



Abstract

A Qualitative Investigation into Perceived Barriers Experienced by European Female Agri-Food Entrepreneurs Situated in Rural Regions for Sustaining the Food Sector [†]

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Abstract: Introduction: Agri-food systems in Europe are predominantly male-dominated. Female food entrepreneurs can play a key role in the development of novel, sustainable food products. The aim of the present study was to gain an increased understanding of the various barriers which female agri-food entrepreneurs situated in rural areas perceive as hindrances to their entrepreneurial growth and development. Methodology: A total of five separate focus groups ($n = 29$ participants; 18 females) were carried out with agri-food entrepreneurs throughout Europe (Ireland, Belgium, Poland, Italy). The discussions were semi-structured and revolved around individuals' perceptions of the support received from their surrounding infrastructure and their opinions on mentorship programmes. A reflective thematic analysis was conducted following verbatim transcription of the conversations from the focus groups. Findings: Three major themes were identified: 1. Business Initiation and Development, 2. Perceived Barriers, and 3. Mentorship Programmes. Of these central themes, each of these themes was further divided into accompanying sub-themes. The most often-cited theme was the lack of adequate financial support and experiencing frustration with the complexity of funding application administrative processes. Socio-cultural support was oftentimes lacking, with participants noting they often felt more senior, experienced entrepreneurs gatekept information to avoid their development and expansion. Females in particular experienced gender-discriminatory behaviour from peers and those more senior than themselves. Finally, the vast majority of participants were aware of the benefits of an online presence but lacked confidence in their digital abilities and were unsure where to source the relevant support. Conclusions: These findings highlight a range of issues that need to be addressed to improve the infrastructure surrounding agri-food entrepreneurs throughout Europe and sustain the food sector. This knowledge may be used to guide policymakers and those at decision-making levels.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; perceptions; barriers; mentorship; supports; female entrepreneurship



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