of and willingness to partake in mentorship programmes are scarce. Without this information, it remains a challenge for policymakers and those at decision-making levels to develop adequate counteracting resources and materials. Having a current, up-to-date insight and understanding of this agri-food entrepreneurial environment is of particular importance given the recent global pandemic and its subsequent effects on global supply chains (Apostolopoulos, 2021). Acknowledging this, the aim of this research was to gain an increased understanding of the various barriers which female agri-food entrepreneurs situated in rural areas perceive as hindrances to their entrepreneurial growth and development. This is with particular focus on their awareness, perception, openness, and acceptance to mentorship programs.



STUDY DESIGN



In accordance with the Braun and Clarke (Clarke et al., 2015) methodology, this research study was conducted in the form of a reflective thematic analysis. A total of five semi-structured focus group discussions were performed. All participants had the common occupation of entrepreneurship within the food and agricultural industry across Europe. A total of N=18 females and N=11 males partook in these discussions, with a total of two groups lacking a male representative and one lacking female representatives. The discussion topics were in relation to the influence of self-belief, impact of being rurally situated, effect of gender, achieving of life balance, and perception of other challenges on business start-up and success. The questions asked in these focus groups were designed specifically to gain a deeper understanding of the positive impact of mentorship for supporting the growth of female agri-food entrepreneurs in what is currently a heavily male dominated sector.

ETHICS AND PROCEDURE



This research paper was granted ethical approval by the Research Sub-Committee of Academic Council of Atlantic Technological University (ATURSC_AC_2022). An initial participant information sheet was circulated by the researcher for the recruitment of individuals. Those who subsequently volunteered, and were deemed eligible for inclusion, received further information on this research, such as its objectives and the confidential nature of the management of data regarding this study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the study commencement. Group discussions were approximately one hour in duration, with all information anonymised to protect participants from identification.

DATA COLLECTION



Individuals were deemed eligible if they owned and managed an Irish food business in the west of Ireland. Question responses were used to collect information relating to participants beliefs and experiences as entrepreneurs in rural Ireland. Each focus group was presented with a myriad of statements regarding their experiences as female agri-food entrepreneurs working within a male dominated sector, 1) business initiation and development, 2) perceived barriers, 3) and mentorship programmes. A general script was followed, with further questioning to tease out or expand on answers where necessary.

DATA ANALYSIS



This research paper was granted ethical approval by the Research Sub-Committee of Academic Council of Atlantic Technological University (ATURSC_AC_2022). An initial participant information sheet was circulated by the researcher for the recruitment of individuals. Those who subsequently volunteered, and were deemed eligible for inclusion, received further information on this research, such as its objectives and the confidential nature of the management of data regarding this study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the study commencement. Group discussions were approximately one hour in duration, with all information anonymised to protect participants from identification.



TRANSCRIPTION



The original audio recording of the focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher on each partner organisation. Following this, the transcripts were compared to the audio recordings to ensure precision. The resulting word document comprised of five focus group transcripts was forwarded to another researcher (T.R.) for analysis.

CODING



The research was conducted in a predominantly deductive manner with the utilisation of a pre-specified framework of analysis, whereby semantic coding is prioritised over latent coding. This was initially carried out by (T.R.) and subsequently reviewed by other members of the research team (L.R., M.McD, A.M.). Similarly, (T.R.) developed themes and sub-themes, which were later discussed and agreed upon by the research team.



| Theme | Sub-theme | Participant | Related Quote |
|--|------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Business Initiation and Development | Business Preparation | A | "...the only market research I suppose I would have done at the minute would be just listening to people in the local community" |
| | | B | "...services farmers needed. And also when the busiest times that the farmers would need that service" |
| | | D | "We would have looked into it and visited other organic farms in Ireland. My parents travelled to other organic farm for farm walks and talks" |
| | The Current Situation | B | "At the present minute it is through I suppose word of mouth... we also have two young lads that are in our local area that do YouTube videos..." |
| | | A | "I would love to learn more about that and I don't even know where to go. I suppose in terms of finding out more information on how to promote my business better. So, it's something that I'd love to look into and learn more about." |

| Theme | Sub-theme | Participant | Related Quote |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Perceived Barriers | Financial Supports | A | "For me, I would have heard about some training in relation to mentors helping in specific areas of your business, maybe and finances and that, but I wouldn't know where to go about getting information on this." |
| | | B | "I suppose the biggest barrier that I had seen at the beginning was the major financial aspect..." |
| | Sociocultural Supports | B | "...if you can build that trust with a customer, it's the hardest part, and that's the hardest part for me anyways, was two was to get your customer base." |
| | | W | "I asked one of the local farmers if he could recommend any person to help with the finances, insurance etc. and can you imagine he didn't want to say even that much?" |
| | | A | "I would love to learn more about that and I don't even know where to go. I suppose in terms of finding out more information on how to promote my business better. So, it's something that I'd love to look into and learn more about." |
| | | | |

| | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Perceived Barriers | Bureaucracy and Administration | D | "There were lots of rules and regulations to learn and lots of training, especially for my parents. The paperwork too was a challenge for us." |
| | | I | "...the bureaucratic procedures to obtain permits from administrations to create something or to implement certain aspects of the company are tiring, slow and complicated." |
| | Gender Discrimination | D | "Some wives and partners would be involved in the farms too to help out if you know what I mean." |
| | | H | "I did actually have some troubles because of my gender. We had a site coordinator that was supposed to help us and teach us how to take care of our crops, things that he's learned from his many years of experience but my gender didn't really suit him and that made me feel uncomfortable, so I stopped asking for help or asking any questions I had." |
| | Digital Transformation | C | "I think the social media side of our business and getting the word out more about our advertising, our business that would be one thing we really need to work on. It always seems to be changing and it can be hard to keep up. We probably need someone on board to help with advertising." |
| | | F | "Yes, through Facebook groups for farmers. It can be handy to just immediately be able to ask your question, but it can also be confusing because if you get a lot of answers and they're different they confuse you more than help you." |

| Theme | Sub-theme | Participant | Related Quote |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Mentorship Programmes | Current Awareness | G | "I've never heard of any mentoring programmes, I'm not sure what that would look like." |
| | Mentee Openness and Desires | D | "Yeah, maybe just how to expand the organic farm. Maybe, just look at other opportunities that could work alongside the organic farm." |
| | | K | "Personally, I feel the need to be supported in the processing of agricultural products. Now we are producing ready-to-cook products, but I would like to expand our business in the field of processed products offered with the introduction of preserves, sauces, jams. To do this I feel I would need to learn the job from a mentor or someone who has experience from a "maestro" in a word." |
| | | E | "I would need some sort of guidance of what exactly is expected of me as a mentor since I've never done it before but I would be happy to help newcomers out as much as I can." |

Table 1: Thematic table depicting the resulting themes and their subsequent sub-themes, along with supporting quotes, made evident through a reflective thematic analysis of focus group discussions with entrepreneurs in Ireland, Poland, Belgium, and Italy. In the Participant column, the letter(s) represents the participant who said the related quote.



04 FINDINGS

Throughout the semi-structured focus group discussions with entrepreneurs situated rurally throughout Europe, multiple identical central themes arose. Each overarching theme was then further separated into relevant sub-themes. These main themes and discussion points comprise of business initiation and development, perceived barriers, and mentorship programmes.



THEME 01

BUSINESS INITIATION AND DEVELOPMENT



The theme of business initiation and development illustrates the knowledge held and practices employed by rural agri-food entrepreneurs. During the earlier phases of their entrepreneurial endeavours, this includes the conducting of market research, conversing with relevant personnel, and partaking in any training programmes. Comparably, once established as a business this is comprised of activities to further develop and broaden their knowledge-base and entrepreneurial skills in order to expand their business. Also included in this, is the awareness and perceptions entrepreneurs hold with regards to their surrounding infrastructure and whether it enhances or hinders such expansion.



SUB-THEME 1: BUSINESS PREPARATION AND DEVELOPMENT



Among the most common practices of entrepreneurs prior to commencing their entrepreneurial endeavour is that of determining relevant experienced personnel in the same, or a similar, field and organising to meet them for advice and guidance. With regards to conducting market research, no participants of this study indicated that they carried out any specific procedure. Conversely, of those who did discuss conducting market research prior to opening their business, their research involved “just listening to people in the local community” to uncover their wants and needs as well as visiting similar business’s to better understand their turnover. Additionally, one participant explained that he also investigated the needs of his customers as it varies throughout the calendar year

SUB-THEME 2: THE CURRENT SITUATION



Speaking of their current practices to grow and develop their business’s, the participants of this study described building and maintaining relationships with local customers. A key reason for doing so, this enables the entrepreneurs to continually gain input and monitor the public’s opinion on their business. Using “word-of-mouth” is a key method these entrepreneurs rely on to expand their business and to do so it is essential to maintain a positive relationship with customers in the hope they will continue to avail of their product or service. However, the majority of participants, though aware of the benefits of an active digital presence, lacked confidence in their digital skills and abilities and were unsure how to overcome these.

Participant A:

“I would love to learn more about that, and I don't even know where to go. I suppose in terms of finding out more information on how to promote my business better. So, it's something that I'd love to look into and learn more about.”

THEME 02



PERCEIVED BARRIERS



Throughout each focus group discussion, participants highlighted the various barriers they have experiences and overcome, and continue to struggle with, in their entrepreneurial endeavour.

SUB-THEME 1: FINANCIAL SUPPORTS



Considered the “biggest barrier” to entrepreneurship, particularly in its earlier phases, is that of financial supports. Participants of this study collectively described a variety of issues with regards to the financial aids available to them. Firstly, they explained that sourcing information on financial assistance was difficult and confusing. Many noted that throughout the earliest phases of their endeavour they were unaware of any financial support whatsoever. Of those who had experience applying for financial support, they described the application process as overly complicated and exhaustive, with the effort required to apply often outweighing the value of the funding awarded. Numerous participants explained that they felt it necessary to plan and prepare in advance in order to overcome financial difficulties they see as inevitably occurring in the future.



SUB-THEME 2: SOCIOCULTURAL SUPPORTS



In terms of participants surrounding infrastructures and the degree of social and psychological support they perceived, many entrepreneurs felt that larger companies were overpowering and unwelcoming. This is not just with regards to nation-wide chain businesses, but also with smaller, community-based but previously established entrepreneurs and their business's. Participants of this study described information as being “gate kept” from them by other entrepreneurs and because of this, oftentimes felt alone in their entrepreneurial endeavour.

SUB-THEME 3: BUREAUCRACY AND ADMINISTRATION



Recognised by the vast majority of entrepreneurs partaking in this research as among the biggest deterrent to entrepreneurship, is that of bureaucracy and administrative processes. Participants described situations of feeling overwhelmed, overburdened, and confused with the plethora of legalities and paperwork surrounding entrepreneurship. Not only was this the case when applying for financial support, but also with the various aspects to setting up their business. One participant noted that thoroughly researching and spending time understanding such procedures is essential before beginning an entrepreneurial endeavour and to be prepared for slow, time-consuming paperwork that can be quite disheartening and monotonous.



SUB-THEME 4: GENDER DISCRIMINATION



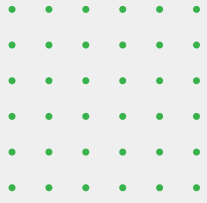
Though few individuals partaking in the focus group discussions for this research had no previous negative experiences regarding their gender, many females involved in agri-food entrepreneurship recognised that it remains a male-dominated profession, similar to many other types of entrepreneurship. Females in particular illustrated situations where they were not taken as seriously as they feel their male counterparts would be, and that they are seen more as seconds-in-command than primary business owners by others in the profession and the wider community. Additionally, females more so than males expressed that they are expecting gender-based barriers to occur in the future, suggesting that the entrepreneurship in general is viewed as more accepting and supporting of males than females.

SUB-THEME 5: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION



Though participants of this study did recognise the benefits of using technology, in particular social media sites, to further expand their business. One entrepreneur explained how she is in contact with two young men who promote their business on social media platform YouTube by releasing regular videos that offer watchers an insight into the workings of their business. Apart from this, there was a stark lack of digital usage for work-related activity. Across the board, entrepreneurs agreed that they were underutilising social media for business expansion but were also clear in stating that they were underconfident in how best to use these platforms. They also praised such sites as platforms to get the younger generations more actively involved and interested in entrepreneurship.





THEME 03

MENTORSHIP PROGRAMMES



A key objective of organising and hosting these focus groups with agri-food entrepreneurs throughout Europe was to gain an understanding of their awareness of experience with, and level of acceptance to partake in mentorship programmes as either mentees or mentors.



SUB-THEME 1: CURRENT AWARENESS



Regarding entrepreneurs' current awareness of mentorship programmes, many had never heard of such programmes. Some even exclaimed that they would "not know what one would look like". Furthering this, multiple individuals described that they would not even know where to begin looking for such support. Of those who were aware of such programmes, they were hesitant as to whether the programs were specifically tailored enough to sufficiently support their business and its development. They expressed worries that mentorships may perhaps be too broad and more suited to those in the earlier phases of their entrepreneurial endeavour. They are concerned though that the further their business develops, the more difficult it would become to find a mentor with a similar pathway who has successfully overcome the same struggles and procedures.



SUB-THEME 2: MENTEE OPENNESS AND DESIRES



Apart from a small few, most of the participating entrepreneurs agreed that they would positively benefit from partaking in a mentorship programme as a mentee. Not only did they suggest that such a relationship would support and guide their physical business development, but also enhance their confidence and self-efficacy as entrepreneurs. In terms of the specific area's entrepreneurs desire support in, expanding their business is a key goal which they believe a mentor could substantially help with.

SUB-THEME 3: MENTOR OPENNESS AND SEDIRES



Although participants of this study did not have a full and in-depth understanding of mentorship programmes and what being a mentor entails, most were open to the idea of taking on that role after completing the relevant training. A desire for guidance and advice on mentorship and what exactly is “expected” of them as mentors exists. With such training, they can confidently support newcomers on a similar entrepreneurial pathway. Participants highlighted that this would accelerate new entrepreneurs’ business growth by helping them through various situations rather than leaving them to struggle for long periods of time to overcome any barriers they may face.





DISCUSSION

05



Throughout all of the focus group discussions with entrepreneurs across Europe, conversation revolved around three main themes. These comprise of business initiation and development, perceived barriers, and mentorship programmes. Discussions on each central theme were further separated into sub-themes during reflective thematic analysis of the resulting transcripts.





01 THEME

BUSINESS INITIATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Many entrepreneurs described their journey from the business initiation phase and also further on in their development and expansion. While participants were aware of the convenience and benefits of conducting market research, they described a lack of digital skills and confidence. Similarly, participants felt a lack of sufficient supports from government and non-government bodies, in particular during the initial phases of their entrepreneurial endeavour. A willingness to seek out information and broaden one's knowledge and skills is a significant characteristic attributed to successful entrepreneurs (Anand Singh and Krishna, 1994). However, there remains a lack of adequate supportive resources, such as training and skills programmes. This is in line with previous research, which has found that a lack of such skills is one of the biggest hindrances to entrepreneurial activity across Europe (Iakovleva et al., 2014). When discussing their current situation and entrepreneurial abilities, participants of this research expressed feeling that they lacked the skills and abilities to adequately use technology for expanding their business. Alternatively, many entrepreneurs were dependant on word of mouth and feedback from customers. Of all skills relevant to entrepreneurs, digital competence is critical for business survival. Currently there is a substantial need for entrepreneurial activity to evolve accordingly, making productive, creative and analytical use of information communications technologies and other advantageous software (Azevedo and Almeida, 2021, Oberländer et al., 2020, Vial, 2019).

While some research suggests that entrepreneurial training may have a negative effect as it may highlight upcoming potential barriers and setbacks, it has overall been shown to have a positive effect (Bae et al., 2014, Martin et al., 2013, Graevenitz et al., 2010). In preparation for starting their business, many participants described seeking out advice from already established entrepreneurs who's business' were in the same or a similar field but unfortunately felt unwelcome. Intergrating entrepreneurial role models into training programes is one of the key recommendations for inspiring young entrepreneurs (Kelley, 2013). Conversely, a lack of such role models is regularly considered as off-putting and deterrent from entrepreneurship (Lafuente et al., 2007). It is vital that more supports be made available to entrepreneurs, not only in the earliest phases of their business but also throughout its development. It is essential that those at decision making levels create training programmes with acknowledgement of the beneficial effects of digital skills as well as role models and mentors for entrepreneurs.






02

THEME

PERCEIVED BARRIERS

In all focus groups, participants discussed the myriad of barriers which accompanied their entrepreneurial endeavours, gave feedback on the supports which they previously availed of, and recommended supports they desire and feel necessary for overall improving entrepreneurship.

The lack of adequate financial supports for entrepreneurs was recognised by participants of this research as being the “biggest barrier” to their success. In recent years, entrepreneurs have become more forward-thinking in their methods of sourcing financial support, branching out from traditional sources such as bank loans to new sources such as online funding websites (Bruton et al., 2015) (Bruton et al., 2015). A significant part of entrepreneurship, particularly during its earlier phases, such financial aid can have a huge impact on the success of a business (Hoogendoorn et al., 2019). This perceived lack of financial support expressed by participants of this study is not a new discovery. Grilo and Thurik (2005), investigated this topic using data from a survey conducted across 15 old EU member states and in doing so, found that the vast majority of those involved in their research also perceived a lack of financial support as a main barrier to pursuing entrepreneurship. More recently, the same authors used two data sets from the Flash Eurobarometer survey of entrepreneurs across 33 different countries and noted that this perception is still very much still in existence (Grilo and Thurik, 2008). Entrepreneurship is often separated into different types, such as urban and rural.



Acknowledging that this perception of a lack in financial supports hinders entrepreneurial activity, Hoogendoorn et al., (Hoogendoorn et al.) investigated whether this differed across entrepreneur types but concluded that it is evident across all sorts. When comparing the degree to which this financial support and its availability are perceived, females have been more likely to express perceiving this barrier as larger than males have (Roper and Scott, 2009). Participants of this research who did successfully avail of financial support, whether from government or non-government bodies, described the administrative procedures as hugely deterring, a finding which also aligns with previous research (Grilo and Thurik, 2008). Multiple participants also described how they felt it necessary to plan and prepare for potential upcoming financial difficulties, highlighting that the perception of entrepreneurship as being accompanied by financial insecurity remains a common viewpoint (Nyström, 2021)

An emotionally supporting infrastructure can significantly impact entrepreneurial intentions and activities (Klyver et al., 2018, Downing, 2005). Additionally, it is well-established that individuals' peers can substantially impact their behaviours and activity (Brechtwald and Prinstein, 2011)Edelman et al., (2016) highlighted that this is true for entrepreneurship, particularly for younger entrepreneurs in the earlier stages of their endeavour. They noted that receiving support and positive feedback from family members and overall familial cohesiveness positively impacts entrepreneur's start-up activities. More recently, Cogan et al., (2022) found that with regards to an entrepreneur's degree of activity, a supportive and encouraging sociocultural environment is superior to one where the family members are distant. Throughout entrepreneurial research, the terms self - confidence, -efficacy, and -belief are often used interchangeably to express one's perception of their ability to complete tasks and be successful and has been linked to one's interest in their career (Wilson et al., 2007). Regarding support from larger, previously established businesses, whether small and local or a large national chain, participants in this research described feeling unwelcomed and belittled. A potential method to counteract these negative emotions, Roper and Scott, (2009) suggested that along with training courses to support entrepreneurs' physical business expansion and development, programmes teaching confidence-building should also be considered.

The majority of participants in this research explained that they felt overwhelmed and confused by the administrative tasks accompanying issues such as applying for funding. Application processes were often time-consuming and confusing, with the resulting finance not equating to the amount of time and effort they spend on the application.

While gender discrimination was not often cited as an off-putting element of their entrepreneurial experience, some participants did describe feeling overlooked and not taken seriously, all of which were female. More recent research highlights this, noting that entrepreneurship is widely regarded as gendered (Kirkwood, 2009). Llie et al., (2021) observed that this perception of entrepreneurship as having a gendered nature has a negative impact on entrepreneurial intentions, especially for females.

Although participants were aware of the huge impact technology could have on their business, they expressed uncertainty about how best to use it for marketing and advertising, as well as a lack of confidence in their general digital skills. Digital competence is widely recognised as having “confident and critical use of Information Society Technology for work, leisure and communication (Søby, 2013). Previous findings suggest that the majority of workers feel that it is necessary to have digital competence and to be constantly developing and improving it. Although this issue is well-known, research in this area remains sparse (Murawski and Bick, 2017)



03

THEME

MENTORSHIP PROGRAMMES

One of the main aims of organising and hosting focus groups with agri-food entrepreneurs for this research, was to better understand their awareness of and opinions on mentorship programs, as well as their willingness to be either a mentee or mentor. Most participants were unaware of any current mentorship programmes which they could avail of. For some, this was to the extent of being unsure what a mentorship programme would even comprise of. Of those who had heard of mentorship programmes, they saw the potential benefits of partaking in such a relationship. In terms of beneficial effects, feedback from trusted individuals from prolonged relationships is superior to that from once-off interactions (Humberd and Rouse, 2015). However, the majority of existing research focuses on once-off interactions (van Werven et al., 2023).

Research regarding entrepreneurs' willingness to partake in a mentorship programme, whether as the mentor or mentee, is sparse, making it difficult to investigate entrepreneurs' desires when taking on either of these roles. Some research suggests that mentorship relationships may have both positive and negative effects on entrepreneurial activity, as through interactions the mentee becomes more aware of the limitations regarding their initial business plan (St-Jean and Mathieu, 2015). Brodie et al., (2017) more recently investigated the perceived value of mentoring by entrepreneurs through semi-structured interviewing and observed an overall positive perception. Findings indicated that particularly during the start-up phase of a business,

mentorship can work to improve entrepreneurs' knowledge and confidence, as well as offer guidance and support. This will subsequently increase entrepreneur's self-efficacy. However, the beneficial effects of mentorship may be temporary, with entrepreneur learning goal orientation and self-efficacy decreasing once this relationship ceases. Because of this, current suggestions note that long-term mentorship should be considered in order to maintain the beneficial effects mentees receive (St-Jean and Tremblay, 2020).



06

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The present study is not without limitations. Firstly, research investigating entrepreneurs' perception of their current situation and available the supportive role of mentorship for female entrepreneurs growth and development, is highly limited. Of the available research, there is a lack of a qualitative approach to gain an insight and understanding of how entrepreneurs perceive their infrastructure and how this affects them. Moreover, of those that do conduct qualitative analyses, the majority focus on entrepreneurs situated in developing regions. With the rapid and continuous advancement of technology, more opportunities arise for entrepreneurs to develop their skills, expand their business, and avail of support and guidance from others. For decision-makers to adequately support entrepreneurs it is vital that they have a detailed understanding of their needs and desires.

07

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research have a number of practical implications. Having a detailed understanding of the issues rural agri-food entrepreneurs face will enable policymakers and those at decision-making levels to develop adequate counteractive policies and practices. Resources can be directed where most needed and the entire profession of entrepreneurship as challenging may be addressed. Economically, such activity will positively effect the economy and allow for an increase in those pursuing entrepreneurship.

CONCLUSION

08

The aim was to qualitatively investigate female agri-food entrepreneurs perception of mentorship programmes to support their growth in a male dominated sector. This is with particular focus on their awareness, perception, openness, and acceptance to mentorship programs. Through analysing the resulting scripts from these focus groups, three key areas were discussed. These comprise of; (1) Business Initiation and Development, (2) Perceived Barriers, and (3) Mentorship Programmes. Participants described no real sense of direction regarding their market research in the earlier phases of their endeavour, often using word of mouth and speaking with those more experienced, but no definitive structured approach was followed. Many barriers were evident for rural agri-food entrepreneurs. Most often cited was that of lacking adequate financial support and experiencing frustration with the complexity of funding applications administrative processes. Socio-cultural support was oftentimes lacking, with participants noting they often felt more senior, experiences entrepreneurs gatekept information to avoid their development and expansion. Females in particular experienced gender discriminatory behaviour from peers and those more senior than themselves. Finally, the vast majority of participants were aware of the benefits of an online presence but completely lacked confidence in their digital abilities and were unsure where to source the relevant support.

CONCLUSION

08

Regarding mentorship, barely any entrepreneurs were aware of such a relationship, and most were unsure what this practice would entail. While some believed this would only be beneficial at earlier stages in business development, the majority spoke positively of the idea and expressed an openness to partaking regardless of whether as mentor or mentee. These findings highlight a range of issues in need of addressing to improve the infrastructure surrounding agri-food entrepreneurs throughout Europe. Additionally, mentoring plays an important role as it can contribute to overcoming these issues. This knowledge may be used to guide policymakers and those at decision-making levels to develop and distribute adequate counteractive practices in order to improve the overall working environment for entrepreneurs in the agri-food sector.



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09



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