

Article

Identities of Female Entrepreneurs from Different Periods

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Abstract

This article explores how female entrepreneurs construct and negotiate entrepreneurial identities across socialist, transition, and post-socialist periods in Slovenia. Drawing on feminist, post-structuralist, and identity-theory perspectives, we ask what determines women's entrepreneurial identities and how multiple roles and changing institutions shape them. Using a qualitative multiple-case design, we analyze 15 information-rich cases selected through purposive sampling and based on in-depth semi-structured interviews and supporting documents. Qualitative content analysis and cross-case comparison identified patterns within and across the three periods. Results show that women's motives combine economic, autonomy, and mission-driven goals; that entrepreneurial identity is closely intertwined with motherhood, partnership, and community roles; and that evolving ecosystems offer increasing but still fragmented support. Identity work intensifies at transitions between employment and entrepreneurship and when growth ambitions confront care responsibilities. We conclude that female entrepreneurial identities in Slovenia are historically and institutionally embedded and that gender-integrative, context-sensitive ecosystem measures are needed to support diverse entrepreneurial pathways and long-term, socially responsible growth.

Keywords: female entrepreneurs; entrepreneurial identity; Slovenia

1. Introduction

The current understanding of female entrepreneurs is limited by a lack of research, which is well known and well documented (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Henry et al., 2016). The first widely cited academic study on female entrepreneurship was published in 1976 (Schwartz, 1976). Prior literature reviews show that studies on female entrepreneurship represent only a minority of all entrepreneurship studies (Jennings & Brush, 2013). Yet female entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses are a rapidly growing entrepreneurial population worldwide and are essential for employment, wealth creation, and innovation across economies (Brush et al., 2006; Brush & Cooper, 2012).

Since the 1980s, researchers have been examining differences between female and male entrepreneurs. Jennings and Brush (2013) argue that research on female entrepreneurship combines two broader areas of scholarship: gender and occupations studies, and feminist theory and education. Current studies are often based on a traditional male-female dyad and tend to examine female entrepreneurship primarily through comparisons with men. These studies mostly focus on differences in motives for entrepreneurship, personality and leadership traits, business characteristics, and the factors that support or block entrepreneurship (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Rey-Martí et al., 2015; Yadav & Unni, 2016).



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Research on female entrepreneurship often mirrors mainstream entrepreneurship topics. However, Jennings and Brush (2013) emphasize that research on female entrepreneurship should differ in several ways: (1) by explicitly defining entrepreneurship as a gendered phenomenon; (2) by recognizing the co-existence of necessity and opportunity in entrepreneurship; and (3) by incorporating goals beyond economic gain, such as social impact or personal fulfillment.

The evolution of female entrepreneurship has attracted significant scholarly attention, yet much of the research still implicitly centered on masculine norms and frameworks (Galloway et al., 2015; Gherardi, 2015), so women entrepreneurs in many contexts continue to face structural barriers, restricted access to finance and networks, and persistent stereotypes about their capabilities. Post-socialist contexts such as Slovenia and other Central and Eastern European countries offer particularly insightful settings because of their relatively recent economic transformations and the ongoing changes in their social institutions (Smallbone & Welter, 2009; Fritsch et al., 2014; Radaković-Marković, 2015). Investigating female entrepreneurial experiences in these environments illuminates the shift from socialist to market-based economies and the interplay between individual agency and changing cultural norms. This study adopts a qualitative, feminist, and post-structuralist perspective to examine how women navigate and shape their entrepreneurial journeys in Slovenia. We focus on entrepreneurial identity, contextual embeddedness, and role negotiation (e.g., mother, partner, entrepreneur), exploring how women construct coherent selves across the socialist, transition, and post-socialist periods.

This study contributes by mapping how women's entrepreneurial identities evolve across socialist, transition, and post-socialist periods within one Central and Eastern European country. It further contributes by integrating feminist, gender-integrative theory with ecosystem analysis to explain how shifting institutions and gender-sensitive supports co-shape women's identity work, from persistent masculine norms to emerging relational archetypes.

2. Theory

Entrepreneurship has long been framed as a distinctly masculine construct, shaped by socio-cultural assumptions and the theoretical lenses used to study the field (Galloway et al., 2015). This framing often privileges an ideal-type entrepreneur aligned with hegemonic masculinity (assertive, competitive, and risk-taking), thereby narrowing what counts as legitimate entrepreneurship and marginalizing women's experiences in contexts marked by cultural and institutional constraints (Hamilton, 2014; Ozasir Kacar & Essers, 2019). As a result, women entrepreneurs frequently navigate mainstream discourses that place them at a disadvantage and respond by constructing identities that are negotiated alongside gendered expectations, sometimes aligning with male archetypes and sometimes resisting them (Bruni et al., 2004; Orser et al., 2011; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

Entrepreneurial identity has been defined as a set of meaningful, self-defining, role-based characteristics (Mathias & Williams, 2018) and as internalized meanings and expectations related to a role (Stryker & Burke, 2000), rooted in identity theory and role-identity perspectives (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Complementing these definitions, narrative approaches conceptualize entrepreneurial identity as a co-produced account of past, present, and anticipated future, developed in dialog with stakeholders and inseparable from interactions and context (Hytti, 2005; Essers & Benschop, 2007; Warren, 2004; Down & Warren, 2008; Watson, 2009; Q. Yin & Liu, 2023). Together, these views imply that entrepreneurial identity spans both self-referential meanings (being an entrepreneur) and practice-based enactments (carrying out entrepreneurship)

(Crosina, 2018; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021), making entrepreneurial identity a particularly promising research domain (Crosina, 2018; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018).

Empirical work in Slovenia documents gender differences among entrepreneurs, for example, in marital status and family background, even when other sociological characteristics are similar (Tominc & Rebernik, 2007; Auer Antončič et al., 2020). Across Central and Eastern Europe, Rugina and Ahl (2023) highlight the surprisingly limited attention to context-specific circumstances, despite evidence that entrepreneurial choices are jointly shaped by family business traditions and gendered expectations. In response, scholars (Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Henry et al., 2016) increasingly advocate gender-integrative conceptualizations that move beyond simple male-female comparisons and instead examine how gender is socially constructed and enacted in entrepreneurship, while treating entrepreneurship as a socially embedded process undertaken by diverse individuals in different contexts. This shift also calls for closer attention to institutional and historical conditions, which are particularly salient in Central and Eastern European transition economies (Leven, 2008; Osowska, 2019; Yordanova & Davidkov, 2009; Zidonis, 2014).

Contextual embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) is therefore central to our framework. Slovenia's trajectory from Yugoslav market socialism to European Union membership offers a compelling setting for examining how institutional change reshapes entrepreneurial opportunities and gendered norms (Szerb & Trumbull, 2016; Acs et al., 2008). Over time, entrepreneurial ecosystems have evolved, introducing new forms of support and policy instruments that increasingly target women (Stam & Spigel, 2016; Cavallo et al., 2019; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2003), which makes Slovenia especially suitable for studying female entrepreneurial identities across socialist, transition, and post-socialist periods. Anchored in a feminist and post-structuralist lens, we treat gender as a dynamic, relational, and power-laden process (Galloway et al., 2015; Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Willmott, 2008) and examine similarities and differences in women's entrepreneurial identities across three periods within a nationally bounded context.

The integration of a feminist approach with a post-structuralist perspective provides a direct rationale for framing the study around entrepreneurial identity, rather than solely focusing on outcomes, such as growth or performance. Feminist perspectives foreground how gendered socialization, unequal power relations, and structural constraints shape women's opportunities and role expectations, while post-structuralist feminism treats the entrepreneur as a discursively produced subject position (typically anchored in masculine norms) so identity is understood as relational, performative, and negotiated across contexts and time (Orser et al., 2011; Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Henry et al., 2016). In a post-socialist country, this integration is especially pertinent because institutional transition, reconfiguration of labor markets, and shifting family policies can intensify tensions between formal equality claims (a liberal feminist concern), persistent gendered socialization and role expectations (a social feminist concern), and the continuing dominance of masculinized entrepreneurship ideals (a post-structuralist concern) (Klanšek, 2020).

The main research question is: What are the determinants of the entrepreneurial identity of women in a post-socialist country? This question is an inquiry into structural and institutional determinants (laws, finance, labor markets, childcare infrastructure, discrimination), socialization and relational determinants (gender norms, family expectations, networks), and discursive determinants (how the entrepreneur is defined in policy, media, and local business culture, and how women adopt/resist these scripts). Liberal feminism justifies examining barriers and equality-of-access mechanisms, social feminism supports exploring gendered life-course experiences and competencies, and post-structuralist feminism motivates analyzing how these conditions are interpreted and performed as identity

through language and everyday practices (Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Henry et al., 2016; Klanšek, 2020).

Sub-questions are:

(a) What are the critical characteristics of female entrepreneurs in post-socialist settings? Rather than treating characteristics as fixed traits, the integrated lens treats them as contextual and produced: which capabilities, dispositions, and resources are valued locally, how women's socialization and biographies shape their entrepreneurial orientations, and how institutional transition privileges certain forms of entrepreneurship. This also opens space to identify characteristics that are rendered invisible when masculine benchmarks define entrepreneurship (Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Klanšek, 2020).

(b) What are the dominant roles of female entrepreneurs in different periods, and what are the dynamics between these roles (e.g., family member/partner, mother, entrepreneur)? A feminist frame legitimizes role dynamics as central (not peripheral) to entrepreneurship, including care work, household labor, and work-family constraints. A post-structuralist frame adds that roles are performed and re-authored over time: women may shift between, blend, or strategically foreground roles depending on institutional demands and cultural expectations, especially across distinct post-socialist periods (e.g., early transition vs. consolidation) (Orser et al., 2011; Henry et al., 2016; Klanšek, 2020).

(c) What identity-shaping processes do women go through, and how do they combine multiple roles to build a coherent sense of self? In this sub-question, post-structuralist feminism is most generative: identity is formed through ongoing identity work (narratives, boundary-setting, legitimizing talk, impression management) as women negotiate competing discourses (e.g., entrepreneur as independent risk-taker versus woman as primary caregiver). Social feminism helps explain how prior socialization and gendered competencies fit into these processes, while liberal feminism highlights how policy and organizational arrangements can enable or constrain role integration (Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Henry et al., 2016; Klanšek, 2020).

(d) What is the perception and self-perception of female entrepreneurs in a post-socialist setting? This sub-question aligns naturally with a post-structuralist feminist approach to discourse: perceptions are not merely attitudes but reflect normative cultural scripts about legitimacy, competence, and fit. The integrated lens encourages comparing external constructions (media, community, institutions, investor discourse) with women's self-definitions, including strategies of resistance, adaptation, or re-signification when the masculine entrepreneurial norm is taken as default (Orser et al., 2011; Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Klanšek, 2020).

3. Methods

Research methods are presented in terms of research design and context, sampling, data collection, and data analysis.

3.1. Research Design and Context

This research is based on a qualitative, multiple-case study design with elements of grounded theory and feminist standpoint approaches (Meyer, 2001; R. K. Yin, 2009; Stake, 2013; Mills et al., 2017; Singh & Dickson, 2002). The empirical setting is Slovenia, a country that experienced socialist market economy within former Yugoslavia (1970s–1990s), post-socialist transition during the 1990s, and post-socialist period after accession to the European Union. These three periods are analytically defined as: Period 1—Socialist entrepreneurship (1970s–1990s), Period 2—Transition entrepreneurship (1990s and early post-transition), and Period 3—Post-socialist entrepreneurship (after EU accession). We conducted 15 in-depth interviews with female entrepreneurs, five in each period (Cases 1–5,

6–10, and 11–15). The periods refer to when they started their core entrepreneurial activity (socialist, early transition, or later/post-socialist generation).

3.2. Sampling

Given the exploratory nature of the study, we could not pre-define an optimal theoretical base for sampling. Instead, we followed typical case sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) and maximum variation sampling principles (Meyer, 2001; Rowley, 2002). We aimed to select cases that represent female entrepreneurship in each period, vary on key dimensions (sector, firm size, generation of business, growth ambition, urban vs. non-urban location), and are recognized by experts as illustrative and information rich. The sampling frame was co-created with academic and practitioner experts familiar with entrepreneurship in Slovenia. We targeted at least two cases per period and ended with five cases per period (15 total). The final number of cases was constrained by time, financial resources, and access. Five cases per period were deemed sufficient because iterative within-period analysis indicated thematic saturation in identity determinants and role-negotiation processes, while still allowing comparisons across contrasting cases to test the stability of emerging patterns. Variation was ensured through purposive selection of cases. Transferability beyond the sample is supported through compact description and transparent case profiles that enable content generalization to comparable post-socialist contexts rather than statistical inference.

3.3. Data Collection

We combined several data sources: a questionnaire (interview guide) and semi-structured interviews with 15 female entrepreneurs (one interview per case, 60–120 min, mostly online), secondary data (where available): company websites, media reports, archives, business reports, and national statistics (R. K. Yin, 2009; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), and contextual knowledge drawn from prior studies of women's entrepreneurship in Slovenia and the former Yugoslav region (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2003; Tominc & Rebernik, 2007; Auer Antončič et al., 2020; Radaković-Marković, 2015). The semi-structured questionnaire (interview guide) was organized into thematic blocks that were used consistently across all three periods.

The semi-structured questionnaire covers core aspects of the entrepreneurs' lives and ventures: their educational and career background, motives for starting a business, and key characteristics of the firm. It asks about sources of support and resources (family, partner, institutions, financial and non-financial), experiences with public and ecosystem programs, and main challenges and opportunities. A central section of the questionnaire examines multiple roles and identity (how women combine entrepreneurship with motherhood, partnership, and other social roles, how their self-image has changed over time, and how they perceive gender differences in entrepreneurship). The final section invites participants to reflect on success factors, key turning points, lessons learned, and advice for younger women entrepreneurs, as well as their views on necessary changes in the national entrepreneurial ecosystem.

3.4. Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and then qualitative content analysis and cross-case comparison (Meyer, 2001; Rowley, 2002; Mills et al., 2017) was used in four steps. First, initial coding involved open coding of the transcripts, guided by the questionnaire topics but allowing new categories to emerge (Mills et al., 2017; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Second, within-case analysis entailed developing narrative summaries for each entrepreneur (Cases 1–15), focusing on motivations, role negotiations, identity work, and contextual constraints. Third, cross-case comparison identified recurring themes within each period

and across periods (Stake, 2013; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Finally, theoretical integration linked the emergent categories to concepts of entrepreneurial identity, feminist entrepreneurship, and contextual embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985; Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). We aimed to balance emic (participant-led) and etic (theory-led) perspectives, and to maintain reflexivity regarding our own positionality (Henry et al., 2016; Willmott, 2008). Coding was conducted using a shared codebook (iteratively refined from open codes to groupings), with two researchers independently coding an initial subset of transcripts and discussing discrepancies until acceptable intercoder agreement was reached before coding the remainder. Themes were validated through triangulation across within-case narratives and cross-case matrices, supplemented by targeted participant checks on interpretive summaries and negative-case analysis to test boundary conditions.

4. Findings

Findings are presented in terms of an overview of cases and cross-case themes from content analysis.

4.1. Overview of the Fifteen Cases

Period 1—Socialist entrepreneurship (Cases 1–5, Table 1). Women entrepreneurs who started under Yugoslav market socialism (or at the very onset of transition) developed ventures in sectors compatible with state priorities while carving out limited semi-autonomous space within a tightly constrained institutional environment. Their entrepreneurial practice was strongly embedded in family and local communities, with heavy reliance on extended-family childcare and informal networks, and was shaped by bureaucratic hurdles and the near absence of formal support. Identity work in this period clustered around professionalism, resilience, and responsibility, often expressed as “hard-working professionals” and “responsible mothers”, with entrepreneurship not yet articulated as a distinct identity category but enacted through long-term commitment and reputational capital.

Period 2—Transition entrepreneurship (Cases 6–10, Table 1). Women whose core entrepreneurial activity emerged during transition and early post-transition operated in a liberalizing economy with nascent support structures and greater formalization (training, programs, subsidies) than in Period 1. The dominant themes are autonomy-seeking exits from constraining organizations, redefinition of professional integrity through self-employment, and heightened visibility of gendered constraints, particularly fragmented measures, gender-blind policy design, and limited peer-based solidarity. Entrepreneurial identity is more explicitly claimed as an expert, value-driven role, yet remains negotiated against persistent masculine success norms and uneven ecosystem access.

Period 3—Post-socialist entrepreneurship (Cases 11–15, Table 1). The youngest cohort, starting after EU accession (often in the 2010s and early 2020s), operates in a more developed ecosystem with accessible national programs and increasing engagement with international accelerators, digital communities, and coaching/therapy resources. The thematic synthesis centers on reflexive, lifestyle-oriented identity narratives (purpose, self-development, and boundary-setting), alongside new forms of strain linked to scaling pressures, 24/7 connectivity, and affective/cognitive overload. Compared to earlier periods, entrepreneurial identity is articulated most explicitly as ongoing identity work shaped simultaneously by expanded opportunity structures and intensified demands, with mental health and role integration becoming central organizing themes.

Table 1. Cases.

Period 1	Period 2	Period 3
Case 1: public sector exit; accounting/tax consulting; autonomy vs. bureaucracy; small stable firm; family-limited growth; professional integrity; long-term clients.	Case 6: public/quasi-public exit (c.2009); SME advisory/consulting; values-driven; autonomy/integrity; partner support; solo vulnerability; masculine success norms.	Case 11: early-2020s product company; COVID hiring-freeze trigger; P2 grant & LUI incubator mentoring; scaling/hiring/distributors; founder peers; gendered barriers (fundraising/international deals).
Case 2: ex-SME development leader; consulting/training; values-driven programs; overload (leader–mother–domestic work); burnout; reprioritization.	Case 7: late-40s founder; insurance brokerage; long sales cycles/time-lag revenue; SPIRIT ABC training & ~€3k grant; covers contributions/confidence; need mentors; tailored support for older women.	Case 12: psychotherapist private practice (c.2023); training & gov entrepreneurship program; meaning/client impact; emotional labor; work-family-wellbeing coordination.
Case 3: solo holistic wellbeing; “calling”; spirituality & motherhood (4 children); small/flexible; weak self-employed social security; authenticity/creativity/service.	Case 8: serial entrepreneur (since early 2000s); knowledge-intensive services; sole proprietor; “calling”/mission; family-life alignment; holistic time management.	Case 13: solopreneur creator/consulting; online courses/workshops global; international ecosystems/accelerators/online communities; low reliance on national supports; mindset/self-care/peer women.
Case 4: ex-corporate top manager; leadership/innovation/sustainability consulting; intrapreneurship; autonomy/values alignment; older children & family support; culture/innovation/sustainable transformation.	Case 9: cosmetics manufacturing/brand; product innovation; international scaling; lack of scaling support (digitalization/global access); family backing; cohesive team; multiple roles.	Case 14: early-2020s product start-up co-founder; COVID job-search dissatisfaction; peer solidarity; mentor support; hiring/talent access; fast-growth navigation.
Case 5: socialist-era founder; beauty salon in cosmetics/wellness brand (spa town); herbs/natural remedies; local resources/jobs; adapted to transition/EU markets; product development/export; employee/community commitment.	Case 10: spouse co-founder (c.2014); symbolic “living tree” start; venture open/close experience; learning journey/shared growth; community support; mentoring; triangle balance (family-business-self).	Case 15: lifestyle brand & stable job/platform work; burnout history; “careerist & hedonist”; security & pleasure; mental load; gendered motherhood expectations; stability vs. freedom.

4.2. Cross-Case Themes from Content Analysis

Across the 15 cases, several themes emerge. Below we highlight patterns that are particularly salient in the more recent ten cases (6–15) and show how they interact with Period-1 patterns. Themes are:

1. **Motives and timing:** from survival and structural change to self-realization. Period 1: Motives were strongly shaped by structural constraints and opportunities within socialism—e.g., creating semi-private spaces for innovation, ensuring family income, or leveraging technical expertise in relatively rigid organizational forms. Period 2: Many entrepreneurs shifted from corporate or quasi-public roles into entrepreneurship when institutional or value conflicts emerged (“time to leave” moments). Autonomy, value congruence, and the desire to “practice what I preach” in supporting other entrepreneurs are prominent motives. Period 3: Motives often combine self-realization, lifestyle design, and global orientation. Entrepreneurs explicitly mention wanting to choose their projects, optimize for flexibility, and build something of their own at a time of high personal energy—often in their late twenties or thirties. They describe entrepreneurship as an avenue to integrate personal growth, meaning, and work–life balance, rather than only as income generation.

2. **Support structures and ecosystem evolution.** Family support remains crucial across all periods, but the availability and type of formal support change over time. Period 1:

Entrepreneurs had virtually no access to dedicated entrepreneurship programs or gender-specific policies. Family and informal networks were often the only safety net. Period 2: Entrepreneurs begin to access targeted programs (e.g., early grant schemes, local development initiatives), but these are fragmented and not always tailored to women. Several emphasize the importance of small grants (e.g., EUR 3000) to cover contributions and create breathing space at start-up. Period 3: Entrepreneurs more systematically use national and EU-funded programs (P2, PONI, EWA), incubators, and accelerators, as well as global online communities. They still perceive gaps—e.g., insufficient support for scale-ups, limited recognition of non-growth-oriented or solo “creator” business models, and a lack of systemic support for combining entrepreneurship with family life. Across all periods, informal mentoring and peer support emerge as vital, and many entrepreneurs call for stronger, more authentic “sisterhood” and cross-generational networks among women.

3. Role negotiation and entrepreneurial identity work. The interviews show complex identity work around multiple roles—entrepreneur, mother, partner, daughter, community member. Identity work intensifies when institutional support is weak or when social expectations are misaligned with women’s aspirations. Many participants describe juggling domestic responsibilities and business demands, particularly when children are young. Period-1 and early Period-2 cases highlight the absence of adequate childcare and the lack of social security for sole proprietors (no sick leave or paid holidays unless absences are long). Several entrepreneurs in Periods 2 and 3 view entrepreneurship as a means to design a holistic life where roles are more integrated and aligned with personal mission, but they also report high mental load and risk of burnout. Identity narratives evolve from “good worker and good mother” (Period 1) to “free professional and mission-driven entrepreneur” (Period 2) and further to “self-aware, reflexive entrepreneur designing a sustainable life and identity” (Period 3). Yet, normative expectations around being a “perfect mother and partner” remain strong and can fuel guilt and self-doubt.

4. Perceived gender differences and entrepreneurial norms. Across all periods, women perceive the entrepreneurial field as still structured around masculine norms: Many describe men as more “driven, direct and risk-taking”, with greater access to informal networks, lobbying arenas, and “off-record” deals. Some argue that to grow, women must adopt a “male” principle of action—instrumental focus, aggressive networking, long working hours—which may conflict with their preferred values and with family obligations. Other female entrepreneurs explicitly challenge this view, instead highlighting “feminine” success factors such as relational skills, inclusive leadership, social sensitivity, and long-term vision. They argue that these qualities can constitute competitive advantages and fit more closely with their sense of purpose. Overall, the participants call for broader definitions of entrepreneurial success that acknowledge both financial and non-financial goals and for ecosystems that value diversity in entrepreneurial styles.

5. Self-perception, stigma, and changing social attitudes. With regard to how society perceives female entrepreneurs, Period-1 participants recall elements of stigma or suspicion surrounding private initiative and limited recognition of entrepreneurship as a legitimate career path for women. Period-2 and Period-3 entrepreneurs observe growing acceptance of women entrepreneurs in Slovenia, yet still point to persistent stereotypes (e.g., women being seen as “less serious” or expected to prioritize family at key career moments). Over time, self-perception tends to shift from “proving oneself” to “owning one’s identity,” carried by accumulated experience and deliberate work on self-awareness and boundaries.

5. Discussion

This study explored the entrepreneurial identities of 15 women entrepreneurs in Slovenia across three historical periods: socialist, transition, and post-socialist. By combining

feminist and post-structuralist perspectives with case-based analysis, we highlight how women's entrepreneurial identities are shaped by evolving institutional contexts, gender norms, and personal role negotiations.

5.1. Entrepreneurial Identity as Contextually Embedded

Our findings support the notion that entrepreneurial identity is not a static trait, but a process of identity work shaped by context (Hytti, 2005; Essers & Benschop, 2007; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). In Period 1, identities are grounded in professionalism, responsibility, and survival within a socialist system. In Period 2, women increasingly position themselves as autonomous experts, leaving constraining organizations. In Period 3, entrepreneurs narrate explicitly reflexive, lifestyle-oriented identities, influenced by global discourses of self-development and “doing what you love.”

Across all periods, women negotiate the tension between hegemonic entrepreneurial archetypes (growth-oriented, individualistic, masculine) and their own values and constraints (Bruni et al., 2004; Orser et al., 2011; Galloway et al., 2015). Some partially adopt masculine norms to gain legitimacy; others consciously resist and articulate alternative archetypes that integrate care, sustainability, and social impact.

This periodized pattern aligns with our contextual embeddedness perspective (Granovetter, 1985), showing how institutional and ecosystem shifts reconfigure the available identity scripts and legitimacy criteria that women can draw on in different historical epochs. It also operationalizes our integrated feminist and post-structuralist lens by demonstrating how gendered power relations and masculinized entrepreneurial discourses structure identity work, while women actively re-signify the entrepreneur through relational and values-based enactments (Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Henry et al., 2016; Willmott, 2008).

5.2. Evolution of Ecosystems and Gendered Access

The results also illustrate how evolving entrepreneurial ecosystems shape women's opportunities and identities (Stam & Spigel, 2016; Cavallo et al., 2019). Period-1 pioneers operated with minimal institutional support and relied on family and informal networks; Period-2 entrepreneurs were “early adopters” of emerging programs and policy instruments; Period-3 entrepreneurs engage with a more complex mix of national and international support (PONI, EWA, P2 grants, incubators, accelerators, global online communities).

Across all periods, women report gaps in ecosystem design: limited consideration of caregiving responsibilities and life-course dynamics (e.g., pregnancy, childcare); insufficient attention to non-growth business models (e.g., solo or lifestyle entrepreneurship); and persistent male dominance in high-level networks, finance, and policy decision-making. These findings point to the need for entrepreneurial ecosystem design that explicitly acknowledges gender needs, structural barriers, and supports multiple forms of entrepreneurship (Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Henry et al., 2016).

Consistent with contextual embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985), the ecosystem is not a neutral resource pool but a historically situated institutional arrangement that distributes legitimacy, access, and constraints differently across periods, thereby shaping the identity scripts available to women. From a feminist and post-structuralist perspective, the reported gaps (care invisibility, growth bias, male-dominated networks) can be read as gendered power effects that reproduce masculinized norms of successful entrepreneurship, which women must navigate, contest, or rework through identity work (Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Henry et al., 2016; Willmott, 2008).

5.3. Role Multiplicity and Resilience

The cases show that combining entrepreneurial and family roles can be both a constraint and a source of meaning and resilience (Peris-Delcampo et al., 2023; Auer Antončič et al., 2020; Antončič & Auer Antončič, 2023). Women frequently describe heavy domestic responsibilities (especially in earlier periods); invisible emotional and cognitive labor; and a strong desire to align business activities with personal mission and relational values. At the same time, motherhood and caregiving roles often motivate them to build stable, ethical businesses and to pursue long-term strategies. Identity work involves integrating these roles into a coherent narrative rather than choosing between “being a good mother” and “being a serious entrepreneur.”

Family duties and childcare obligations are frequently identified as key constraints on women’s entrepreneurial development in countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Rugina & Ahl, 2023). Evidence from Romania shows that family responsibilities are closely intertwined with the challenge of achieving work-family balance (Herman & Szabo, 2015), while the scheduling flexibility associated with entrepreneurship can also serve as a motivator for women’s entry into business ownership in Romania (Herman & Szabo, 2015) and Serbia (Ivanović-Đukić & Petković, 2020). Similarly, prior studies suggest that business start-up is often used as a strategy to reconcile paid work with family commitments in Kosovo (Sadiku-Dushi et al., 2020) and Poland (Zapalska, 1997).

Linking to the study’s theoretical framework, these patterns illustrate how gendered socialization and unequal power relations render care work structurally backgrounded yet simultaneously position it as a central site of entrepreneurial identity construction (Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Henry et al., 2016). From a post-structuralist perspective, women’s role-integration narratives can be read as performative identity work that re-signifies the masculinized entrepreneur ideal by legitimizing relational, stability-oriented, and ethically grounded enactments of entrepreneurship across historically shifting contexts (Willmott, 2008; Hytti, 2005; Essers & Benschop, 2007).

5.4. Contribution to Theory

This study contributes to the literature on entrepreneurial identity and women’s entrepreneurship by the following: (1) Highlighting historical periodization: We show how female entrepreneurial identities evolve across socialist, transition, and post-socialist epochs in one Central and Eastern European country, thus enriching context-sensitive theories of entrepreneurship and institutional change (Acs et al., 2008; Szerb & Trumbull, 2016; Smallbone & Welter, 2009). (2) Extending feminist and gender-integrative perspectives: Our findings illustrate both the persistence of masculine norms and the emergence of alternative, more relational archetypes of female entrepreneurship (Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Gherardi, 2015; Hamilton, 2014). (3) Linking identity work to ecosystem design: Women’s identity work is deeply influenced by the availability, framing, and gender sensitivity of ecosystem supports. This suggests that identity and ecosystem research should be more tightly integrated (Stam & Spigel, 2016; Cavallo et al., 2019).

5.5. Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

To strengthen the analytical distinction, this study theorizes women’s entrepreneurial identity work as shaped by the intersection of historical and institutional logics (socialist professionalism and survival, transition-era autonomy through organizational exit, post-socialist reflexive and lifestyle discourses) and life-course triggers (motherhood, caregiving intensity, burnout, and career stage), rather than attributing observed shifts to either mechanism alone. Across cases and periods, institutional change sets the available and legitimate entrepreneurial scripts and ecosystem resources, while life-course events determine when

and how women adopt, resist, or reconfigure these scripts (e.g., constraining growth during intensive caregiving, redefining success after burnout, or leveraging new programs and global communities when family responsibilities and career timing permit).

Theoretical implications are: (1) Entrepreneurship research should treat gender as an analytic lens, not only a control variable (Clark Muntean & Özkazanç-Pan, 2015; Klanšek, 2020; Henry et al., 2016). (2) Future identity research should consider historical time and institutional transformation, exploring how entrepreneurial identities are co-constructed with changing policy regimes, labour markets, and cultural scripts (Acs et al., 2008; Fritsch et al., 2014). (3) Our findings support a multi-archetype view of female entrepreneurship (Owalla, 2017), where growth-oriented, lifestyle, social, and creative entrepreneurship coexist.

Practical implications for practitioners (coaches, educators, mentors) are: (1) Training and mentoring programs should explicitly address identity work, role negotiation, and mental health, not only business skills. (2) Peer-to-peer learning and inter-generational mentoring between Period-1, Period-2, and Period-3 entrepreneurs can help transfer both resilience strategies and critical perspectives on gender norms.

Policy implications for policymakers and ecosystem designers are: (1) Design gender-sensitive support instruments that recognize caregiving responsibilities, non-linear careers, and diverse business models (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2003; Yadav & Unni, 2016). (2) Move beyond one-off start-up grants to support scale-up, internationalization, and digitalization of women-led firms (GEM—Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2019; Cavallo et al., 2019). (3) Encourage inclusive networks and “sisterhood” initiatives, where women can share resources, contacts, and experiences without being pressured to conform to masculine norms.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has some limitations. First, sample size and non-probability sampling: We analyzed 15 cases, purposefully selected, and not statistically representative. While typical for qualitative case study research (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), this limits generalizability with the risk of overgeneralizing from a small, qualitative sample by implying period-wide conclusions about Slovenian female entrepreneurs, so findings should be viewed as exploratory and illustrative rather than definitive. Second, a single-country focus: The Slovenian context has specific institutional and historical features; patterns may differ in other Central and Eastern European or post-socialist countries (Leven, 2008; Radaković-Marković, 2015; Osowska, 2019). Third, self-report and retrospective bias: Interviews rely on entrepreneurs’ recollections, which may be selective, especially for older cases in Period 1. This introduces potential recall bias, as interviewees may unintentionally reconstruct timelines, motivations, and constraints through present-day interpretations, particularly when reflecting on experiences from the distant socialist era. In addition, self-report data are vulnerable to social desirability and impression management effects, meaning that narratives may understate conflict, failure, or informal practices and overemphasize coherence, agency, or success. Fourth, a lack of direct comparison with men: We focused on women only. While this avoids reducing gender to a binary comparison, it limits our ability to empirically document gender differences in identical sectors or ecosystems. Finally, the study is not longitudinal: although we compared cases across historical periods, we did not follow the same individuals over time, which limits our ability to infer changes in the person’s identity, causal sequencing, and the dynamic interaction between life-course events and institutional shifts.

These limitations point to several future research avenues. Entrepreneurial resilience of female entrepreneurs, particularly in crisis contexts (e.g., COVID-19, economic downturns), and how resilience interacts with competitive strategies (Grčić Fabić et al.,

2025). Quality management systems and competitiveness in women-led SMEs, exploring whether formalized quality practices help convert exploration into competitive advantage (Kutnjak et al., 2019). Use of sustainable value added as an integrative performance metric that incorporates sustainability implications in female-managed firms (Miljenović, 2018). Psychosocial characteristics and personality traits (e.g., Big Five, locus of control, need for achievement) of female entrepreneurs, expanding recent research on entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors (Antončič & Auer Antončič, 2023; Peris-Delcampo et al., 2023). Comparative studies across post-transition countries that examine ecosystem elements and entrepreneurial archetypes in different institutional configurations (Acs et al., 2008; Smallbone & Welter, 2009; Cavallo et al., 2019).

7. Conclusions

This article explored the identities of 15 female entrepreneurs across three periods in Slovenia: socialist, transition, and post-socialist. By combining feminist, post-structuralist, and identity-theory perspectives with multiple case studies, we showed how women's entrepreneurial identities are shaped by historical context, institutional arrangements, and gendered expectations.

Across all periods, women display high levels of resilience, creativity, and commitment to their ventures and families. However, they navigate persistent structural barriers, including masculine norms of success, uneven access to finance and networks, and insufficient policy recognition of care responsibilities and diverse business models. Over time, there was a shift from identities focused on survival and professionalism toward more reflexive, self-authored entrepreneurial identities that integrate lifestyle, meaning, and a global orientation.

The study contributes to theory by linking entrepreneurial identity work with institutional transformation and ecosystem design; it contributes to practice and policy by highlighting the need for gender-integrative, context-sensitive support that values multiple entrepreneurial archetypes. By situating lived experiences of women within broader socio-historical processes, this research underscores that understanding female entrepreneurship in Central and Eastern European countries requires careful attention to both time and context, and to the many ways women re-write entrepreneurial archetypes in their own image.

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