

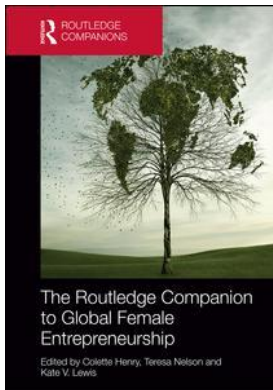
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The Routledge Companion to Global Female Entrepreneurship

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WOMEN, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY

Kate Kearins and Katrin Schaefer

Introduction

In presenting this chapter, we should have liked to be able to say definitively that women are out there contributing to social and environmental sustainability through entrepreneurial businesses and that researchers have captured this as fact. The nexus of women, entrepreneurship and sustainability is, however, relatively rare in research to date (for an exception see Gray, Duncan, Kirkwood, & Walton, 2014), as it is also specifically for men, entrepreneurship, and sustainability.¹

It is often more gender-neutral studies that begin to explore entrepreneurship and sustainability (e.g. Cohen & Winn, 2007; Kearins & Collins, 2012; Parrish & Foxon, 2009). This nascent field of women, entrepreneurship, and sustainability is ripe for attention. The question is what sort of attention should we rightfully give it as we attempt to move the agenda forward?

Entrepreneurship research in general focuses on the actors themselves (Walter & Heinrichs, 2015), the entrepreneurial context (Zahra, Wright, & Abdelgawad, 2014), and the ways they work to create value (Leyden & Link, 2015; Shane, 2012; Steyaert, 2007). Over time, there has been particular emphasis on outcomes. Outcomes, as in much business research, have often focused on performance. In the case of entrepreneurship, economic (e.g. Carton & Hofer, 2006; Luke, Verreynne, & Kearins, 2007; Zahra, 1991) and social outcomes have both been of interest, whether at individual business, community, or broader economy level (Ward & Aronoff, 1993). A more explicit focus on social and environmental outcomes, as well as economic ones, is hinted at in the fields of social, environmental, and sustainability entrepreneurship. But even there, we are missing an explicit analysis of whether the achievements of these forms of entrepreneurship are consistent with what is required for sustainability broadly writ – that is, beyond just sustainability of the enterprise and the direct and obvious effects of its activities.

Admitting complexity while offering what we see as a worthy ideal, we take the view that sustainability is a construct based on biophysically and socially interconnected systems (Bradbury, 2003; Stead & Stead, 1994). We suggest that sustainability may be contributed to by entrepreneurial businesses. We premise the chapter on the view that we should question the existence – and our support of – dirty, damaging, and dangerous businesses that

put people and other life forms, including nature, at risk. We are thus far less interested in entrepreneurial businesses sustaining themselves – *unless* they are contributing to the possibility of all life on Earth flourishing. We advocate the ideal of sustainability-as-flourishing put forward by John Ehrenfeld (2008) as a positive aspirational goal for entrepreneurial and other business activity. We acknowledge that business and entrepreneurial activity are part of the current problems of unsustainability, which we document below, and that they are commonly also seen as part of the solution (Gibbs, 2009; Mackey & Sisodia, 2013; Tilley & Young, 2009). Other arenas of human endeavour beyond business and entrepreneurship as it is traditionally conceived – such as education, regulation, ethical consumerism, community engagement, and lifestyle adjustments – are also essential to achieve sustainability-as-flourishing. These arenas may also be seen as places where entrepreneurial activity can take place, or from which to derive new opportunities and innovations.

We conceive of ‘business’ as an overarching umbrella term, and the term ‘entrepreneurship’ as a subset of what can occur when those in business act in particular ways. Established ‘incumbent’ organisations in a managerial phase are often distinguished from where entrepreneurship more typically occurs. Entrepreneurship is referred to as the process of establishing a new organisation or continuing to change an existing one, with the potential to evoke disruptive sustainability innovation (Hockerts & Wüstenhagen, 2010). Current businesses are criticised for adopting environmental and social sustainability strategies that at best lead to business-almost-as-usual and incremental change towards less unsustainability (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Welford, 1998). They often neglect sustainability strategies that integrate social and environmental goals at the core of the business and would likely lead to a fundamental organisational change towards sustainability. This being said, we acknowledge the fact that entrepreneurship has also been rebuked for being unequal and exploitative in line with market economics (Tedmanson et al., 2012). In that way, commercial entrepreneurship, in particular, may be seen to contribute to current levels of unsustainability. But equally it has the potential to provoke radical changes in behaviour towards sustainability.

Our intention in this chapter is to lay some groundwork for future research on women, entrepreneurship, and sustainability by summarising extant research, identifying gaps and possible research questions. We do so as sustainability scholars with an interest in the potential of entrepreneurship and faith in humanity if working concertedly – women and men, older and younger, and through them their children – to contribute to a better future. First, however, and somewhat counter-intuitively, we provide a rationale for our focus on sustainability by sounding some alarm bells before elaborating on the ideal of sustainability-as-flourishing.

Social inequalities, environmental degradation and economic instability

In describing the current state of unsustainability, we admit a certain reluctance. It is depressing – and focusing on it is generally not empowering for people. The problems we describe seem bigger than any individual working alone can solve. Yet we, and others, see hope for entrepreneurs in this space (Tilley & Young, 2009; Zahra et al., 2009).

Currently, humanity is facing severe and unprecedented levels of unsustainability, across at least three domains – social, environmental, and economic. These three domains are those most commonly recognised in the business and sustainability literature and in business discourse inspired by Elkington’s (1997) triple bottom line heuristic (sometimes also referred to as people, planet, and profit²). They are used in an inclusive and not exclusive sense.

In the social domain, there are increasing levels of social disintegration and social inequalities, with the latter even in high-income nations (OECD, 2011). Extreme human deprivation, social exclusion, and vulnerability remain acute for one-third of the population worldwide (The Worldbank, 2013). Across various dimensions, humanity does not achieve the social foundations required for a socially just space, including undernourishment, lack of access to drinking water, and extreme income poverty (Raworth, 2013). Also, social and gender inequality are still significant (Raworth, 2013, p. 32). In addition to material deprivations mostly in the developing world, an “impoverishment of human life” (Balakrishnan, Duvall, & Primeaux, 2003, p. 299), pathological and psychological distress is witnessed, despite rapidly rising material standards (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013).

In the environmental domain, there is increasing consensus among scientists that environmental degradation has reached an unsustainable level. Climate change, rate of biodiversity loss, and human interference with the nitrogen cycle (Folke, 2013; Rockström et al., 2009) are at unprecedented levels. Forecasts predict no reversal of these trends, but rather further environmental degradation (Engelman, 2013; IPCC, 2013).

The economic domain is the scene of global economic instability, as the financial system, seemingly stable two decades ago, has not recovered from a crisis that almost created financial collapse (Jackson, 2011; Morgan, 2013). The sovereign-debt crisis at record level, in particular in Europe and the United States, is not only regarded as a sign of instability, but as a sign of failure of our economic model (Lietaer et al., 2012; Morgan, 2013). Moreover, “the prevailing financial system”—which is at the core of our economic system—“is incompatible with sustainability”, among other reasons due to its short-term orientation, assumption of unlimited growth, and destruction of social capital (Lietaer et al., 2012, p. 14).

These examples that span the social, environmental, and economic domains highlight the considerable extent of our current level of unsustainability, if not yet – according to Hoffman – amounting to “systemic breakdowns in mainstream institutions of society” (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013, p. 4). Korten (2006) refers to this unravelling requiring a ‘Great Turning’ on the part of humanity towards a much more nurturing, life-centred, sustainable, and democratic ‘Earth Community’. Fundamental changes in our economic, social, and political systems are advocated to address unsustainability (Alvord, Brown, & Letts, 2004; Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Hall, Daneke, & Lenox, 2010; Jackson, 2011). Arguably these problems and the changes they inspire provide opportunities for entrepreneurs – and a worthy focus for entrepreneurship scholars.

Sustainability-as-flourishing

On a more positive note – and in response to the seemingly intractable problems we have described, Ehrenfeld (2008) offers sustainability-as-flourishing as an ideal that is attracting growing interest (Cooperrider & Fry, 2012; Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Laszlo et al., 2014). Sustainability-as-flourishing is defined as “the possibility that humans and other life will flourish on the Earth forever” (Ehrenfeld, 2008, p. 6). It encompasses a meaningful vision, a “nurturing possibility” of a positive thriving future for all (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013, p. 16).

Moving towards such a positive possibility as a society requires a change in cultural beliefs (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Kurucz, Colbert, & Wheeler, 2013). According to Ehrenfeld (2012, p. 615), we need to embrace two basic beliefs underlying sustainability. First, he sees the true nature of human beings as “based on care, not need”. He advocates our changing

the focus from our insatiable needs to caring. Caring involves the authentic expression of wider compassion for our fellow human beings. Second, Ehrenfeld (2012) advocates acknowledging that large living systems like the Earth are extremely complex and can only be understood via holistic and organic approaches. Taking atomistic and individualistic approaches, such as efforts to develop a single ‘good’ business, are worthless if the planetary ecosystems on which it relies are rendered defunct. Equally, if problems incurred by the business’ activities are merely passed along the supply chain, or onto consumers, we are failing to take the holistic approach required for sustainability-as-flourishing. Organic approaches, such as Ehrenfeld (2012) suggests, see us tune into the environment, feel what the impacts of our activities are, and make adjustments. These beliefs, though fundamental to a better world, are pretty much against the grain of much of what we have traditionally focused on in business and business education – and in the domain of entrepreneurship.

Sustainability-as-flourishing is opposed to a more enterprise-centric view of sustaining firm performance and profit as the overarching priority. It goes well beyond the contested concept of sustainable development – popularised by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in the ‘Our Common Future (or Brundtland) Report’ (1987). The report offers the most widely cited definition characterising sustainable development as a “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43).³ Although the Brundtland conception of sustainable development has people’s well-being at heart and holds potential to reduce unsustainability, it is substantially flawed. The conception is deeply in dispute with sustainability since it retains economic growth “as the operative concept” (Ehrenfeld, 2005, p. 23) and, thus, ignores bio-physical boundaries including resource limits. Current practices following this definition are not actually helping us to achieve sustainability (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013). They invoke trade-offs, often in favour of economic performance at individual firm level (Hahn et al., 2010) and invariably result in what has been termed ‘weak’ sustainability.

A partial view is inadequate to the challenges we face. What is required is a more systemic view, one that is a challenge for all sectors, not least for the business sector, which is often predicated on: competition rather than co-operation, privatised profits, and potentially socialised losses and growth often of a kind that is depleting non-renewable resources, degrading the environment, and heightening social inequality. Some hope does lie in new forms of entrepreneurship – social, environmental and sustainable, which we discuss next.

Social, environmental and sustainable entrepreneurship

There has been recent interest in various forms of entrepreneurship – social, environmental and sustainable – in the spirit of new or substantially altered organisational forms and behaviours being needed to address the pressing sustainability challenges (Gibbs, 2009; Hall et al., 2010; Tilley & Young, 2009). With slightly different but overlapping foci, these forms of entrepreneurship privilege the generation of social and/or environmental value alongside, or ahead of, economic value (Dacin, Dacin, & Matear, 2010; Short, Moss, & Lumpkin, 2009; Zahra et al., 2009). In this sense, these new forms are redolent of the optimism inherent in the win-win hypothesis (achieving a win for the environment/society at the same time as a financial win for business). They do so, however, less in the sense of these new opportunities providing for secondary or added value, but generally with environmental or social value creation as their primary purpose. We see all three types as potentially contributing to sustainability-as-flourishing and the distinctions between them as more of an

academic than practical interest, as the social, environmental, and economic dimensions are inextricably linked.

Within social entrepreneurship there is often a focus on empowering and uplifting marginalised and poor people (Alvord et al., 2004; Mair & Martí, 2006; Martin & Osberg, 2007), with profit being considered as a means of addressing social outcomes (Thompson, Kiefer, & York, 2011). Social enterprises are on a continuum of for-profit and non-profit organisations, including newly emerging forms like community-based enterprises and intrapreneurial efforts (those of individual social entrepreneurs in existing corporations) (Thompson et al., 2011).

Environmental entrepreneurship looks to simultaneously create environmental and economic value “by addressing environmentally relevant market failures” (Lenox & York, 2012; Thompson et al., 2011, p. 218). As well as seeking to solve environmental problems, this form of entrepreneurship tends to ascribe equal importance to the creation of economic growth (Thompson et al., 2011). Another, similar variant sometimes mentioned is ecopreneurship (Isaak, 2002; Schaper, 2002). Again the focus is on environmental and economic value creation but with greater primacy given to environmental outcomes.

Sustainable entrepreneurship centres on “a ‘triple-bottom-line’ of *people, planet, profit*” (Thompson et al., 2011, p. 204). In other words, the focus is on simultaneous creation of social, environmental, and economic value (Hall et al., 2010; Parrish, 2010). These enterprises seek to create products and services that help shift towards a socially and environmentally more sustainable society (Parrish & Foxon, 2009; Thompson et al., 2011).

Notably much of this literature is gender-neutral in its approach. We turn now to the wider field of entrepreneurship research and what we know specifically about women and entrepreneurship.

Women and entrepreneurship – relevant research contributions to date

The rate of female participation in entrepreneurship varies across countries and over time. Generally, however, it is clear that women play a less than proportionate role in entrepreneurship (Acs et al., 2011), in both developed and less developed countries (Bönte & Piegeler, 2013). Various factors have been identified as contributing to the lower rate of female participation. DeBruin, Brush, and Welter (2007) see financing, networking and social capital, and growth and performances as recurrent topics and possible areas of growth potential in research on women and entrepreneurship. Griffiths, Gundry, and Kickul (2013) also point to the importance of training programmes and local networks. Bönte and Piegeler (2013) found women were less competitively inclined than men in almost all countries they sampled – and less willing to take risks than their male counterparts. Acs et al. (2011) suggest that some of the roles women tend to play such as taking primary responsibility for childrearing and care giving might dissuade them from becoming entrepreneurs. Al Kaylani (2013) points to Arab women in Middle Eastern and North African countries struggling to access capital and technology, as well as needing networking and other skills to be able to identify and exploit opportunities. “Cultural attitudes about the value of women’s work and gender equality affect women’s participation in every part of the world” but in the Arab region arguably more so (p. 7).

Female entrepreneurship has been seen to be traditionally concentrated on personal service and small-scale retailing, often serving a household clientele (Bates, 2002). Brush (1992) saw women’s businesses as smaller, service-oriented, and generating less revenue than those of men. More recently, DeTienne and Chandler (2007, p. 365) claim, “women and men

utilise their unique stocks of human capital to identify [entrepreneurial] opportunities and that they use fundamentally different processes of identifying opportunities". In their sample, they encountered different experiential backgrounds and different ways of thinking between women and men. Other studies point to women entrepreneurs having less years of industry experience than men entrepreneurs at the time of start-up (see DeTienne & Chandler, 2007). The work of these authors also points to the women reporting lower levels of technical expertise than the men they surveyed and drawing from different stores of knowledge. They allude less to a deficit perspective in respect of gender difference than to uniqueness and potential complementarity. DeTienne and Chandler (2007) find women were more likely to be involved in a learn/innovate approach than men, who were more likely to use a learn/acquire or learn/replicate sequence, possibly explained by the latter having a stronger motivation towards financial success and faster growth of their enterprises.

Griffiths et al. (2013) quote Wilson and Kickul's (2006) finding that women who are interested in entrepreneurial careers appear "more likely than males to be motivated by social aspects than by economic motives" (p. 346), whereas males are reportedly more motivated by the prospect of financial success than they are by social aspects. However, the different social and economic motives are not mutually exclusive. These authors see younger women wanting to succeed financially but unwilling to compromise on "also making a positive difference, making them a powerful source of future entrepreneurship that will have both social and economic value at its core" (Wilson & Kickul, 2006 in Griffiths et al., 2013, p. 346). We see here a familiar theme about the *potential* for women entrepreneurs to contribute.

There has been a strong historical focus on performance in research on entrepreneurship, which has carried on into research on women and entrepreneurship (Hughes et al., 2012). The story here is no less rosy. Bates (2002) pointed to abundant research done on opportunities and constraints faced by women entrepreneurs but a gap existing in terms of the performance of women-owned businesses.⁴ Where the performance of women's businesses has been measured, it has tended to be less in financial terms when compared to those of men across several studies (Robb, 2002; Coleman, 2007). Ownership gender, of course, is not necessarily the only relevant variable.

In much of this discussion, there is a rather unfortunate sense of the 'female resource base' being underutilised, where it appears eminently possible that it is undervalued (see Waring, 1988). Datta and Gailey (2012, p. 569) claim, "too often entrepreneurial efforts by women have gone unnoticed, and their contributions have been underappreciated". This leads us to consider what women entrepreneurs are seen to be able to contribute towards sustainability.

Conundrums as to what women entrepreneurs can contribute towards sustainability

The potential for women to contribute to sustainability is a frequent topic – both in a direct and in a more nuanced sense. The combination of productive and reproductive roles (Acs et al., 2011), while advocated in research on women and entrepreneurship, is not unproblematic. Ang (2004) and many other commentators see women as agents of change within their households, instilling values conducive to long-term growth and development of community. Levie and Hart (2011, p. 214) find evidence that "women are more likely than men to make deep commitments to address local needs by engaging in social entrepreneurial activities".

Psychological research suggests women's 'reality' is more typically characterised by connectedness and relationships as opposed to autonomy and logic as for men (Brush, 1992).

Interpersonal relationships are seen as important with women tending to “view their businesses as a cooperative network of relationships rather than a separate economic entity” (p. 24). Ang (2004) points to the importance of trust and social capital for women’s success in creating and growing sustainable micro-enterprises.

Surveys demonstrate fairly consistent differences between men and women in relation to environmental concern, with no real consensus on reasons (Bord & O’Connor, 1997). Women appear more environmentally concerned than men (Hunter, Hatch, & Johnson, 2004). One possibility Bord and O’Connor allude to is that women may perceive themselves to be more vulnerable rather than necessarily having higher ecological sensibilities. Women are shown to value altruism, which is also associated with environmental behaviours (Hunter et al., 2004). Gender socialisation theory asserts that women have a stronger ethic of care but that it is seen to be slower to manifest in environmentalism (and even slower in environmental activism) (Braun, 2010). Somewhat counter to the previous assertion, this author also suggests female entrepreneurs may be more engaged in ‘green issues’ than male entrepreneurs. However, little systematic or wide-scale research has been done on these topics. One of the confounding issues for women and men is whether attitudes actually translate into behaviour.

Much of the research on women and entrepreneurship that tilts at sustainability is situated in developing country contexts where more entrepreneurial engagement in the community is commonly seen as an avenue for poverty alleviation. Micro-finance strategies are one purported solution (Ang, 2004; Halkias et al., 2011). Sigalla and Carney (2012) caution against seeing microcredit as a panacea and are more ambivalent about women’s lived experience. Such schemes, they say, “can have widely heterogeneous impacts that can affect women in very different ways”, with changes in social dynamics and potentially an individualistic approach to poverty reduction being taken. We earlier mentioned the importance of a more systemic view in the understanding and achievement of sustainability.

Taking a positive view on adversity, Gray et al. (2014) draw on the case of a non-governmental organisation that supports women and their families in setting up sustainable enterprises. The authors claim extreme situations (such as severe environmental events) “may spark the emergence of institutional entrepreneurs who acquire, develop and leverage resources to create new organisational forms and processes” (p. 401). They see such prompting moving potential entrepreneurs from an internal, organisational focus to an external orientation towards empowering others. Here the focus can be on addressing wider systems’ problems, with these becoming more evident in extreme situations. These authors are not alone in seeing social or environmental catastrophe as prompting necessary changes.

Less concerning, perhaps, are some interesting findings from a study of women entrepreneurs participating alongside men entrepreneurs in a green entrepreneurship programme in Victoria, Australia. This research conducted by Braun (2010) found six men dropping out of the programme because they were reportedly too busy or purportedly already doing much of what the programme covered and all the women in the programme completing. The women were found to be more eager participants and keener to gather and contribute information, as well as to network, “seeing networking as both a learning experience and business opportunity” (p. 251). Women participants saw themselves as agents for more profound change in their businesses, while men on exiting the programme saw it as contributing more by way of eco-efficiency – leaner business practices and operational savings. The total sample of 30 in this research limits the generalisability of its findings, but again women’s potential to contribute meaningfully and profoundly to sustainability is hinted at here.

Our review points to possible gender attributes and how they might play out in achieving the wider system objectives of sustainability-as-flourishing. Next, we introduce a range of

ideas under the umbrella of eco-feminism. Of a more political nature, the discourses in the eco-feminist space, we believe, prompt us to think differently about the kind of research we need going forward.

Where might an eco-feminist perspective take us?

Returning to Ehrenfeld and Hoffmann's (2013) call for fundamental cultural change to achieve sustainability-as-flourishing, we look at some of the underpinning aspects of eco-feminist analysis. Eco-feminism calls for a "different, non-dualistic relationship between human groups and between humans and nature" (Bullis & Glaser, 1992, p. 51). Specifically, it calls for a non-hierarchical (or non-competitive) relationship between men and women and for any perceived hierarchy of men and women over nature to be abolished. Domination, objectification, and disassociation are seen as problematic, as are dualisms such as man/woman, human/nature, rationality/emotion (Crittenden, 2000). They are seen as separating the self from emotional connections with others. More radical forms of eco-feminism see patriarchy and hierarchy as ultimately destructive of all life (Bullis & Glaser, 1992) and thus in complete disharmony with the achievement of sustainability-as-flourishing.

Eco-feminist analysis, more positively construed, focuses "on the relationship between women and the environment as central to human survival and environmental integrity" (Hessing, 1993, p. 15). This author suggests "that only when the analysis of society and environment starts with women will the challenge of sustaining development be met" (p. 15). This view postulates that "women's reproductive capabilities, emotional qualities and nurturing activities are the foundations of women's alliance with nature" (p. 15) and that our understanding of the Earth as mother is reflected in women's/mother's own ethic of care for the Earth and all life, now and into the future.

This eco-feminist analysis therefore extends the ethic of care towards valuing the work more often performed by women in looking after children and the elderly, the sick and their families – working within the system (Hessing, 1993) and contributing to overall flourishing. Whereas these domains might not be so obviously construed as places in which entrepreneurial activity takes place, we need only to look at the rise of institutionalised aged-care and child-care arrangements to see women's contributions as important in the way we design and operate enterprises that offer opportunities for clients, their families, and the workers themselves to flourish. While rejecting patriarchal, large-scale, centralised and mechanistic forms of organising, eco-feminists support co-operation, non-hierarchy, and organic forms (Hessing, 1993).

Depending on who one reads within the field of eco-feminism and which of the many variants one follows, the approach is either entirely pro-women and anti-men or more united. In the latter case, unqualified or unhelpful dualisms become inappropriate within the discourse. The approach we advocate in support of sustainability-as-flourishing, in support of all life, is more united, cognisant of the need for diversity and simultaneous solidarity (Bullis & Glaser, 1992). More and more, while understanding the differences that tend to persist between genders and the potential for working together, a partnership culture is called for by Gaard (2001; see also Korten, 2006).

A future research agenda

We start this discussion with what, in our opinion, having reviewed the extant literature, we probably need to do *less* of to support sustainability-as-flourishing.

Focusing *less* on the financial performance and growth of entrepreneurial businesses⁵ – or at least not evaluating these aspects as reducible to male or female owner-managers seems in order as we begin to build a future research agenda that is more united and representative of the work the genders do and could more optimally do together. This does not mean researchers should ignore unwarranted hierarchies (male entrepreneurs, owners, and managers and lower paid female workers etc.). Note, we are not making a case for non-gender specific and non-politicised research – we need and invite change!

Focusing *less* on the minutiae of processes that are employed in traditional entrepreneurial businesses and linking these to traditional gender stereotypes may also be in order. Allowing for different approaches to emerge and studying what does emerge is important.

Focusing *less* on the individual in an atomised and decontextualised sense also seems to be important in entrepreneurship research going forward (Ahl, 2006). In feminist studies there are increasing acknowledgements of the futility of a ‘blame the women’ mentality; equally, a ‘blame the men’ one might only take us so far. What is missing is situated context and historical explanation (Ahl, 2006).

We juxtapose the above statements with what we think we might need to do *more* of. While focusing less on financial performance and growth outcomes of entrepreneurial businesses themselves, we need to focus *more* on broader economic, social, environmental, and cultural outcomes of entrepreneurial business activities. We need to ask: What negative outcomes or externalities are being incurred and how might these be avoided or mitigated if possible? Considering gender in this equation becomes important. Do the outcomes change traditional gender power structures – in good ways or in less than optimal ways – and, for whom? For sustainability-as-flourishing, we need to ask what additional or new positive outcomes might we jointly realise? Outcomes not just for the entrepreneur and the business, but systemically and for all.

Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen (2009) nudge researchers towards a broader view of entrepreneurship as an emancipatory act of change creation, rather than just an economic outcome-focused enactment towards wealth creation. With change needed from our current more enterprise-centric focus towards a more systems-centric one for sustainability-as-flourishing, such broadening of the research agenda appears appropriate. How do entrepreneurial businesses work together to produce more synergistic outcomes of greater/wider benefit, would be an interesting question for researchers to answer.

While focusing less on the minutiae of processes employed in traditional entrepreneurial businesses, it might be of *more* utility to look at what works in new hybrid forms of business including social and environmental enterprises and partnership organisations, including along supply chains. What lessons can be learned that might be transferrable and that might lead to expansion and growth in numbers of enterprises and supply chains with positive sustainability outcomes?

While focusing less on the individual we need to focus *more* on the situated context and institutionalised power structures in which people are embedded. At the same time, we need not to move from simply blaming the women to a discourse of needing to change the women in a bid to develop what researchers have identified as female entrepreneurial potential. Sensitive research questions as to where women entrepreneurs’ interests and talents lie, and how and if these might be different from men’s, would be useful. Exploring the nature and expression of eco-feminist thinking among women entrepreneurs, we think, might be new territory that could yield interesting answers. A number of researchers have called for acknowledgement and recognition of the remarkable heterogeneity among female entrepreneurs (de Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2007; Hughes & Jennings 2012; Hughes et al.,

2012). Following Ahl (2006), we consider deeper attention to how gender is interpreted and experienced with and through others might also be useful.

In terms of new arenas for a research focus on women, entrepreneurship, and sustainability, we should seek out and investigate the existence of and roadblocks to entrepreneurial activity in arenas where an ethic of care is to the fore, or could/should be – such as hospitals, child-care facilities, educational institutions, and aged-care facilities. Many of these arenas boast a preponderance of women staff, if not always senior managers. To what extent does entrepreneurial activity flourish in these arenas? From where do the ideas and opportunities for enhanced practice come? What are the outcomes beyond a focus on the financial? And what trade-offs occur?

What other arenas, more traditionally devoid of a caring ethic, can be seen as frontiers for change? What role does the union entrepreneur have in enhancing working conditions, and in changing institutionalised practices? What role might imaginative regulators have – when private gain is set aside? What is the role of the academic entrepreneur in changing our own institutions? More explicitly in the business context, we could look at what opportunities exist for businesses to promote ethical consumerism – selling goods that are more socially and environmentally responsible, selling materially less, promoting shared ownership arrangements, cutting out unwarranted links in the supply chain so as to ensure returns are greatest to those who deserve them, encouraging community engagement and lifestyle adjustments such as greater spiritual connectedness. All are, in essence, entrepreneurial opportunities that on various levels can be complicated by the adoption of a sustainability ethic but can also be inspired by one.

Much hope seems to lie in local studies by local researchers who can understand the setting and context, the cultural norms and challenges, as indeed much hope lies in the entrepreneurs themselves making change at the local level. Sustainability-as-flourishing is as we have said a global if not planetary systems construct. An argument is sometimes made that it can be harder for entrepreneurs to tackle big sustainability challenges when they are starting out or when the business is small. A counter-argument is that smart set-ups with strong localist orientations may be able to make positive contributions to sustainability, precisely by not incurring environmental impacts associated with the tyranny of distance or size.

We do see hope in these new forms of social, environmental, and sustainability entrepreneurship. However, research that focuses solely on either the social or the environmental dimensions of sustainability and/or the economic dimension may be missing the point. Sustainability as we currently understand it comprises at least three dimensions – social, environmental and economic – and all three are simultaneously challenging and important. How entrepreneurs rationalise what they see as inevitable trade-offs among the dimensions may well tell us more about them and the kind of entrepreneurship they practice than we previously have known. This would take us beyond the predominant focus on the economic or the labels of social, environmental or sustainability entrepreneurship that many of these entrepreneurs, in our experience, seem themselves to eschew. Again, we need to focus on whether the outcomes – social, environmental, and economic – are ones that lead to a flourishing life for all. How we might know or be able to evaluate or judge that achievement, or lack of it, is a key question for researchers to consider.

There exists potential for a rich terrain for future research on women, entrepreneurship, and sustainability. Whether one takes a more gender-specific or broader focus, nuanced understandings of how gender is constructed and what is required for sustainability are needed in the pursuit of entrepreneurship research that is of positive consequence in securing our common future.

Notes

- 1 There were more search results for gender, entrepreneurship, and sustainability, but the articles often refer to sustainability in terms of business continuity (e.g. Ang, 2004; Kumar, 2013), rather than the wider systems focus we invoke in this paper.
- 2 Entrepreneurship literature has also focused on these three domains. More recently the focus on social and environmental (also sustainable entrepreneurship) has extended the more traditional focus on economic or what has been termed commercial entrepreneurship research (Corner & Ho, 2010).
- 3 Helsing (1993, p. 15) points out the obvious gender neutrality of the Brundtland definition, suggesting that like other contemporary discourses in the field, it “reduces women to just another user group seeking to maximize their own interests in the ongoing struggle to redistribute global wealth and resources”. We take less issue with this aspect than with the overall flaws in the definition and associated philosophy that appears to be a pragmatic compromise towards taking us down the same development path we are currently on, albeit more knowingly and more efficiently, perhaps.
- 4 We would extend this to include a gap on social and environmental performance of both men- and women-owned businesses, important dimensions of sustainability where research relies heavily on self-reports of performance.
- 5 Financial performance and growth outcomes of women’s businesses have been a major research focus (Ahl, 2006; Hughes et al., 2012).

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