

From Potential to Action: Strategies for Supporting Female Founders in the Pre-Start-Up Phase

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Abstract: In today's global economy, the role of start-ups is recognized as crucial for a country's competitiveness. Creating a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem is therefore essential to enable founders to realize their potential optimally. Notably, there is a significant gender disparity in start-ups, suggesting a vast untapped entrepreneurial potential among women. This research aims to enhance the utilization of female start-up potential by providing actionable recommendations, based on an empirical analysis of the pre-start-up process of (potential) female founders. Through a qualitative research methodology, this study investigates the factors influencing women's journey towards entrepreneurship, considering diverse biographies and life situations. Interviews with ten women showed the complexity of the pre-start-up phase and the necessity for a broad support system. The study identifies several key areas for action to foster female entrepreneurship. Firstly, increasing awareness and visibility of self-employment as a viable career path for women is crucial, requiring more female role models and media representation to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. This could cultivate a natural inclination towards entrepreneurship and sectors with high start-up activity. Moreover, lessening the disproportionate burden of family responsibilities on women is essential, suggesting enhancements in childcare facilities and encouraging shared domestic duties. The research further suggests the implementation of support programs to reduce barriers and provide a realistic view of entrepreneurship, alongside the potential benefits of mentorship in both pre- and post-start-up phases. Women's risk-averse, cautious approach in the pre-start-up process often leads to hesitance in developing innovative projects. Encouraging a focus on market needs and early engagement with potential customers, alongside proactive network building, seeking co-founders, or outsourcing, can address knowledge gaps and reduce uncertainties, making self-employment a more attractive option. This study emphasizes the importance of a collaborative effort among various stakeholders in the entrepreneurial ecosystem to unlock the entrepreneurial potential among women.

Keywords: Female entrepreneurship, Gender disparity, Pre-start-up process, Entrepreneurship ecosystem, Start-up support, Entrepreneurial tendency

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in creating new jobs, driving structural change, and fostering economic drivers for innovation and technological progress, especially in growth and technology sectors (Danko, 2018). Despite the recognised potential of female entrepreneurship, women consistently account for only one third of entrepreneurial activity in Switzerland (Baldegger et al., 2020). And the share of entrepreneurs in the overall female working-age population has remained stable at 6-7% for the past 30 years, while the share of men is significantly higher (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2020). This suggests a significant untapped potential among women, where targeted investments and initiatives could lead to substantial economic benefits (Allen et al., 2008). Furthermore, there are also societal reasons to address the gender gap in self-employment, given the legal anchorage of gender equality in Swiss law since 1981 (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2013). Nevertheless, women continue to face greater constraints on their career development opportunities, as evidenced by their underrepresentation in managerial positions and lower rates of self-employment (Leicht & Welter, 2004).

The gender gap in entrepreneurship is particularly pronounced in Switzerland, indicating a need for further exploration and intervention (Elam et al., 2019). This study aims to bridge the gender gap in entrepreneurship by exploring how Switzerland can better leverage female entrepreneurial potential. It seeks to offer actionable recommendations based on an empirical investigation of the pre-founding process among women. The research will explore various paths to self-employment, identify obstacles women face before starting a company, and analyse these challenges in a contextual framework. The main research question is: *How can the entrepreneurial potential of women in the pre-startup phase in Switzerland be unlocked?* Based on this, the following sub-questions were included:

- What triggers the *inclination* towards entrepreneurship among women?
- Which *goals and motives* do women pursue in becoming self-employed?
- What *obstacles* do women encounter in the pre-startup process?

- What is the impact of different (gender-specific) life situations and environments?
- Under what *conditions* do women become entrepreneurs?
- What potential for action and *support* are there in the pre-start-up process?

This research does not aim to explain why fewer women than men embark on entrepreneurship. It focuses on the female pre-founding process to better understand and harness women's entrepreneurial potential.

The research is structured into seven sections. The literature review explores the determinants of the lower rate of female founders. The methodology starts with the developed theoretical framework and introduces the qualitative approach chosen. In the results section the research questions are answered and discussed. The last two sections close the paper with recommendations and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Entrepreneurship has historically been seen as male-dominated (Brush, 2008, S. 611), while the field of female entrepreneurship, which has only developed in recent decades, still requires considerable research. Previous studies have mainly focused on descriptive, quantitative comparisons based on statistical indicators. For this reason, the need for qualitative research approaches that consider personal circumstances, social and professional conditions as well as individual intentions for success and motives for starting a business is increasingly being emphasized (Ettl, 2010; Henry & Foss, 2016; Paoloni & Serafini, 2018).

Many studies examine the "outcome" of start-up activities and often highlight differences between male and female founders. Even if this study does not aim to make a direct comparison on a gender basis, such studies offer valuable insights. Shinnar et al. (2018) found that gender influences the relationship between entrepreneurial intentions and actions, and that lower social expectations and environmental support contribute to women being less likely to start businesses despite their intentions. When self-employed, women are often solo entrepreneurs, employ fewer staff than men and concentrate on smaller businesses, which is partly attributed to the demands of childcare and leads to higher levels of part-time self-employment (Bergmann et al., 2014; Leicht et al., 2004). Despite similar survival rates of businesses founded by women, these businesses tend to have lower turnover, lower growth and fewer investments than those founded by men (Brush, 2008; Du Rietz & Henrekson, 2000).

There are several determinants of the lower female start-up activity. One is the entrepreneurial tendency and the motivation. All studies show a higher propensity and motivation among men than women (e.g. Sieger et al. 2019; Engels, 2020). Another factor is the recognition and development of business opportunities. The literature shows that men more often identify these opportunities and that they are more innovative (Gonzalez-Alvarez & Solis-Rodriguez, 2011; Baldegger et al., 2020). This is reflected in the number of women in scalable and highly innovative start-ups, where only 12.8% of founders are women (Schatt, 2024). Also, the background of a person plays a role. On the one hand, university graduates found more often than people without university degree. By now women have more university degrees than men (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2016). Therefore, this should not play a significant role going forward. However, men are over-represented in technical subjects at university, which is where many of the innovative start-ups come from. The second pillar when looking at the background is management and leadership experience. Founders have in average a high level of experience. As women are still under-represented in management roles, they have less opportunities to gain skills that are also valuable for self-employment (Bergmann et al., 2014; OECD, 2016).

Also, a determinant is the personality traits and the self-perception. It is consistently shown that women rate their abilities significantly lower than men. (SECO, 2008; OECD, 2016; Baldegger et al., 2020). In Switzerland, around 20 per cent more women than men consider their entrepreneurial skills to be insufficient for self-employment (Baldegger et al., 2020). Regarding the female start-up rate, this is aggravated by the fact that women have a slightly higher fear of failure (SECO, 2008; OECD, 2016). A main thrust that is also reflected in the statements of the qualitative study by Tchouvakhina (2004), in which women are generally described as more anxious and insecure.

As the main burden of household and family work is still borne by women, it can be assumed that self-employment among women is significantly more influenced by family circumstances than among men. Family-related factors - limited to the pure probability of starting a business - can have both an inhibiting and a promoting effect. On the one hand, a considerable proportion of self-employed women strive to achieve a better work-life balance through greater flexibility in terms of location and time. On the other hand, family obligations represent an obstacle to starting a business, especially in resource-intensive business models (Lauxen-Ulbrich et

al., 2004). Female founders without kids work in average six hours more than mothers, while there is no difference among male founders with and without kids (Hirschfeld et al., 2019).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study takes the gender gap in business start-ups as an opportunity to analyse the pre-start-up process in more detail from a female perspective. Based on two equally large gender groups of working age, there is a disparity of around one third at the end of the pre-start-up process. Accordingly, this period needs to be analysed more closely to promote female start-up activity.

The pre-foundation process is to be understood as part of the foundation process, which is itself part of the overall company life cycle and ends with the formal founding act (Welter & Bergmann, 2002). As only a fraction realises their intentions, the start-up process is presented as a funnel. The large number of influencing factors and the high level of complexity within the pre-start-up process make it more difficult to identify the main start-up obstacles that can result in the start-up project being cancelled. Therefore, a theoretical framework was developed specifically for this study, which is shown in Figure 1. The pre-foundation phase was modelled as a serial, multi-stage process. The aim of the theoretical framework is to theoretically illustrate various stages in the pre-foundation-process that can be differentiated from one another to better categorise the various influencing factors and their interdependencies. It should be noted that the developed pre-startup process is a theoretical, ideal-type model, which is unlikely to be linear or continuous in practice.

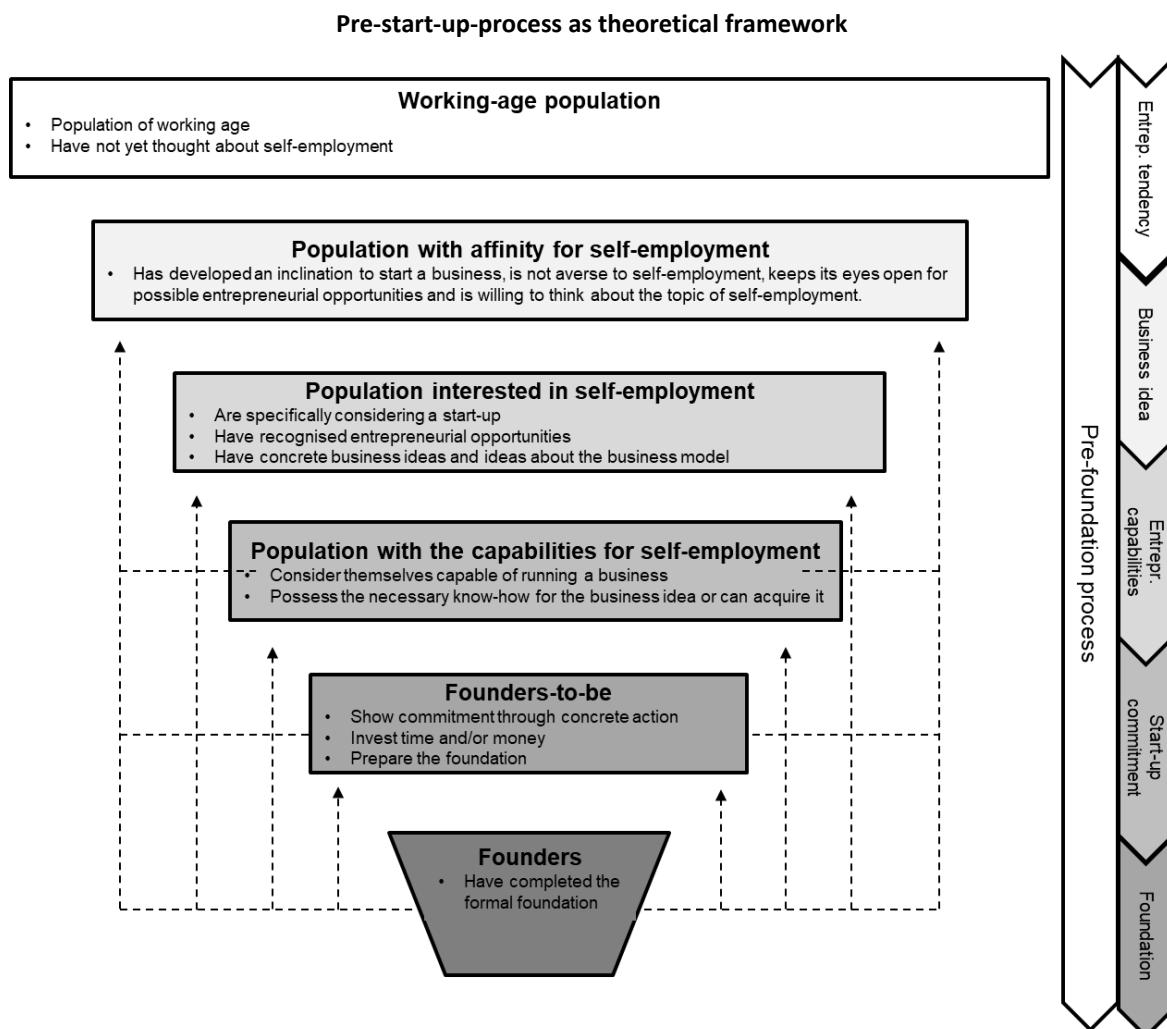


Figure 1: Pre-start-up process (own figure)

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to investigate the pre-founding process from a female perspective, which enables an in-depth exploration beyond mere statistical differences, focusing on personal, biographical, and contextual factors.

Research Design. A qualitative framework is chosen to closely examine the difficulties of the pre-founding process, prioritizing a contextual and case-specific analysis. This method is well-suited for addressing the multifaceted and under-researched aspects of female entrepreneurship, allowing for a detailed understanding of individual experiences and societal influences.

Sampling and Field Access. The study targets women of working age in the German-speaking part of Switzerland who are at the different stages of the pre-founding process. The selection process aimed for diversity among participants, including founders, aspiring founders, and those who discontinued their projects, while considering socio-demographic characteristics.

Data Collection. Data was collected through ten interviews, employing a semi-structured interview guide that allows flexibility for participants to express their views while ensuring focused exploration of the research themes. This method facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the pre-founding process from multiple perspectives, emphasizing openness and reflexivity in the interview process.

Data Analysis. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti9 software. This involved a categorization, starting with main categories derived from the theoretical framework and refining through sub-categories emerged from the data. The analysis aimed to maintain a balance between a detailed examination of individual cases and the identification of broader patterns and themes.

5. Results and Discussion

Based on the results from the interviews the research questions were answered.

What triggers the inclination towards entrepreneurship among women?

Among the women surveyed, the inclination to start their own business was triggered in various ways. Two of the women stated that they had a lifelong affinity for self-employment and always considered it as a normal career option. In one case, the inclination to start a business was triggered by an innovative professional environment. One woman made a personal and professional assessment when her children reached school age. The remaining six women stated that their inclination to set up their own business was only triggered when they identified the idea of setting up their own business.

From the other statements made in the interviews, two other factors could be identified, which may have additionally influenced the inclination to start a business. On the one hand, seven of the women interviewed have a self-employed father. Although a large proportion of the women denied a parental effect on the propensity to start a business, a look at the literature suggests an influence, although unconscious. On the other hand, seven of the women also report that they were dissatisfied with their previous professional situation and in some cases relate this directly to the interest in starting a business. Although the motives mentioned were almost exclusively pull motives, there is an obvious connection between dissatisfaction with the job and the emergence of an inclination to start a business. The findings from the interviews show that it is difficult in many cases - even for the women surveyed themselves - to make a clear statement as to whether and since when they have had an inclination to start their own business. Influencing factors such as parental role models and dissatisfaction with the professional work situation can trigger a latent and unnoticed entrepreneurial interest without this being perceived as a clear entrepreneurial inclination by the women themselves. A clear distinction between push and pull start-ups, as is sometimes made in the literature, does not apply to the majority of the samples analysed. Rather, entrepreneurial interest seems to stem from a combination of factors, with job dissatisfaction playing a central role.

The participants themselves see the main reasons for the lower propensity to start a business among women in the societal role models for women, the lack of entrepreneurial role models, and in the media, where successful women are portrayed as deviant from the norm and associated with masculine attributes.

Which goals and motives do women pursue in becoming self-employed?

When asked about the motives for self-employment, almost all women cite motives that can be subsumed under the terms self-determination and self-realisation. These include specific statements such as being their own

boss, being able to make their own decisions, being independent, having freedom and realising their own ideas. In many cases, these are goals and wishes that remained unfulfilled at the previous job.

For three women, social considerations also played a role in their start-up plans, while none of the women mentioned financial motives or a high income. Some of the women also see certain advantages in self-employment in terms of flexible working methods in connection with childcare. Others hope for a greater variety of topics and a faster realisation of ideas. All of the seven women with self-employed parents decided against taking over their parents' company or never even considered it.

How were the entrepreneurial opportunities identified?

The identification of entrepreneurial opportunities was also very case-specific. In principle, two different development patterns can be recognised as to how the business ideas were identified. These range from unexpected revelations and increased awareness to the active and targeted search for entrepreneurial opportunities.

An existing entrepreneurial tendency, which can itself be caused by various factors as described, is primarily responsible for whether entrepreneurial opportunities are sought or pursued at all. The intensity, duration and scope of the search influence how, where and for how long the search is conducted and therefore have a positive effect on the probability of finding an opportunity. The intensity of the search is determined by the degree of job dissatisfaction and the lack of career alternatives. The duration of the search depends on when the entrepreneurial inclination was triggered.

However, individual statements from the interviewees also show that start-up ideas can also be found quite unexpectedly, without prior searching. The start-up idea can be brought to the attention of potential female founders both by chance and by third parties from the network. Whether and for how long the start-up idea is pursued depends on the one hand on the career alternatives and on the other hand on further obstacles and impediments in the further course of the pre-start-up process.

What obstacles do women encounter in the pre-startup process?

A majority of the participants are very self-critical of their abilities and that this represents a certain uncertainty in the pre-start-up process, especially with regard to future sales. The women identify sales as an important success factor for self-employment but are unsure whether they will be able to confidently market their services. Self-confidence, in-depth knowledge, and positive feedback appear to be very important to gain the necessary security and self-confidence.

In this context, other women point out that they were able to reduce and overcome their uncertainties through early customer surveys, extensive market and competitor analyses or by contacting potential business partners. Positive feedback from specialists or doing well in competitions was also described as a motivational boost in the pre-start-up process.

A large workload, doubts about setting boundaries, and the financial risks were often seen as barriers in the pre-start-up phase. Predominantly, these inhibiting factors are personality traits. Skill and knowledge gaps, particularly in administration, law, or accounting, are also cited as barriers, but as ones that can be overcome. Starting a business as a team is seen as beneficial, as the complementing skills can be crucial for covering knowledge gaps. All surveyed women favoured founding in a team than solo, with many viewing a co-founder as vital for success. Additionally, solo founders often use freelancers to fill knowledge gaps, manage order fluctuations, and offload undesirable tasks, which allows them to concentrate on core competencies.

Several women consider the transition phase from employment to self-employment to be a critical phase. Some women do not want to take any financial risks and prepare their start-up on the side, which exposes them to a lack of time. Others consider it more important to have enough time during the preparation phase and quit their job, which exposes them to a financial risk. Having a professional alternative, their family situation, the possibility of reducing their workload, a supportive environment and financial savings or their partner's income are relevant decision criteria for bridging the transition period.

What is the impact of different (gender-specific) life situations and environments?

The compatibility of work and family was often mentioned as an important influencing factor in relation to self-employment. Reports on this topic were very ambivalent. Some see self-employment as an opportunity to better harmonise work and family life through a flexible form of work. Others see the described uncertainties during the preparation and early phase as an inhibiting factor, which can intensify in combination with children in need

of care. This seems to be particularly the case with resource-intensive start-up projects. For this reason, individual female respondents tried to start a business before starting a family or only started after their children reached school age. It can therefore be assumed that a high workload in the family can have an inhibiting effect on resource-intensive start-up plans, especially if these occur at the same time.

Particularly in connection with children, but also otherwise, the importance of support from the partner or family environment was highlighted, which can take on childcare and household tasks and also provide mental and financial support. The importance of networks, which serve as a source of information for the women and can help them solve problems, was also mentioned.

Under what conditions do women become entrepreneurs?

There is no universally valid formula that sets out the conditions; however, various influencing factors and conditions can be recognised from the interviews. The professional alternatives in existing employment are to a certain extent in competition with self-employment. The decisive factor seems to be which form of employment is better suited to both professional and private goals and motives. Accordingly, this decision is based on an individualised weighing up of interests, which can cause the start-up project to be abandoned at all stages of the pre-start-up process.

If the decision is made in favour of self-employment, it is very important to have a functioning business model and to know who the paying customers are. In addition, there must be confidence that the challenges ahead can be mastered with one's own skills. If this is not the case, it must be possible to compensate for deficits and gaps in knowledge either through potential co-founders or by outsourcing work. It must be possible to either bridge the income gap or solve the problem of the double time burden and to reconcile the start-up project with any family requirements in terms of time and finances. The support of the partner and family also appears to be an important prerequisite for the start-up project to be realised.

What potential for action and support are there in the pre-start-up process?

Most respondents were positive about the existing services, although some potential for improvement was pointed out. Attention was drawn to the lack of role models, which could encourage women to set up their own business and support in the pre-start-up process. Also, the underrepresentation of self-employed and successful women in media coverage and the fact that, in the event of coverage, they are often connoted as deviating from the female norm and with male attributes.

The attended support programmes and courses were mostly rated positively. However, many women would like further support, for example in the form of a mentor as independent advisor in the pre- and post-start-up phase. In some cases, it was pointed out that the focus of counselling in the private sector is on selling the service, which led to doubts about the objectivity of the advice. An open and honest discussion about entrepreneurship is desired that does not unrealistically glorify it and allows talks about the downsides. Reports on failed start-up projects are also seen as useful to learn from mistakes and gain a realistic insight into self-employment.

Many women see potential in the search for suitable co-founders. The majority looked for co-founders in their known professional, school or private environment. However, it was also pointed out that knowing the co-founder was not a mandatory requirement. Various women therefore see potential in digital search options for co-founders.

5.1 Adapted Theoretical Framework

Based on the literature and the findings from the empirical data, the theoretical framework presented in section 3 was supplemented with the influencing factors for each stage of the pre-foundation process, shown in figure 2. Influencing factors with a plus sign have a positive effect on progress in the pre-start-up process, while factors with a minus sign have an inhibiting effect. The professional alternative was assigned to the start-up idea stage, as its influence is greatest at this stage. However, as shown, this factor has an impact on the entire pre-start-up process, where the two forms of employment are constantly weighed up against each other.

Pre-start-up-process and influencing factors

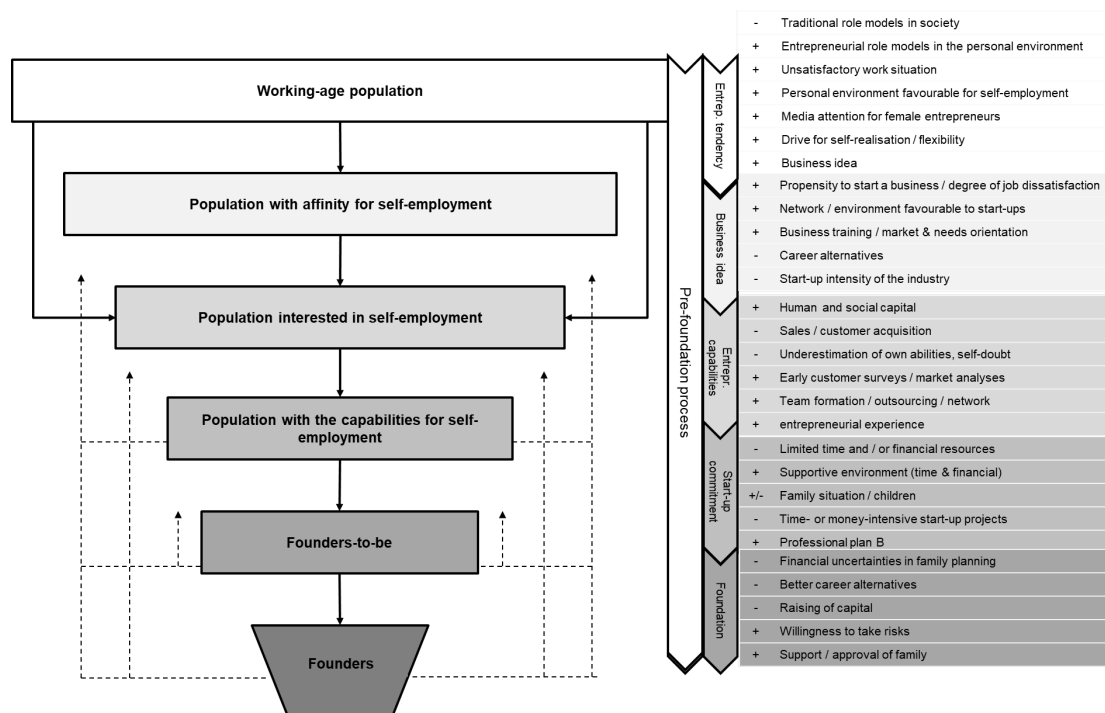


Figure 2: Pre-start-up process and its influencing factors (own figure)

6. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following opportunities were identified to better support female founders-to-be. The measures and strategies for raising the proportion of female founders targeted at the pre-founding phase are addressed towards potential founders, entrepreneurs, educational institutions, start-up support institutions, governmental bodies as well as society.

For potential female founders

- Establish and maintain professional contacts early on. Think ahead about topics relevant to your founding project and how to acquire necessary knowledge, e.g. through leveraging women's networks.
- Confident decision-making: Acknowledge that men may market their services more confidently than women. Consider this when making decisions and do not restrict your own potential.
- While seeking entrepreneurial opportunities, do not focus solely on your qualifications and experiences. Pay attention to unmet market needs from the perspective of potential customers and consider how you can fulfil these needs.
- Reflect on your business model early in the process. Identify your paying customers and engage with them and partners as soon as possible.
- View missing knowledge or skills not as overwhelming barriers. Explore partnering with co-founders, tapping into your network, or outsourcing certain tasks, for example to freelancers.
- Insist on active involvement from your partner in household and childcare responsibilities. Strive to create conditions that allow both partners to thrive professionally and personally.
- Think about starting a business with your partner. Mutual support, understanding, and the combination of professional and personal synergies have been highlighted as beneficial.
- Be confident in your abilities. View any unsuccessful venture not as a failure but as a valuable experience that will aid your professional and personal growth.

For Female Entrepreneurs

- Share your journey as a female entrepreneur, highlighting your successes and experiences. Support other women in the pre-founding phase by sharing the advantages and challenges of entrepreneurship transparently and how you overcame these challenges.

- Serve as role model as an inspiration for future generations, especially girls and young women. Discuss why you chose self-employment and highlight aspects of your entrepreneurial journey that differentiate from male stereotypes.

For Educational Institutions, Start-up Support Initiatives, and Governmental Bodies

- Offer training and support programs with a practical focus to build entrepreneurial skills and reduce uncertainties regarding self-employment.
- Actively create opportunities for female role models in education, including professorships, teaching materials, case studies, and guest lectures.
- Use current or former entrepreneurs to serve as mentors to guide female founders through process.
- Promote team founding for women and develop (virtual) platforms for finding co-founders. Enhance physical and virtual spaces for entrepreneurs and innovative companies to meet and benefit from mutual support and synergy.
- Implement measures to attract more women to fields and studies traditionally dominated by men, thereby increasing female entrepreneurial activity.
- Introduce more awards and competitions specifically designed to support innovative and resource-intensive ventures by women, offering not only financial support but also networking opportunities and feedback from experts.
- Incorporate the concept of self-employment into compulsory education to normalize it as a career option from an early age. This could help foster intrinsic entrepreneurial inclinations among all children, not just those with entrepreneurial family backgrounds.
- Include entrepreneurial competencies, negotiation, sales, and strategic thinking in the curriculum to promote entrepreneurship and ensure the acquisition of skills traditionally associated with male entrepreneurs.

For Society and Policy

- Expand part-time and flexible working models in leadership positions to enable women to acquire entrepreneurial skills while managing family commitments.
- Ensure balanced media coverage of entrepreneurship that portrays successful women entrepreneurs without reinforcing stereotypes.
- Address traditional gender roles and stereotypes by creating opportunities for female role models in male-dominated professions and promoting equal sharing of employment and family responsibilities.
- Consider subsidies for childcare or tax policies favouring dual earners to support women's professional careers.
- Encourage men to contribute to family responsibilities, enabling women to pursue their professional aspirations. Advocate for gender-neutral parental leave policies to facilitate equal sharing of professional and familial duties.

7. Conclusion

This research focused on the under-researched pre-start-up process of women in Switzerland and aimed to develop recommendations for action to better utilise the start-up potential of women. The literature highlights the need to consider various influencing factors not in isolation, but as part of an integrated whole in order to understand their complex interactions. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was chosen that makes it possible to analyse the pre-start-up process. A theoretical framework was developed that divides the pre-foundation process into different phases and helps to systematically structure the influencing factors. Despite certain limitations, this framework has proven useful for systematically collecting and analysing the data. The research identifies a variety of influencing factors and barriers affecting women in the different stages of starting a business.

Future research could focus on women that have abandoned their entrepreneurial ventures. The primary data collection highlighted the challenge of these women. Exploring the reasons behind these decisions could offer valuable insights for supporting potential female entrepreneurs. Also, the number of interviews was rather small. A broader, quantitative study based on the recognized factors could deepen the understanding.

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, as mentioned above, the number of interviews was limited. Secondly, most of the founders had an academic degree, which may lead to different findings than for women without a degree. Thirdly, participation was voluntary. The study may therefore be subject to selection bias, as

only people who were willing to talk about their experiences were included. Finally, the study has a narrow geographical and therefore cultural focus. This does not allow for generalization in other contexts.

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