UNINTENDED OUTCOMES OF PUBLIC SUPPORT ON FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP- METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND INITIAL FINDINGS

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Abstract

This study explores how public support mechanisms generate unintended outcomes when institutional pressures interact with ecosystem factors. The study employs a qualitative research methodology of multiple case studies and thematic analysis, grounded in phenomenological and grounded theory approaches. Nine actors from the female entrepreneurship ecosystem across Ghana, including government agencies and hubs, were interviewed to obtain relevant insights. The major findings include the non-targeted nature of public support mechanisms and the over-concentration on training at the expense of other support mechanisms, especially in promoting access to investment and capital assets. The study further uncovers how public support measures can unintentionally encourage grant dependency, crowding out of private capital, and intra-household tensions linked to gendered expectations around resource sharing. This study contributes to the understanding of how public support systems influence women's entrepreneurial outcomes in Ghana and shifts attention to whether support works to how support systems reproduce unintended behavioural and institutional responses, thus providing new insights on a process-oriented and context-sensitive understanding of female entrepreneurship policy in developing economies. The findings offer important implications for designing a more inclusive, ecosystem-aligned and institutionally grounded support framework for women entrepreneurs.

Key words: unintended outcomes, public support, female entrepreneurship, interview

JEL Codes: J16, L26

Introduction

Despite the considerable expansion in public support for female entrepreneurship aimed at improving women's entrepreneurial outcomes (Coleman et al., 2019), the results remain mixed and, in many cases, counterproductive. Rather than uniformly enhancing performance, these interventions have generated unintended outcomes, including overdependency on government

grants, crowding out of private capital, spousal frictions, and widening gender pay gaps (Salia et al., 2018; Mwesigwa et al., 2025). This raises a critical concern: existing approaches insufficiently account for the institutional pressures and ecosystem interactions that shape women's entrepreneurial experiences. As a result, we continue to overlook the deeper challenges faced by female entrepreneurs and ecosystem actors in navigating these support systems.

Accordingly, this study addresses the research question: How do institutional pressures and ecosystem interactions shape the emergence of unintended outcomes in public support for female entrepreneurs?

Grounded in institutional theory and the entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective, the study employs semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs, enterprise support organisations, and government actors. A qualitative multiple case study design, supported by thematic analysis drawing on phenomenological and grounded theory approaches, is used to generate in-depth insights. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how women entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of public support and how unintended outcomes emerge from these interactions.

The study contributes to the literature on entrepreneurship and public policy in three ways. First, it responds to calls for a deeper examination of women's entrepreneurship and the role of institutions in shaping their challenges. Second, it advances understanding of women entrepreneurs' pathways by revealing persistent impediments and bottlenecks that constrain their progression (Aman et al., 2024). More broadly, it provides a critical lens through which to reassess the effectiveness of public support mechanisms in contexts characterised by institutional and ecosystem complexities.

1 Theoretical Foundations

The extant literature on female entrepreneurship indicates enduring structural obstacles to funding (Henry et al., 2022) and time constraints stemming from unpaid caregiving duties (Salia et al., 2018). Public assistance systems have been established to support women entrepreneurs and address these challenges. These interventions consist of supplying capital, enhancing skills, and reforming institutions (Coleman et al., 2019).

Notwithstanding their well-intentioned nature, empirical evidence suggests that aid access does not consistently improve business performance. Microfinance programs may improve women's incomes; yet they may also heighten family tensions or strengthen male

dominance over resources (Bentancor, 2022; Salia et al., 2018). Although in recent times, unintended outcomes have been of interest to researchers, especially in public health (Oliver et al., 2019), little attention has been given to them in entrepreneurship research.

Institutional theory provides a suitable framework for elucidating the unintended outcomes of public support mechanisms for female entrepreneurship. Institutions consist of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive factors that influence entrepreneurial behaviour. Entrepreneurship is influenced by both individual competencies and the alignment or misalignment of institutional underpinnings (Audretsch et al., 2024).

Institutional Theory also explains how informal and formal institutions reshape the behaviour and outcomes of entrepreneurship. For female entrepreneurs, these institutions are relevant, as gender norms interact with regulatory environments to reshape business constraints and opportunities (Coleman et al., 2019). Institutional theory helps one understand that support programmes differ across settings (Mwesigwa et al., 2025). For instance, access to finance can be achieved in the context of strong financial infrastructure and legal protections, but can be less effective in an environment where norms restrict women from controlling assets. The theory also helps us to understand that public support is not inherently ineffective or effective; rather, the institutional environment in which women entrepreneurs operate shapes the outcome (Urbano et al., 2026). According to the theory, a well-designed public support can also fail to achieve its intended outcome if it is not coordinated well. For women entrepreneurs, administrative complexity and fragmented institutions can intensify gendered barriers to utilising the support and may generate unintended consequences (Salia et al., 2018; Mwesigwa et al., 2025).

It is worth noting that institutions on their own are never adequate to provide relevant support to female entrepreneurs. How these actors in the ecosystem interact in harmony and reciprocally reinforce each other and utilise the available resources to promote a conducive business environment for women entrepreneurs is crucial (Audretsch et al., 2024). Institutional Theory, coupled with the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem perspective, help scholarly community to understand how institutional pressures and ecosystem interactions shape the emergence of unintended outcomes.

2 Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to understand how institutional pressures and ecosystem interactions shape the emergence of unintended outcomes in public support for

female entrepreneurs (Van Burg et al., 2022). A multiple case study approach was adopted based on the back-and-forth abduction protocol. This allowed for deeper insight into the subject under investigation, grounded in the lived experiences of the research participants, their interpretations, and understandings of how unintended outcomes are instigated by the interaction between institutional pressures and ecosystem dynamics (Korstjens and Moser, 2017). The multiple case approach was instrumental in advancing theory (Van Burg et al., 2022). Case studies were in their right place as they facilitated the study to address the how of the questions and how question development was guided (Van Burg et al., 2022). Moving further, the central goal was to map out a theoretical framework that incorporates unintended outcomes, institutional pressures, and ecosystem interactions (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

The explanatory nature of the study is vital to harness our understanding of the subject, as women entrepreneurship, unintended outcomes, and institutional pressure have not received much attention in the entrepreneurship scholarship (Coleman et al., 2019; Johnston et al., 2023). Back-and-forth protocol endeavours to build evidence from one case firm and then moves to gather further evidence from other case firms, which are necessary for theory development (Van Burg et al., 2022).

2.1 Case Selection

The respondents were recruited using purposive sampling from a database maintained by Social Enterprise Ghana, a business network in Ghana that works with actors in the female entrepreneurship ecosystem, as well as from the Ghana Enterprises Agency database, a statutory body that works with female entrepreneurs, and from Google and LinkedIn platform searches. The female entrepreneurs and enterprise support organizations were selected for the interview because they have received some form of support from a public support organization, while the government agencies are the providers of public support measures to female entrepreneurs and are deemed fit to have appropriate information relevant to answering the research question (Korstjens and Moser, 2017; Van Burg et al., 2022). The maximum possible heterogeneity was achieved because the case firms have different backgrounds as female entrepreneurs, hub owners, and representatives of government institutions. Nonetheless, informants include women entrepreneurs, hub owners, and policymakers; to ensure similarities are at least maintained, differences are mitigated, thereby attaining sample homogeneity (Korstjens and Moser, 2017).

2.2 Data Collection

The study adopts a qualitative research design, using in-depth semi-structured interviews with 3 women entrepreneurs, 3 government officials, and 3 hub owners who train and support women entrepreneurs to provide relevant information necessary to address the research question, in line with earlier studies (Lopez et al., 2025). The interviews were conducted from December 2025 to March 2026 and were done in the English language and employed a variety of in-person, online, and phone calls. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Trancribe.com. The main themes of the interview were guided by the constructs of our research question, especially on public support measures, institutional pressures, ecosystem interactions, and unintended outcomes. Semi-structured interviews allowed the use of probing tactics. All interviews complied with ethical standards by obtaining permission to record. Following this, all transcripts are securely stored. Besides, archival data, including policy briefs, government statements, business reports, annual activity reports and social media postings, were employed to at least provide study triangulation (Korstjens and Moser, 2017; Van Burg et al., 2022).

Tab. 1: Participants' Information and Interview Duration

Participant Type	Description of Operations	Duration
Female Entrepreneur 1	Food Processing Company-Accra	45 Minutes
Female Entrepreneur 2	Fashion- Kumasi	30 Minutes
Female Entrepreneur 3	Agribusiness Company- Tamale	45 minutes
Business Incubation Hub 1	Incubation space- Tamale	50 minutes
Business Incubation Hub 2	Business training space - Sefwi Wiawso	43 minutes
Business Incubation Hub 3	Hub- Sunyani	60 Minutes
Female Government Official 1	To provide training to women entrepreneurs	35 Minutes
Female Government Official 2	To provide public loans to women business owners	40 Minutes
Female Government Official 3	To support female start-ups with start-up kits	30 Minutes

Source: Own elaboration

2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by Corbin and Strauss (1990): open, axial and selective coding procedures. First, we obtained narratives from informants on their experiences concerning the constructs of our research question: public support measures, institutional pressures, ecosystem interactions, unintended outcomes, and women entrepreneurship that form open codes and categories. The study then sought patterns of these themes that underpin axial coding; then, finally, through iterative processes supported with a review strategy, derived selective codes and dimensions. ChatGPT 4o Plus was used at the initial stage to refine the themes, but the researcher still cross-checked for consistency (Markowska et al., 2023; Aman et al., 2024; Korstjens and Moser, 2017). The study employed thematic analysis based on the narrations of the research participants, and the data were compared for patterns and commonalities.

3 Findings

The emerging themes from the analysis of narratives and data from the semi-structured interview are Communication, Public Support, Effectiveness and Unintended Outcomes.

3.1 Communication

While government institutions employ formal information systems to reach women entrepreneurs, the women entrepreneurs heavily rely on informal processes to access information, leading to information asymmetry (Audretsch et al., 2024), and thus, women entrepreneurs are not able to access this support, as support is made available to only political cronies. This is succinctly captured by Female Entrepreneur 1, who is quoted as saying, *"These opportunities are only in a few locations,...and we in various regional communities don't know about them and do not benefit"*.

Moreover, studies on institutional theory and women entrepreneurship establish that institutional pillars do affect the vision of women entrepreneurs (Lopez et al., 2025), thereby constraining their ability to access potential benefits from various institutions. Compounding the problems is the inability of the women entrepreneurs to be incorporated into the design and implementation of government programmes meant for them.

3.2 Public Support

Though on paper, public institutions have very interesting programmes, there is little impact of these on the performance of the female-owned businesses. There is little alignment between

what the women entrepreneurs are expecting in the form of public support and what the public support organisations provide. As the CEO of Business Incubation Hub 3 described the situation: *"Female entrepreneurs require more support just beyond training. They need hard cash for their businesses. They need money to buy equipment and tools".*

This suggests that there is a feeling among female entrepreneurs that public support should go beyond a few pockets of offerings, such as training and event organisations, to address their actual needs, especially investment in capital expenditures (Henry et al., 2022).

3.3 Effectiveness

Government officials recognise the critical role of women entrepreneurs in promoting jobs and economic growth, and Female Government Official 1 is noted to have explained that: *"These women entrepreneurs are the sole breadwinners of their families, and we are proud to have provided them with grants that have enabled them to expand their businesses and employ other women".*

Notwithstanding these supports and their impact in improving the business skills of the women entrepreneurs, there remain the bureaucratic processes, abuse of power, and sexual harassment that many of these women entrepreneurs need to endure to access the public support measures. This is also compounded by the ongoing gender stereotypes from government agency representatives, who see women only as 'breadwinners' for domestic responsibilities and do not acknowledge the contributions of women entrepreneurs to the country's overall economic growth (Markowska et al., 2023).

3.4 Unintended Outcomes

The respondents believe that though these public support initiatives improve the businesses of female entrepreneurs in Ghana, there is evidence of increasing over-reliance. Instead of making time to run their business profitably, these female entrepreneurs have always believed and are always in search of public support. According to Hub Owner 3, *"Some of these women entrepreneurs have turned into 'pitchpreneurs', moving from one pitch competition to another for free money instead of making time to run their businesses"*.

Women entrepreneurs mentioned unintended outcomes arising from normative pressures from family members, business peers, etc., including business income diversion, spousal conflicts, time poverty, and market distortions. Successful women entrepreneurs are socially expected to share their profits, time, and resources with the community and the public at large. These social obligations within networks and society that women entrepreneurs belong

to lead them to experience unintended consequences that affect the performance of their businesses (Bentancor, 2022; Salia et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This research highlights that the Ghanaian government's support for women entrepreneurs is insufficient. Cases show that women entrepreneurs lack access to institutional support. Thus, most women are bypassed in the design and implementation of public support measures. This study established that support for these entrepreneurs primarily focuses on training, facilitation, and networking rather than capital investment, and that some of these public supports generate unintended outcomes, including business income diversion, spousal conflicts, and market distortions (Bentancor, 2022; Salia et al., 2018).

Underpinned by institutional theory, this study examined the institutional support scheme proposed for women entrepreneurs and the unintended outcomes of these in Ghana. The study contributes to the body of knowledge in entrepreneurship and public policy by exploring how unintended outcomes arise from public support measures for women's entrepreneurship. More research is required on how institutional pressures and ecosystem interactions can be aligned to address the challenges posed by these unintended outcomes, and on which public support mechanisms can be promoted to enable women entrepreneurs to achieve better business performance.

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