



# Feminisms and entrepreneurship: a systematic literature review investigating a troubled connection

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Accepted: 23 March 2024  
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## Abstract

The paper aims to systematically review the literature that empirically investigates the relationship between feminisms and entrepreneurship. Feminisms, meant as movements, cultures, collective identities embedded with values and beliefs, could indeed contribute to challenge patriarchal gender norms that dominate the entrepreneurial world, so allowing new forms and narratives of business to emerge. To achieve the paper goal, a systematic literature review protocol is developed and the most prominent scientific research databases are queried. After a bibliometric framing of the retrieved papers, content analysis is adopted to identify the theoretical and methodological approaches, relevant topics and research gaps. Despite a considerable inhomogeneity in definitions, topics, and theoretical framings, the study shows that most papers agree on recognizing the crucial role of feminisms in: (i) women's entrepreneurial empowerment, especially in traditionally male-dominated cultural and geographical contexts and (ii) challenging the neoliberal paradigm. The study also inductively derives a definition of feminist entrepreneur, proposing an ontology that illustrates its relationship to the concepts of entrepreneurship, feminism and entrepreneurial feminist. From a managerial perspective, the study highlights similarities and differences among heterogeneous entrepreneurial experiences, thus unveiling feminist entrepreneurship features potentially useful for policy makers, educators, and practitioners. On the societal level, the research contributes to spreading knowledge about a phenomenon arguably disruptive in enhancing the inclusiveness of traditional entrepreneurial ecosystems.

**Keywords** Feminism · Entrepreneurship · Systematic literature review · Feminist entrepreneurship · Entrepreneurial behavior · Entrepreneurial feminism

## Introduction

Entrepreneurship has proven to be central to the economic development of market economies, in both developed and developing countries. In addition, entrepreneurship can contribute to social and environmental value generation (Schaltegger &

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Wagner, 2011) and play a central role in addressing global societal grand challenges (Brammer et al., 2019) such as the end of hunger and poverty, global warming, and gender equality. Entrepreneurship has, for example, proven to enhance livelihood of its actors, the entrepreneurs, often serving as a means of individual, family, and community social redemption (Renko & Freeman, 2018). As mentioned in (Certo & Miller, 2008; Renko & Freeman, 2018), entrepreneurship can contribute to the achievement of social sustainability either by improving the living conditions of those who decide to start their own business (entrepreneurship by disadvantaged groups) or by creating social value for such groups (entrepreneurship for disadvantaged groups). Starting also from these assumptions, international organizations, governments, researchers, and experts agree in recognizing fostering entrepreneurship as a lever to face the impacts of economic, social, and environmental crises at the international, national, and local level (Arafat et al., 2020a, b; European Commission et al., 2021; OECD, 2008; Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017).

These are some of the rationales behind a plethora of international, national, and regional political agendas, initiatives, and projects aimed at encouraging access to entrepreneurship for groups excluded from the business world. Despite the dominant neo-liberal individualistic paradigm, which elevates entrepreneurial action to the highest expression of human potential and presents entrepreneurship as an inclusive (Harrison et al., 2024) and “meritocratic accessible field of economic opportunity seeking behavior” (Ahl & Marlow, 2012), there is indeed considerable evidence of access limitation faced by certain groups based on ethnic, cultural, demographic, and gender variables (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Fairlie, 2007). With reference to the gender variable, the world of entrepreneurship has historically been analyzed from a purely male point of view (Ahl, 2006), resulting in narratives that depict the entrepreneur as a Darwinian hero, endowed with values traditionally considered as masculine (Gupta et al., 2009). Such a narrative has been fueled by a Schumpeterian vision of (western) entrepreneurship (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2008) and the traditional male dominance over the entrepreneurial system (Minniti, 2009; Orser et al., 2011), with negative repercussions in terms of access to the entrepreneurial world for those who do not fit into the masculine entrepreneurial discourse (Gupta et al., 2009). As demonstrated in the seminal paper by Langowitz and Minniti (2007) with reference to the gender variable, a lower propensity for entrepreneurship by women is due only to contextual variables that largely depend on culture and environment.

Feminist cultures and movements have historically challenged male dominance in various spheres of society, including the business world (Harquail, 2019). Multiple studies adopting feminist theoretical lenses explored the male domination over the entrepreneurial world, when investigating, for example, gender stereotypes, exclusionary narratives, and stereotypical role models (e.g., Balachandra et al., 2019; Gupta et al., 2009; Mc Donnell & Morley, 2015). In the contemporary entrepreneurial landscape new entrepreneurial narratives and identities, such as that of feminist entrepreneurship (Elliott & Orser, 2015; Harquail, 2019) are emerging. However, feminist entrepreneurship is still an underexplored entrepreneurial subgroup and, as Orser et al. (2011) argues, “the prescriptive academic

attribution of feminist discourse to women's lived experiences" risks distorting the academical representation of the phenomenon.

The aim of the paper is to explore the literature that empirically investigates the experience of feminist entrepreneurs. In particular, the study aims to inspect the literature shedding light on the relationship between feminisms and entrepreneurship by giving voice to the entrepreneurial experiences of feminist entrepreneurs. To this end, the study uses a systematic literature review protocol to identify the relevant literature on the topic, and content analysis to highlight the main theoretical and methodological features and themes as well as potential future research streams.

The review allows a heterogeneous and updated knowledge base to be collected and analyzed. Despite a considerable inhomogeneity in definitions, topics, and theoretical framings, the study shows that most papers agree on recognizing the crucial role of feminisms in: (i) women's entrepreneurial empowerment, especially in traditionally male-dominated cultural and geographical contexts and (ii) challenging the neoliberal paradigm. Additionally, the study led to a definition of feminist entrepreneur. Such definition posits the feminist entrepreneur in ontological relation with the concepts of feminist and entrepreneur, while pointing out the differences between feminist entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial feminism.

From a research point of view, the implications of the study are multiple. First, by conducting a systematic review of theories and methodologies adopted to frame the phenomenon, the study provides researchers with methodological and theoretical indications that could inform and drive future research developments. Second, the study points out concepts that may have been inconsistently managed within the research domain and provides a synoptic and comparative analysis of the main definitions and operationalizations. Finally, the study draws up a collection of open questions and issues capable of inspiring future researchers, so contributing to enable the development of a consistent research area. From a managerial point of view, the study provides a summary of feminist entrepreneurship studies that includes information and recommendations, potentially preparatory to activities such as the development of feminist entrepreneurial training courses, incubation projects, and mentorship programs. From a societal point of view, the study contributes to investigating new entrepreneurial identities that are potentially disruptive in terms of social value creation: indeed, the cultural and value structure of entrepreneurs has been shown to play a decisive role in decisions concerning the generation of social and environmental value (e.g., Gunawan et al., 2020; Thelken & de Jong, 2020; Yasir et al., 2022). Investigating and understanding the phenomenon of feminist entrepreneurship could encourage individuals whose set of values could potentially enrich the business world to enter such a world.

The paper is organized as follows: in the "[Background and research rationale](#)" section, the theoretical framework of the research and the rationale that led to the generation of the research questions are presented. The "[Research methodology](#)" section illustrates the methodological approach and its implementation. In the "[Findings](#)" and "[Discussion](#)" sections, the results are outlined and discussed. Finally, in the conclusions, closing considerations are drawn and future research avenues identified.

## Background and research rationale

The section outlines the theoretical assumptions and the research background based on which the research questions are developed. First, the main feminist historical waves and the characteristics common to all feminist strands are illustrated. Then, the relationship between feminisms and entrepreneurship is introduced.

### Feminisms and entrepreneurship

Defining feminism is a complex and delicate task. Harnessing the concept in a rigid and static definition would entail freezing it in a certain era, relegating it to a certain culture or chaining it to a certain ideology. The concept has undergone a definitional stratification over time that has gradually expanded its ontological boundaries. Indeed, most of the latest conceptualization renounce providing a unique and precise definition (e.g., Grunig et al., 2000; Hoffman, 2001). That can be ascribed to the need of including within the boundaries of feminism a vast plurality of cultures, theories, movements, concepts, and perspectives. Feminism has undergone considerable changes over time, hybridizing itself with different cultures, gradually addressing different issues and contributing to give voice to extraordinarily heterogeneous identities. The multiplicity of voices raised under the tag feminism is so characteristic of feminism that some scholars prefer to use it as plural noun, i.e. feminisms rather than feminism (Cornwall et al., 2007; Olesen, 1994).

Historically, four feminist waves are usually identified (Munro, 2013; Offen, 1988). The first feminist wave (19th and early 20th century) focused on universal fundamental rights like voting and property. Collective mobilizations characterized this period as a way to address socio-cultural problems. The demands of the first wave were followed by those of the second wave (~1960–1990), which broadened the pool of rights and social conditions to which women aspired, including, for example, reproductive rights, gender equality in the workplace and in the family group. During the second wave, especially in America and Canada, the first feminist businesses started to emerge. These economic activities were essentially shops, community centers and cultural businesses that presented themselves as more ethically responsible and women-friendly alternatives (Delap, 2020, p. 123). The third feminist wave (1990–2010) distinguishes from the first two by the blossoming of numerous and diverse currents of thought within feminism itself (e.g., trans-feminism, eco-feminism, post-feminism). The quantity and heterogeneity of cultures, subcultures, movements, concepts and positions that arose within the third wave constituted its cultural-historical signature, to the point that according to Evans (2015a) “[...] the confusion surrounding what constitutes third wave feminism is in some respects its defining feature”. With the third wave the term feminism began to become inclusive of even more different demands which, however, shared some common features such as the recognition of the male privilege, the strive for sexual freedom, and the acknowledgement of power structures (Heywood & Drake, 1997, p. 3). Moreover, several strands of third-wave feminism aligned with neo-liberal individualism, connecting feminist

discourse to the realm of individual self-determination (Evans, 2015a, b). The third wave witnessed the progressive flourishing of feminist enterprises: businesses oriented towards the dissemination of feminist ideals capable of creating synergy between activism, political dissent and marketplace participation (Davis, 2017). Building on the heterogeneous assumptions of the third wave and leveraging the potential offered by the new digital media, the fourth feminist wave is periodized from 2012 onwards (Munro, 2013). Common to the various strands of the fourth wave is the focus on intersectionality, an analytic framework that dominates feminist discussion. Intersectionality enriched academic and public discourse highlighting how personal and political factors (e.g., gender, ethnicity, social class, disability) interact and overlap in generating oppression or privilege (Wernimont & Losh, 2016).

Apart from the historical differentiation, which according to some scholars represents a simplification of the complex historical development of western feminism (Evans, 2015a), feminisms have also differentiated vertically, connecting, for example, ideologies, cultures, and religions. Indeed, the various facets of feminism constitute a heterogeneous plethora of strands and theories now competing, now overlapping, now complementing each other (Lorber, 2011; Wendling, 2018). Such fragmentation reflects the feminist aim to give voice to different women and minorities (e.g. LGBTIQ+ people) acknowledging diversity without universalizing perspectives (Grunig, 1988).

According to Hoffman (2001) feminism “is both multiple and singular, since ‘liberal’, ‘socialist’ and ‘radical’ feminisms are distinctive feminisms that can and should be assessed according to the extent to which they contribute positively to the development of a post-patriarchal society. [...] Each represents differing feminisms within a single body of argument unified by its commitment to the emancipation of women”. While renouncing the ambition to univocally define feminism, and indeed reiterating the need for the term ‘feminisms’, Grunig et al. (2000) identifies four characteristics common to all feminist strands and theories: “i) the centrality of gender as an analytical category, (ii) a belief in equity for everyone and the concern for oppression wherever it is found, (iii) an openness to all voices, and (iv) a call to action”. These four pillars partially replicate one of the simplest, most inclusive and popular definitions of feminism (Harquail, 2019, p. 45), the one provided by Hooks in (2000, p. 1): “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression”. Although it is therefore possible to delineate certain elements common to all feminisms, the various theories represent a variegated whole in terms of philosophies and theoretical frameworks. Based on the above discussion, the following research question arises:

**RQ-1:** *What are the theoretical lenses and methodological protocols adopted to frame and investigate feminist entrepreneurship within empirical studies?*

Addressing such a question means detecting the most popular theories and methodologies adopted to frame feminist entrepreneurial experiences. As stated in (Ahl & Marlow, 2012) the theoretical lenses commonly adopted to frame the phenomenon of entrepreneurship contribute to the social construction of the entrepreneur archetype: in addition, the theoretical lenses generally used to investigate the entrepreneurial

phenomenon contribute to epistemological gender bias (Calás et al., 2009). RQ-1 contributes to understanding whether such a bias is reproduced in the literature that investigates feminist entrepreneurship so as to inform research on entrepreneurship as a whole with these findings. Furthermore, given the intrinsic symbiosis between theory and methodology (Duane et al., 2005), it becomes important to investigate not only the theoretical frameworks but also the applied methodological protocols. The investigation of the methodological aspects has a dual purpose. Firstly, it allows to illustrate the most commonly used methodologies in order to inform future research with methodological empirical designs that past literature has indicated as effective. Secondly, the investigation is useful to shed light on possible systematic limitations affecting the existing body of knowledge. In particular, certain recurring choices in the methodologies of sampling, data retrieval and data analysis could systematically bias the literature. Indeed, the scope of RQ-1 includes assessing the methodological pluralism within the domain and highlighting possible pitfalls.

### **Feminist entrepreneurs and organizations**

The examples of feminist strands and theories given in the previous section are only a hint of the multitude of feminisms that can be traced (Wendling, 2018). Despite that, even if a comprehensive categorization of feminisms could be proposed, the experiences of feminists would exceed the structures and definitions generated by academic criticism: according to (Grunig et al., 2000) women's experiences can hardly be framed within a single conceptualization of "feminist". Furthermore, Orser et al. (2011) illustrate how the identities of self-declared feminist entrepreneurs eschew stereotypes relating to women entrepreneurs, show unprecedented ways of enacting feminist values, and allow for a critical review of the attribution of certain prescriptive academic discourses to the life stories of feminist entrepreneurs. Based on these considerations, the following research question is formulated:

**RQ-2:** *How is the feminist entrepreneur defined and to which feminist strand such definitions refer to?*

Although to a lesser extent than feminism, also the concept of entrepreneurship has changed over time. Prince et al. (2021) collects the most prominent definitions of entrepreneurship, grouping them by definitional theme: over the course of time, the concept of entrepreneurship has been defined, for example, by associating it with the management of uncertainty, the recognition of opportunities, the creation of value. Building on the assumption that the entrepreneurial field must be placed "at the nexus of opportunities, enterprising individuals and teams, and mode of organizing" (Busenitz et al., 2003), Calás et al. (2009) argue that the conceptualizations of entrepreneurship capture the economic dimension, while neglecting the dimension of social change that is central to feminist discourses. Most theorizations on entrepreneurship indeed do not enough emphasize its potential value of gendered social change. Such theorizations are reflected in the definitions of entrepreneurs that may be exclusionary of minor entrepreneurial instances. RQ-2 aims to shed light on such aspects by providing novel insights from the literature investigating feminist entrepreneurs. The research question

delves both whether the literature has conceptually associated certain feminist strands with entrepreneurship, and whether existing empirical investigations have inductively revealed feminism strands associated with entrepreneurial behavior. Additionally, the question could potentially highlight the feminisms that have received more attention by academic empirical research and trace the strands that encouraged entrepreneurial behavior. According to Petersson McIntyre (2021), third- and fourth-wave feminisms seem to point to entrepreneurship as the preferred route to individual self-fulfillment and socio-economic independence. Some feminist strands have also proven to act as levers and cultural incentives for the development of women's enterprises in highly patriarchal contexts (Althalathini et al., 2022).

In order to provide a complete picture of the characteristics of feminist entrepreneurship investigated in the existing literature, it was deemed necessary to collect information about the industry and the size of companies started by feminist entrepreneurs. Based on that, the following research question is formulated:

**RQ-3:** *What are the industry and the size of the companies run by the feminist entrepreneurs?*

RQ-3 finds justification in that some definitions of feminist entrepreneurs conceptualize them as “[...] change agents who exemplify entrepreneurial acumen in the creation of equity-based outcomes that improve women's quality of life and well-being through innovative products, services and processes” (Orser et al., 2013). Such definitions could limit the ontological boundaries of the category, thus excluding entire entrepreneurial industries. Additionally, the conceptualization proposed by Orser et al. (2013) is related both to the term ‘entrepreneurial feminist’ and to ‘feminist entrepreneur’ (Orser et al., 2011). The inversion of the terms, although they share the same etymological roots, might suggest different meanings: possible new definitions will be evaluated in the discussion phase (see RQ-2). The size of a company has been shown to impact the extent to which the culture and values of its founders are reflected in the business itself (Kotey, 1997): RQ-3 seeks to understand whether the phenomenon also finds a counterpart in the case of feminist values. Within the study, and in line with most of the managerial and entrepreneurial literature, the size of a company is operationalized using the number of employees.

## Research methodology

The systematic literature review is a research methodology aimed at investigating a specific topic by leveraging on existing contributions. Originally developed in the medical field to achieve consistency and standardization in the review of medical treatments (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015), the methodology is currently adopted in several scientific fields, including management (Paul & Criado, 2020; Tranfield et al., 2003), entrepreneurship (Kraus et al., 2020), and gender studies (Santos & Neumeyer, 2021). A systematic literature review allows for the identification, evaluation, and correlation of evidence gathered from previous publications. In particular, systematic reviews have become a preferred tool for



consolidating knowledge related to a domain, theory and/or methodology (Paul & Criado, 2020). In comparison to other approaches to review, the systematic literature review allows for the avoidance of analyses tainted by sporadic and potentially biased coverage of existing evidence, presenting itself as a methodology endowed with replicability, transparency, objectivity, and rigor (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015; Hiebl, 2023). In order to ensure these features, numerous frameworks have been developed to guide and standardize the systematic review process. The research pipeline adopted in this study was informed by several methodological recommendations contained in (Kraus et al., 2020; Tranfield et al., 2003; Xiao & Watson, 2019). As pointed out in Hiebl (2023), the definition of the sample under review constitutes a critical step in the systematic review process, crucial in ensuring its rigor and reproducibility. For this reason, the following part of this section explains all the steps and rationales that led to the definition of the sampled articles.

The steps that guided the study are illustrated in Fig. 1 and explained in the next paragraphs.

Step 1 and Step 2 deal with research planning. In particular, in Step 1 (Problem Formulation) the research questions introduced in the “[Background and research rationale](#)” section are formulated. As shown, the questions are drawn on the basis of an initial analysis of the literature which defined the research background. It is deemed necessary to precisely state the scope of the review, which, in alignment with the defined research questions, focuses on the investigation of empirical studies having feminist entrepreneurship as their subject. Subsequent choices that characterize this research design are therefore made coherently with that scope. In Step 2 (Research Protocol Development) the research protocol is designed: as explained by Kraus et al. (2020), that required the identification of the search database to be queried, the selection of the keywords and formulation of the query, the choice of filters to be applied, the definition of the quality criteria to be met, the definition of the data extraction mode, and the development of the data analysis mode.

In Step 3 (Literature Search) we select 15 primary search terms grouped into two semantic areas (feminism and entrepreneurship). Adopting a precautionary and inclusive approach, the identified search terms are lemmatized: all the search terms led back to the roots “feminis\*” and “entrepren\*” which identify two different etymological families. The final query is formulated as follows: “entrepren\*” AND “feminis\*”. The lemmatization process results in a query whose results include, but are not limited to, those of the query achievable by using the 15 primary identified search terms.

The primary identified search terms, lemmatizations and the final query are shown in Fig. 2.

The selected query was launched on two search engines, Scopus and Web Of Science (WOS): such a choice is justified by the scientific relevance and reliability of the two databases (Burnham, 2006; Li et al., 2018). The search fields of the query were title, abstract and keywords. The initial raw output consisted of 446 (Scopus) and 530 (WOS) documents.

Scopus and WOS allow the raw query output to be filtered by exploiting structured bibliographic data such as year of publication, language or scientific area.



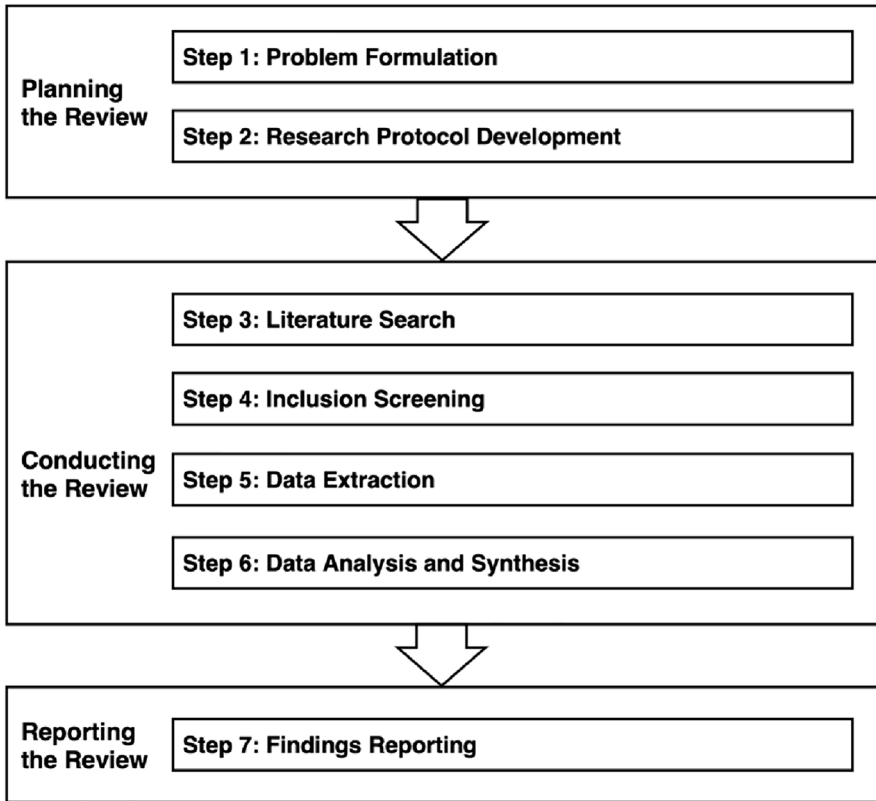


Fig. 1 Systematic literature research pipeline adopted in this study

In Step 4 (Inclusion Screening) we filtered the results to obtain a homogeneous knowledge base by scientific area, language, and publication type. The applied filters are shown in Table 1: the Subject Area filter was set homologically rather than identically, because the two databases index documents by using different classifications. We chose to limit the review to journal articles as they are considered

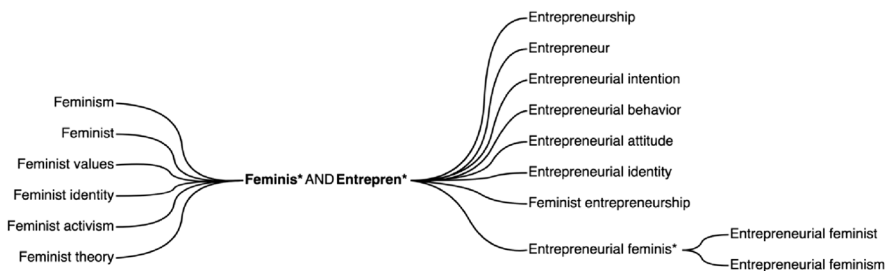


Fig. 2 Search terms grouped by semantic area, lemmatizations, and final query

validated knowledge in the business and management literature (Podsakoff et al., 2005): book, chapter, and conference papers were excluded due to the high variability of the peer review process (Jones et al., 2011). After applying the filters, the cardinalities of the outputs fell to 155 for Scopus and 212 for Web of Science.

After a duplicate elimination phase, titles and abstracts of the papers were read. The reading allowed the results to be skimmed down to a sample of 15 articles. The 15 articles selected were read in their entirety: after reading the full text two articles that were not relevant to the research questions were eliminated. The articles excluded after abstract and full text reading were mainly off topic articles not containing empirical studies, articles adopting feminist theory in areas other from entrepreneurship or aimed at investigating gender stereotypes by adopting feminist approaches. Only empirical articles which could have contributed to even one of the research questions were included. The high false positive rate (more than 95% of the articles selected with the query were discarded) is indicative of a certain caution and laxity in the query design phase. At that stage, the 13 selected articles were read and analyzed to identify additional keywords useful to broaden the search or cited articles potentially useful for answering the research questions. In both cases, the activities did not produce any results: no keywords were identified that were not covered by the formulated query and no reference articles were identified aimed at empirically investigating feminist entrepreneurship. We therefore proceeded with the Data Extraction phase.

In Step 5 (Data Extraction) the selected articles were read and subjected to bibliometric analysis and content analysis. Bibliometric analysis deals with the mapping of literary production related to a topic in a quantitative manner leveraging on structured bibliometric data (Schmitz et al., 2017). In particular, the years of publication, journals and nationality of the authors were analyzed, with the aim of addressing the research questions and define the bibliographical boundaries of the obtained knowledge base. Further bibliometric analysis (e.g., co-citation, co-authorship, keywords co-occurrence) was not deemed appropriate due to the small number of retrieved articles. Therefore, the research presents a only a bibliometric framing of the selected articles.

Content analysis is a methodological tool for textual data analysis, aimed at identifying manifest and/or latent content widely used for the analysis of business and management literature (Gaur & Kumar, 2018). The adoption of content analysis as a data analysis tool allowed the us to code documents by using themes deductively obtained from the research questions formulated and inductively emerging from the knowledge base (Gaur & Kumar, 2018; Jones et al., 2011; Liñán & Fayolle, 2015;

**Table 1** Filters applied to obtain the knowledge base under review

Filter	Scopus	WOS
<b>Subject Area</b>	Business, Management and Accounting; Economics, Economy and Finance	Business Economics
<b>Document type</b>	Article	Article
<b>Language</b>	English	English

Thorpe et al., 2005). The following themes, grouped in two categories, namely ‘Theories and Methodologies’ and ‘Definitions and Features’ were defined a priori to address the research questions:

- Theories and methodologies: ‘Theoretical framing’, ‘Methodological protocol’;
- Definitions and features: ‘Feminist entrepreneur definition’, ‘Feminist strands’, ‘Industry’, ‘Size’, ‘Country’.

As to the theme ‘Methodological protocol’, data were collected on the unit of analysis of the identified works, sampling techniques, sample cardinality and characterization, and methodologies of data retrieval and analysis used. These a priori defined elements were derived from those indicated as fundamental for the development of a research protocol in (Wahyuni, 2012).

In Step 6 (Data Analysis and Synthesis), the textual unit coded in Step 5 were summarized, compared with each other and discussed. In Step 7 (Findings Reporting), the output of the previous step was discussed together with the bibliometric framing.

## Findings

In this section, the retrieved knowledge base is described and the results of the analysis, classified as bibliometric framing and content analysis, are reported.

### Bibliometric framing

The knowledge base obtained by applying the protocol consists of 13 articles, covering a time span of approximately 10 years. No empirical research capable of satisfying the search criteria was identified before 2011. Table 2 provides the list of the articles, accompanied by the authors’ name, year, journal and country.

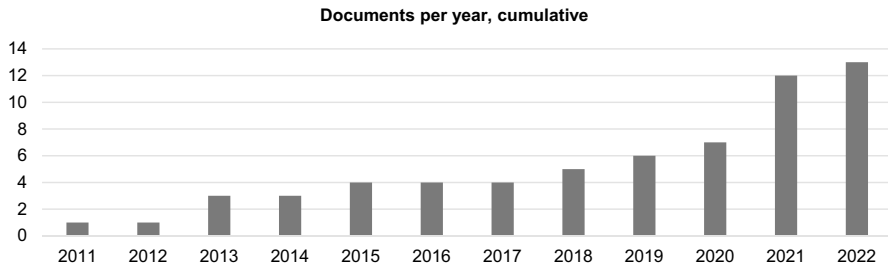
The first article (Orser et al., 2011) that empirically investigates the phenomenon of feminist entrepreneurship dates back to 2011. However, a significant increase in the scientific interest towards the topic is not registered until 2021, as shown in Fig. 3. Despite that, the overall low number of identified articles confirms that the empirical analysis of feminist entrepreneurship is an underdeveloped research niche (Harquail, 2019).

The literature landscape is dominated by ‘*Gender, Work and Organization*’, a journal historically focused on gender issues and feminist knowledge and practice (John Wiley & Sons, 2022), followed by ‘*Journal of Business Ethics*’, and by ‘*Gender in Management*’, ‘*Equality, diversity, and Inclusion*’, ‘*International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*’, ‘*Journal for International Business and Entrepreneurship Development*’, ‘*International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*’, and ‘*Business History*’.

Geographically, most of the studies are conducted in Canadian, US and European institutions. Scholars are engaged in research that is often conducted on samples

Table 2 Final list of the articles included within the knowledge base

ID	Title	Author	Year	Journal
1	Feminist attributes and entrepreneurial identity	Orser B., Elliott C., Leck J.	2011	Gender in Management
2	Entrepreneurial Feminists: Perspectives About Opportunity Recognition and Governance	Orser B., Elliott C., Leck J.	2013	Journal of Business Ethics
3	Women entrepreneurship in Mongolia: The role of culture on entrepreneurial motivation	Aramand M.	2013	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
4	Secular and Islamic feminist entrepreneurship in Turkey	Özkazanç-Pan B.	2015	International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship
5	Women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh: Influential aspects and their relationship in small and medium enterprise involvement	Siddique M. Z. R.	2018	Journal for International Business and Entrepreneurship Development
6	Uneasy passages between neoliberalism and feminism: Social inclusion and financialization in Israel's empowerment microfinance	Kemp A., Berkovitch N.	2019	Gender, Work and Organization
7	Theorizing postfeminist communities: How gender-inclusive meetups address gender inequity in high-tech industries	Petrucci L.	2020	Gender, Work and Organization
8	Women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia: Feminist solidarity and political activism in disguise?	Alkhaled S.	2021	Gender, Work and Organization
9	The Impact of Islamic Feminism in Empowering Women's Entrepreneurship in Conflict Zones: Evidence from Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine	Althathini D., Al-Dajani H., Apostolopoulos N.	2021	Journal of Business Ethics
10	Commodifying feminism: Economic choice and agency in the context of lifestyle influencers and gender consultants	Petersson McIntyre M.	2021	Gender, Work and Organization
11	Islam, Arab women's entrepreneurship and the construal of success	Tlaihss H.A., McAdam M.	2021	International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research
12	Unexpected Lives: The Intersection of Islam and Arab Women's Entrepreneurship	Tlaihss H.A., McAdam M.	2021	Journal of Business Ethics
13	Cooking the books: Feminist restaurant owners' relationships with banks, loans and taxes	Ketchum A.D.	2022	Business History



**Fig. 3** Bar chart visualizing the cumulative of published articles within the knowledge base, per year

selected from their home countries or, as in the case of Ketchum (2022), in archival research focused on the history of feminist local businesses.

The keywords that appear more than once are, in order of frequency of occurring: women entrepreneurship (6), feminism (4), Islam (3), Islamic feminism (2), neoliberalism (2), entrepreneurship (2).

### Content analysis

This section illustrates the themes detected within the knowledge base. In the first part the main themes that emerged are illustrated and related to each other. The following subsections (“Theories and methodologies”, “Definitions and features”) contain the results of the coding adopting the preconceived themes defined based on the research questions.

The selected articles are characterized by a considerable heterogeneity of topics and aims. The earlier studies, dated back to 2011 (Orser et al., 2011) and 2013 (Orser et al., 2013), investigate the phenomenon of feminist entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial feminists. Orser et al. (2011) disproves the archetype of the female entrepreneur described in the literature as “caring and nurturing” (Machold et al., 2008), by empirically demonstrating that feminist entrepreneurs adopt a set of attributes to describe their entrepreneurial identity that refutes the feminine portrayal mentioned in some feminist literature. Orser et al. (2013) shifts the focus from feminist entrepreneurs to entrepreneurial feminists, and from the dimension of attributes to that of values. In particular, the authors investigate the way in which entrepreneurial feminists enact feminist values in the opportunity recognition phase and how they are reflected in their governance and leadership. The results of the study show how the experiences of entrepreneurial feminists contradict that feminist critique that sees business enterprise working “... to the detriment of all women” (Walker et al., 2004), and likewise refute the neo-classical paradigm of the entrepreneur exclusively interested in the economic return. Entrepreneurial feminists indeed seem to be able to witness for organizational and entrepreneurial models in which feminist ethics is firmly intertwined with value creation processes. The relationship between feminism and entrepreneurial identity is also explored in (Pettersson McIntyre, 2021): the research investigates the meaning that some female entrepreneurs (influencers and gender consultants) attribute to feminism and feminist values. The paper critically

illustrates how the attribute “feminist” is placed in relation to certain entrepreneurial activities and interpreted according to sensibilities that refer to the choice of feminism and post-feminism. According to the results of the study, feminist values are interpreted by entrepreneurs as something to be used in their individual professional and entrepreneurial careers, and not as a constituent trait of their identity.

The studies cited so far empirically investigate the relationship between feminisms and entrepreneurial identities while maintaining the individual as the unit of analysis. On the other hand, in Petrucci (2020) and Kemp and Berkovitch (2020), the units of analysis are feminist communities and organizations, respectively. In (Petrucci, 2020) the training and mentorship strategies adopted in the tech sector by postfeminist communities are investigated. Postfeminist communities prove useful in generating supportive, inclusive, and safe environments that support individuals in their professional careers and trigger (or accelerate) organizational change. Kemp and Berkovitch (2020) investigates the practices, narratives, discourses, and struggles of some feminist NGOs that advocate for economic empowerment of women through micro-financed entrepreneurship. The study reveals how feminism and the neoliberal paradigm “both collude and collide”. In (Ketchum, 2022) the analysis of how feminist organizations have co-existed with the neo-liberal economic paradigm assumes the contours of an historiographic investigation. In particular, by analyzing the history of Canadian feminist cafés and bars that sprang up between the 1970s and 1980s, Ketchum (2022) contributes to documenting the entrepreneurial experiences of feminist women, largely neglected by academic research. The collected testimonies and documents allow for the historical investigation of entrepreneurial activities whose inception and management openly challenged the establishment.

While the literature focusing on Western cases mostly, but not exclusively, investigates the phenomenon of feminist entrepreneurship as a paradigm that challenges the neoclassical entrepreneurial paradigm, in the rest of the world the feminist entrepreneurship literature focuses on the role feminisms can play in deeply challenging patriarchal social and cultural structures. In (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021a) and (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021b) the role that Islamic feminism plays in the female entrepreneurial experience in Lebanon is investigated. Specifically, in (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021a) the scholars highlight how the feminist interpretation of Islam provides Lebanese women entrepreneurs with “... entrepreneurial resilience within the context of adverse socio-cultural barriers and masculine stereotypes”. Along with entrepreneurial resilience, it emerges how the Islamic feminism allows Islamic teachings to be internalized both as a vehicle to personal growth and as ethical guidebook to business growth. In (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021b) the authors investigate the Lebanese female entrepreneurial system and highlights how Islamic feminism allows the women entrepreneurs “... to deflect the negative influence of socio-cultural values and norms to understand the nature and causes of widespread, traditional, conservative interpretations of Islam and to identify and draw clear distinctions between the teachings and principles of Islam and the traditional, masculine gender norms which are often confused in patriarchal contexts”. Such studies demonstrate the critical role played by Islamic religiousness, swayed by a feminist interpretation of the Koran, in shaping the entrepreneurial behavior of Muslim women. Althalathini et al. (2022) further confirms

these findings in the contexts of Afghan, Iraqi and Palestinian conflict. The authors investigate the influence of Islamic feminism on women's empowerment in traditionally patriarchal and conflict-ridden contexts. The cases analyzed in the research highlight how a feminist interpretation of Islam is able to legitimize female entrepreneurial behavior and challenge gendered social norms and inequalities. The subject of Islamic feminism was also previously addressed in (Özkazanç-Pan, 2015): the scholar demonstrates how both Islamic and secular feminism contribute to challenging patriarchal norms by elevating entrepreneurship as women's empowerment tool. The research also emphasizes the neo-liberal development paradigm contribution in perpetuating gender inequality within the Turkish context: in this sense, Islamic and secular feminisms present themselves as path-breaking alternatives to both the neo-liberal political/economic paradigm and the patriarchal cultural tradition. Alkhaled (2021) longitudinally explores the process of commitment and encroachment that leads, in the Saudi Arabian environment (where declaring oneself as a feminist is forbidden), female entrepreneurs to create organizational networks supportive for women, to develop feminist awareness and solidarity, and finally to become political activists. The subject of Islamic feminism and its role in the empowerment of Muslim women is thus a topic that has been particularly explored in the business literature.

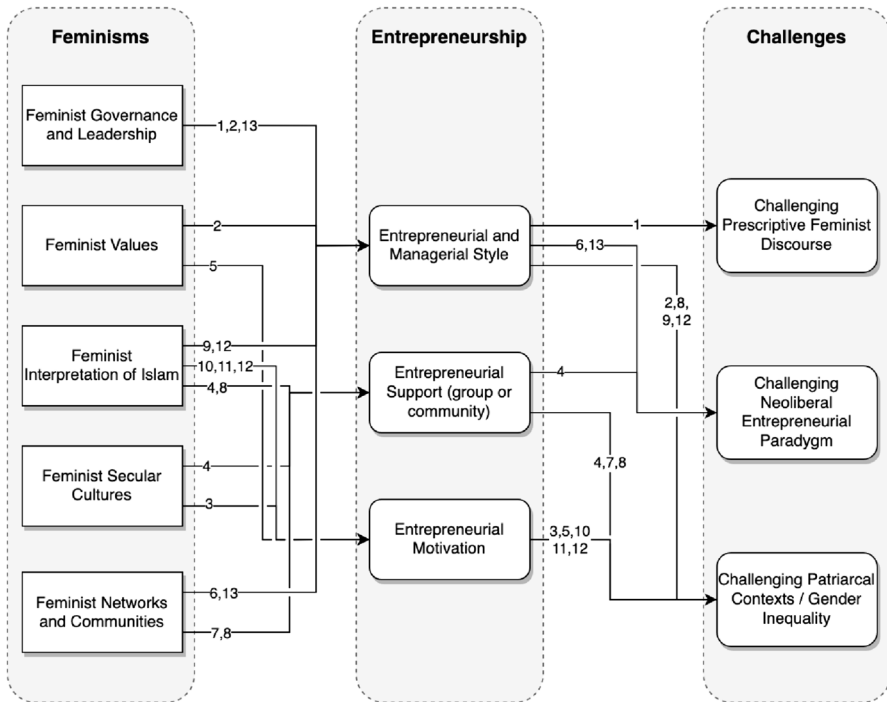
Other studies have investigated other non-Western business realities in which feminist secular cultures seems to have contributed to the emergence of new entrepreneurial identities. In (Aramand, 2013) the synergetic relationship between Mongolian nomadic culture, secular feminist culture and Asian collectivist culture in the development of entrepreneurial motivation is explored. Siddique (2018) investigates the relationship between feminism and entrepreneurial skills in the Bangladeshi context: the research empirically and quantitatively demonstrates a positive correlation between the construct 'own sense of feminism' and entrepreneurial skills. This relationship appears to validate the scholar's hypothesis that feminisms encourage women to obtain adequate entrepreneurial training.

As illustrated so far, the content analysis led to the identification, within the knowledge base, of a number of recurring themes relating to three categories: feminisms, entrepreneurship, and challenges. Specifically, all the identified works relate feminism-related themes to one or more entrepreneurship-related aspect. The selected articles place such relations in a dialectical perspective now with the neo-liberal entrepreneurial paradigm, now with patriarchal cultural contexts, now with feminist discourse. A comprehensive representation of the identified themes and the papers that explored them is presented in Fig. 4. The numbers on the arrows refer to the ID code associated to papers reported in Table 2. For example, Aramand (2013) – ID3 in Table 2 - investigates the role of *feminist secular cultures* in supporting *entrepreneurial motivation* to challenge *gender inequality*.

## Theories and methodologies

All the identified studies rely on qualitative research protocols (Aspers & Corte, 2019) except for (Siddique, 2018). As shown in Table 3, most of the qualitative research protocols adopt semi-structured interviews and/or document analysis. The selection of these methodological tools is in line with the nature of the





**Fig. 4** Themes identified in the literature and the relationships between them

samples, which largely consist of individuals and, to a lesser extent, of organizations and communities. The sampling technique, when explicitly declared within the papers, is generally purposive, possibly followed by a snowballing phase. It is particularly striking that during the sampling phase several studies have resorted to an interviewee recruitment that exploit the researchers' network of personal and professional acquaintances.

Homogeneity at the methodological level is not reflected at the theoretical level: the identified studies adopt heterogeneous theoretical frameworks because engaged on epistemologically different fields. Such heterogeneity derives from the diversity of aims that connotes the selected articles. Orser et al. (2011) adopt the identity theory to frame entrepreneurship. According to those scholars, becoming an entrepreneur means embarking on a path of identity construction and negotiation in which categories such as ethnicity and gender are also included. Such a theoretical framing is functional to the analysis of entrepreneurship also at the individual level: in particular (Orser et al., 2011) identify and analyze the sets of attributes used by feminist entrepreneurs to describe their identity. The same scholars attempt to frame the feminist entrepreneurship within one of the three major entrepreneurial theories (neoclassical theory, contingency theory, relational theory). On the other hand, Aramand (2013) and Siddique (2018) embrace two motivational theories, respectively motivational theories and the theory of planned behavior. Motivational theories shift the focus of analysis from identity to behavior. Among the

**Table 3** Theoretical-methodological framing traceable within the collected documents. The hyphen indicates the lack of an explicit reference to theory or sampling technique

ID	Title	Author	Theoretical lenses	Methodology	Unit of analysis	Sampling	Sample cardinality and typology
1	Feminist attributes and entrepreneurial identity	Orser B.J., Elliott C., Leck J.	Identity theory	Semi structured interviews	Individual	Purposive	15 self-identified feminist entrepreneurs
2	Entrepreneurial Feminists: Perspectives About Opportunity Recognition and Governance	Orser B., Elliott C., Leck J.	Neo-classical theory, contingency theory, relational theory (theories comparison)	Semi structured interviews	Individual	Purposive	15 entrepreneurial feminist
3	Women entrepreneurship in Mongolia: The role of culture on entrepreneurial motivation	Aramand M.	Motivational theories	Semi structured questionnaire administered through interviews	Individual, organization	- (Purposive)	2 women founded, women owned companies
4	Secular and Islamic feminist entrepreneurship in Turkey	Özkazanç-Pan B.	- (Theory building)	- (Document analysis)	Organization	- (Purposive)	2 women organizations aimed at women empowerment
5	Women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh: Influential aspects and their relationship in small and medium enterprise involvement	Zillur Rahman Siddique Md.	Theory of planned behavior	Structured questionnaire Confirmatory Factor Analysis Multiple Regression Analysis	Individual	Randomic	300 women entrepreneurs

Table 3 (continued)

ID	Title	Author	Theoretical lenses	Methodology	Unit of analysis	Sampling	Sample cardinality and typology
6	Uneasy passages between neoliberalism and feminism: Social inclusion and financialization in Israel's empowerment microfinance	Kemp A., Berkovitch N.	Grounded theory	Methodological pluralism Structured and unstructured interviews, document analysis, single case study	Individual, organization	- (Purposive)	30 NGO directors, 17 actors, activists or professionals in the field of economic empowerment of women, 13 events, 1 organization for women economic empowerment
7	Theorizing postfeminist communities: How gender-inclusive meetups address gender inequity in high-tech industries	Petrucci L.	- (Theory building)	Document analysis, interviews	Individual, Community	- (Purposive)	21 people involved in women-in-tech organizations (19 women)
8	Women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia: Feminist solidarity and political activism in disguise?	Alkhaled S.	Theory of quiet encroachment	Semi structured interview	Individual	Purposive, snowballing	15 women entrepreneurs
9	The Impact of Islamic Feminism in Empowering Women's Entrepreneurship in Conflict Zones: Evidence from Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine	Althalathini D., Al-Dajani H., Apostolopoulos N.	Islamic feminism	Semi structured interviews	Individual	Purposive, snowballing	16 Muslim women entrepreneurs

Table 3 (continued)

ID	Title	Author	Theoretical lenses	Methodology	Unit of analysis	Sampling	Sample cardinality and typology
10	Commodifying feminism: Economic choice and agency in the context of lifestyle influencers and gender consultants	Peterson McIntyre M.	- (Theory building)	Ethnography	Individual	- (Purposive)	20 gender equality consultant, 12 influencers
11	Islam, Arab women's entrepreneurship and the construal of success	Tlaiss H.A., McAdam M.	- (Theory building)	Semi structured interviews	Individual	Purposive, snowballing	25 Muslim women entrepreneurs
12	Unexpected Lives: The Intersection of Islam and Arab Women's Entrepreneurship	Tlaiss H.A., McAdam M.	Structuration theory	Semi structured interviews	Individual	Purposive	21 Muslim women entrepreneurs
13	Cooking the books: Feminist restaurant owners' relationships with banks, loans and taxes	Ketchum A.D.	-	Archival analysis, interviews	Individual, Organization	- (Purposive)	12 feminist café founders, 6 historical feminist café

motivational theories, the theory of planned behavior is certainly one of the best known and applied in the entrepreneurial field, both for qualitative research and, more often (Siddique, 2018), to conduct quantitative surveys.

Studies investigating the contribution of Islamic feminism on entrepreneurial behavior embrace structuration theory (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021a) and theory of quiet encroachment (Alkhaled, 2021), shifting the level of analysis from the behavioral/individual to the sociological/cultural level. Structuration theory is useful to framing complex and multidimensional social phenomena, insisting “on the potential for human agency and reflexivity to solve conflicts between the dimensions of structure through choosing actions deliberately and executing them effectively, even, in defiance of the rules and structure” (Giddens, 1984; Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021a). The theory of quiet encroachment makes it possible to frame silent and chronic social phenomena. In the case of (Alkhaled, 2021), such theory is used to demonstrate how entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia serves as a platform to experience feminist solidarity and catalyze social change.

Many of the identified studies attempt to explore the phenomenon of feminist entrepreneurship with the (more or less) explicit aim of laying the epistemological foundations of new theories. Kemp and Berkovitch (2020), for example, adopt a grounded approach to explain the conflicts between neo-liberalism and feminism. The considerable amount of research aimed at exploratory theory-building points out the novelty and uniqueness of the feminist entrepreneurial phenomenon. The theoretical and methodological designs adopted within the retrieved articles also suggests a certain difficulty in framing feminist entrepreneurship within the major entrepreneurial theories (e.g. Orser et al., 2013).

## Definitions and features

The analyzed papers lead to different definitions of feminist entrepreneur, when explicit: not all works manifestly contain specific definitions of feminism and entrepreneur, and that does not contribute to univocally identify the feminist entrepreneurial subgroup. First of all, the definitions of entrepreneurship are not completely homogeneous. Orser et al. (2011) for example conceptualizes entrepreneur, business owner, and self-employed as a whole category. In addition, feminist entrepreneurs are identified as “... female entrepreneurs who own and operate firms targeting female clients, with a double bottom line, one that includes helping women overcome subordination” in the sample recruiting phase and defined as “...change agents who exemplify entrepreneurial acumen in the creation of equity-based outcomes that improve women’s quality of life and well-being through innovative products, services and processes”. A few years later, Orser et al. (2013) coined the expression “entrepreneurial feminist” and provided a formal definition identical with the one previously provided for feminist entrepreneur. Such definition refers to the feminist literature that sees the entrepreneur as a change agent (Calás et al., 2009) and is adopted in (Alkhaled, 2021) as well. Within the identified literature, however, definitional frames of ‘entrepreneur’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ refer to topics other than social change: in (Siddique, 2018) entrepreneurship is defined as “... the art of creation of business with

profitability and future growth intention along with the skills to run an organization and overcome risk barriers”. In (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021b) the entrepreneur is operationalized as “as an individual who owned and managed a business and was self-employed”, in line with what stated in (Orser et al., 2011).

The analyzed documents rarely contain a reference to one or more feminist strands. On the other hand, many studies consider feminisms as deeply intertwined with national cultures. Figure 5 shows the geography of the studies constituting the knowledge base. Nine over 13 of the selected studies focus on Muslim and North American (US and Canada) settings.

Studies aimed at investigating the relationship between feminism and entrepreneurship in Islamic contexts situate and explain entrepreneurial experiences by adopting Islamic Feminism as part of their theoretical background. As illustrated in (Alkhaled, 2021), this is due to the considerable difficulties of sampling entrepreneurs that define themselves as feminists in contexts wherein feminism and activism are institutionally outlawed or culturally unaccepted.

Also, with reference to data on the industry and the size of the surveyed companies, the picture is extremely heterogeneous (see Table 4). The industries investigated range from tourism to consulting; however, most studies analyze entrepreneurial experiences coming from different sectors.

## Discussion

The data presented in the “Findings” section proved to be useful in addressing the research questions.

As to RQ-1 (Theoretical lenses and methodologies), the identified theoretical lenses are consistent with the entrepreneurial research domain, even though a hesitancy in uncritically applying the major entrepreneurial theories can be highlighted, to the point that, Orser et al. (2013) discuss in which of the entrepreneurial macro-theories feminist entrepreneurship could be framed. Indeed,

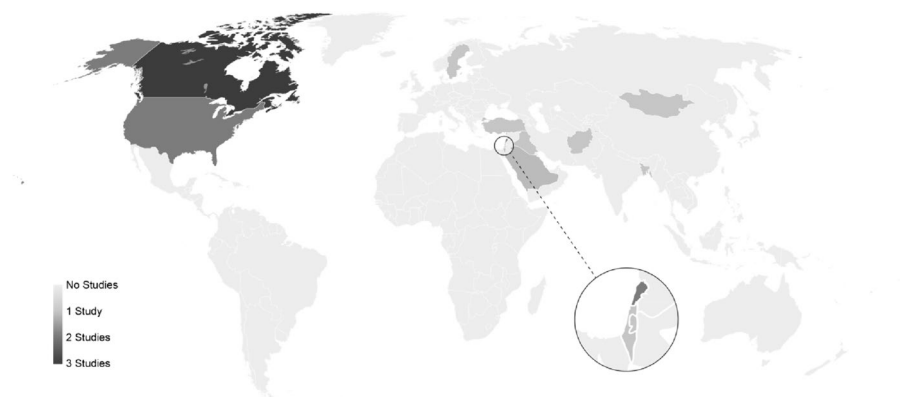


Fig. 5 Geography of the selected empirical cases

**Table 4** Industry, country, and size of the companies examined by the identified articles

ID	Title	Author	Industry	Country	Size (number of employees)
1	Feminist attributes and entrepreneurial identity	Orser B.J., Elliott C., Leck J.	Mixed (e.g., retail, manufacturing, consulting, no profit)	Canada	Mixed, majority micro (<5 employees)
2	Entrepreneurial Feminists: Perspectives About Opportunity Recognition and Governance	Orser B.J., Elliott C., Leck J.	Mixed (e.g., retail, manufacturing, consulting, no profit)	Canada	Mixed, majority micro (<5 employees)
3	Women entrepreneurship in Mongolia: The role of culture on entrepreneurial motivation	Aramand M.	Tourism	Mongolia	- (Small)
4	Secular and Islamic feminist entrepreneurship in Turkey	Özkazanç-Pan B.	Women empowerment	Turkey	-
5	Women entrepreneurship in Bangladesh: Influential aspects and their relationship in small and medium enterprise involvement	Zillur Rahman Siddique Md.	Mixed (e.g., furnishing, handcraft, tailoring)	Bangladesh	Mixed
6	Uneasy passages between neoliberalism and feminism: Social inclusion and financialization in Israel's empowerment microfinance	Kemp A., Berkovitch N.	NGO (financial services)	Israel	-
7	Theorizing postfeminist communities: How gender-inclusive meetups address gender inequity in high-tech industries	Petrucci L.	Tech	US	-
8	Women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia: Feminist solidarity and political activism in disguise?	Alkhaled S.	Mixed (e.g., fashion, retail, marketing)	Saudi Arabia	-



Table 4 (continued)

ID	Title	Author	Industry	Country	Size (number of employees)
9	The Impact of Islamic Feminism in Empowering Women's Entrepreneurship in Conflict Zones: Evidence from Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine	Althalathini D., Al-Dajani H., Apostolopoulos N.	Mixed (e.g., embroidery, pharmacy, carpentry)	Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine	- Mixed
10	Commodifying feminism: Economic choice and agency in the context of lifestyle influencers and gender consultants	Petersson McIntyre M.	Consulting, social media influencer	Sweden	- Micro (Self employed individuals)
11	Islam, Arab women's entrepreneurship and the construal of success	Tlaiss H.A., McAdam M.	Mixed (e.g., healthcare, tourism, event planning)	Lebanon	- Micro and Small (9–20 employees)
12	Unexpected Lives: The Intersection of Islam and Arab Women's Entrepreneurship	Tlaiss H.A., McAdam M.	Mixed (e.g., retail, consulting, real estate)	Lebanon	- Micro and small (9–20 employees)
13	Cooking the books: Feminist restaurant owners' relationships with banks, loans and taxes	Ketchum A.D.	Catering	US, Canada	-

none of the identified studies propose an organic and comprehensive framing capable of shaping feminist entrepreneurship as a theoretically grounded concept. Feminist entrepreneurship thus remains an empirical phenomenon that seems to escape an orthodox and simplistic framing, standing in dialectical contrast to both the neoliberal paradigm and certain feminist critiques. The adopted theoretical lenses are often informed by feminist theory, with both theoretical and methodological implications. In line with the suggestions formulated by Ahl (2006) in their seminal paper, gender is not used to conduct static comparative investigations within the identified studies. From this point of view, most of the samples contain, where stated, subjects who identify with the female gender. However, in the absence of theoretically grounded framing, the broad female representativeness is not based on theoretical implications nor precise operationalizations, except in the case of (Orser et al., 2011), but rather derives from specific research needs combined, as discussed below, with the choice of purposive and snowballing sampling methods. In order to develop a theory capable of explaining feminist entrepreneurship, we argue that, from a philosophical-theoretical point of view, pragmatic approaches (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019) oriented towards theory building could be exploited. The use of such approaches for the framing of the feminist entrepreneurial phenomenon could allow not only the development of theories capable of framing it, but also the integration and expansion of existing entrepreneurial theories adopting mixed methodologies. From a methodological point of view, there is a certain homogeneity in adopting qualitative research protocols. The dominance of qualitative approaches is historically connected within feminist research (e.g., Letherby, 2004; Oakley, 1998). Extant research proves to be engaged in the description and qualification phases of the phenomenon (Hlady Rispal et al., 2015), adopting purposeful methodologies. From a methodological point of view, the lack of a theoretical framework also entails the lack of a coherent conceptualization of feminism and entrepreneurship within the research domain. Entrepreneurship is considered a complex phenomenon that cannot be entirely represented within a single theoretical framework: feminisms add complexity by also presenting themselves as extremely heterogeneous movements and cultures. Studies on feminist entrepreneurship do not shy away from considering the complexities related to the two concepts and resort to qualitative case studies that seem, at present, generally preparatory to the development of future theories. It is no coincidence that the identification of feminist entrepreneurs often takes place in an unstructured manner or by resorting to the self-attribution of the attribute 'feminist' by the sample members. However, feminist entrepreneurial research could already rely on methodological tools for measuring feminist identity, which have already been developed within the socio-psychological literature (Henley et al., 1998; Lee & Wessel, 2022). Such tools could enable and accelerate the adoption of quantitative research protocols, thus contributing to the theoretical and methodological enrichment of the research domain.

As to RQ-2 (Definitions and feminist strands), the analysis points out that the terms feminist entrepreneur and entrepreneurial feminist identify different categories. When referring to feminist entrepreneurs, Orser et al. (2011) adopts the already mentioned definition: "female entrepreneurs who own and operate firms targeting

female clients, with a double bottom line, one that includes helping women overcome subordination" so binding the category 'feminist entrepreneurs' to a gender (female). Such definition excludes those entrepreneurs who enact their values in ways that are strategically independent from the choice of targeting women. Feminist values can indeed affect leadership, managerial approach, governance and self-legitimization process. In addition, as acknowledged in the Islamic feminism literature, entrepreneurs do not always explicitly manifest feminist values within their business, although these are traceable in their experiences.

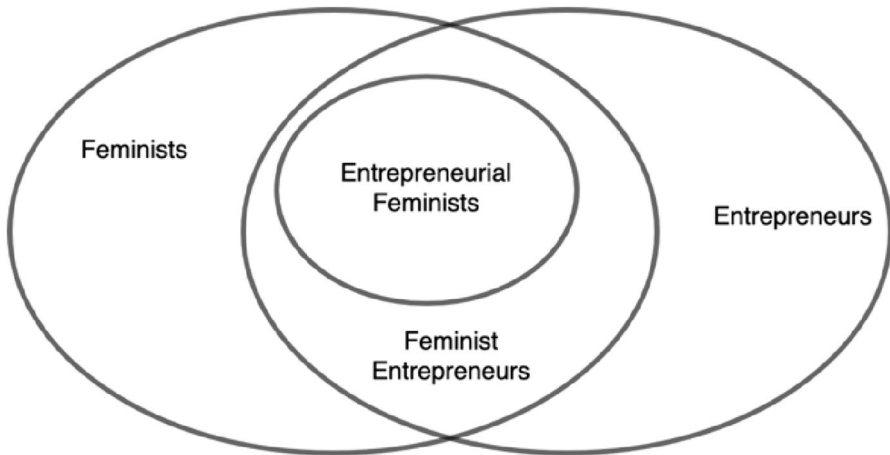
In the attempt to make a critical synthesis of what arises from the literature, we define:

- Feminists: individuals who recognize men's and women's unequal conditions and desire to change that (Ahl, 2004, p. 16; Orser et al., 2013);
- Entrepreneurs: individuals who own and manage a business and are self-employed (Orser et al., 2011; Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021b);
- Feminist entrepreneur: entrepreneurs who recognize men's and women's unequal conditions and act, manifestly or latently, to pursue gender equality (derived from Ahl, 2004; Orser et al., 2013);
- Entrepreneurial feminist: change agents who exemplify entrepreneurial acumen in the creation of equity-based outcomes that improve women's quality of life and well-being through innovative products, services and processes (Alkhaled, 2021; Orser et al., 2013).

The proposed definitions, formulated based on the papers identified within the study, are related among each other as represented in Fig. 6.

The ontological boundaries of the categories defined do not appear to be linked to either biological sex or gender. Based on the retrieved studies, the definition of feminist entrepreneur provided is in line with the experiences gathered and deliberately broad and inclusive, free of any prescriptive indications acting on the strategic dimensions of the enterprise (e.g. customer segment). Entrepreneurial feminists are represented as a subset of the category feminist entrepreneurs: they are configured as change-oriented entrepreneurs who pursue gender equality through the development of innovative processes, products and services, in line with the definition provided in (Orser et al., 2013). However, the proposed ontology does not contain information on the ontological relationships between the represented categories and other entrepreneurial subcategories, such as social entrepreneurs or ecopreneurs. Such ontological relationships could be explored by future research both at the conceptual and empirical levels. In addition, the selected studies do not delve into how the feminist identity of entrepreneurs is reflected in their business strategy. From the point of view of entrepreneurial studies, the research allows to provide a retrospective framing capable of justifying subsequent theory driven or theory building approaches.

In the reviewed literature no evidence of concepts, movements or cultures specifically involved in the feminist entrepreneurial experience is reported. Islamic feminism emerges in the account of the experiences of some entrepreneurs. However, Islamic feminism is not always expression of a manifestly declared identity trait, but rather the result of an a-posteriori interpretation of the authors of the studies. Such



**Fig. 6** Ontology derived from the collected definitions

studies suggest the possibility of acting for gender equality even latently, silently, in a non-demonstrated and unclaimed manner: these ways of expressing feminism are well explained by the theory of quiet encroachment and contribute to strip the term feminist entrepreneur of the identity and manifest instance that seems to characterize Western experiences. For those reasons, our definition of feminist entrepreneur mentions that feminist values could be enacted both “manifestly and latently”. Furthermore, it has recorded relative absence of overtly cross-cultural studies aimed at detecting the differences and similarities between various feminist entrepreneurial experiences. The work also contributes to informing feminist research and gender studies about an emerging phenomenon, i.e. feminist entrepreneurship, which seems, as emerged in our study, poorly represented and investigated.

As to RQ-3 (Industry and Size), the review shows that feminist entrepreneurs operate in several different industries. Most studies investigate samples containing heterogeneous entrepreneurial experiences in terms of industry and size. On the other hand, a certain homogeneity can be observed in terms of size: studies tend to focus on micro or small enterprises. In any case, none of the studies used size or industry as comparative analytical variables, so further confirming that the domain is still academically unexplored.

## Conclusions

Feminist entrepreneurs are an underexplored entrepreneurial reality at the level of empirical academic research. The neo-liberal paradigm sees entrepreneurship as the ultimate expression of individual human fulfilment, and presents the entrepreneurial world as freely accessible. The dominant entrepreneurial models, also, provide prejudicial representations of the entrepreneur and contribute to the exclusion of minorities from the entrepreneurial world. By using a systematic literature analysis

protocol embedded with bibliometric framing and content analysis, we investigated extant literature aimed at empirically investigating the relations between feminisms and entrepreneurship to shed light on the theoretical and methodological frameworks used, the definitions and operationalization adopted, and the characteristics of the samples investigated. The results confirmed that feminist entrepreneurship is described as a challenger of the neoliberal model and highly patriarchal contexts. The research carried out on feminist entrepreneurs investigates different aspects of the entrepreneurial experience, ranging from entrepreneurial identity and leadership to networking and community building. Different theoretical frameworks are used to adapt to the topics investigated: such heterogeneity is not reflected at the methodological level, where the tool of the semi-open interview emerged as dominant. The large number of studies aimed at exploring the possibility of creating new theories underlines the novelty of the topic and the need to identify or develop a theory capable of framing feminist values and ethics in the entrepreneurial field, as also argued in (Orser et al., 2013). At the definitional level, the identified studies have not always adopted a precise definition and operationalization of feminist entrepreneurship. Also, despite the extreme fragmentation of concepts pertaining to feminism, scholars rarely associate their samples to a particular feminist strand. That results in a lack of homogeneity in the studies which could be overcome by leveraging on the sociological-psychological literature that tries to frame the feminist experiences in distinct categories (e.g., Henley et al., 1998; Lee & Wessel, 2022) as suggested in the “Discussion” section. The literature has investigated feminist entrepreneurs working in different industries: it seems, however, that the heterogeneity is more due to the difficulty of identifying feminist entrepreneurs pertaining to the same industry than to the need to include the industry as an element of investigation.

The systematic literature review made it possible, from a research point of view to collect, analyze and compare the literature on feminist entrepreneurship, so allowing the main themes, theoretical lenses and methodological approaches to be highlighted. Also, a first attempt of defining an ontology concerning feminist entrepreneurs is provided. The ontology can be expanded and further detailed by future research. Finally, the work highlights the themes and relationships between them so providing researchers with a summary of the knowledge currently available on the topic.

From a managerial perspective, the research contributed to analyzing and comparing heterogeneous entrepreneurial experiences, laying the foundations for a holistic understanding of the feminist entrepreneurial phenomenon. From a societal point of view, the research contributes to gathering and synthesizing knowledge on feminist entrepreneurship, a phenomenon potentially disruptive in terms of impact on local and national economies, as well as on the lives and careers of individuals traditionally excluded from the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Starting from the considerations illustrated in the Discussion, issues that could be further investigated include: (i) the role of feminisms on entrepreneurial experiences within unexplored cultural settings (e.g., Europe and Africa); (ii) how feminist values are or could be translated into more environmentally and socially sustainable entrepreneurial choices; (iii) how feminist ethics is introduced and translated at the level of business model and processes. With regard to the latter two points, some initial attempts of research can be retrieved within the grey literature (Harquail, 2016,

2019). Also, further studies could deal with the development of grounded theoretical frameworks able of explaining the phenomenon of feminist entrepreneurship.

The paper is not exempt from limitations. Despite the accurate literature review protocol, it is not certain that all the material studies with the themes were selected. The set of keywords used and the filters applied, despite the adoption of an approach that, by leveraging on lemmatization, ensured a certain caution, could have excluded potentially relevant research.

**Author contributions** Conceptualization: Francesco Paolo Lagrasta; Methodology: Francesco Paolo Lagrasta; Formal analysis and investigation: Francesco Paolo Lagrasta; Writing - original draft preparation: Francesco Paolo Lagrasta; Writing - review and editing: Barbara Scozzi, Pierpaolo Pontrandolfo, Francesco Paolo Lagrasta; Supervision: Barbara Scozzi, Pierpaolo Pontrandolfo.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Politecnico di Bari within the CRUI-CARE Agreement. The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

**Data availability** None – Not applicable.

**Code availability** None – Not applicable.

## Declarations

**Ethics approval** None – Not applicable.

**Consent** None – Not applicable.

**Competing interests** The authors have no financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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