

Entrepreneurship, Neurodiversity & Gender

If I had a wish, I would make it compulsory for every stakeholder in the entrepreneurship ecosystem to read this excellent book. Policymakers and enterprise support agencies need to truly understand the additional and distinctive challenges faced by disadvantaged communities (e.g. neurodivergent women) wishing to start their own business and how best they can be supported. As highlighted in this book, it would also help if people in the ecosystem recognised the enormous entrepreneurial potential that remains untapped within the disabled community.

Professor Tom Cooney, College of Business, Technological University Dublin

This book will be the first step in bridging the many issues autistic women currently face in employment. The experiences and perspective shown throughout will allow autistic women to exist as more than faceless statistics of unemployment or workplace discrimination, but as entirely capable, creative, empathetic and intelligent people who are (and always have been) invaluable to society.

Jasmine Ghibli, Undergraduate Student at Glasgow University and Member of the SWAN Peer Mentoring Programme

I am delighted to recommend this important new book from Dinah and Yolanda.

The authors first consider what it means to have a fulfilling career, especially in such turbulent times as these, and the benefits that entrepreneurship and self-employment as a career path can bring. Looking through a lens of neurodiversity and gender highlights the challenges and lack of support facing potential and existing business-owners who are neurodivergent, shining a much-needed light on to the gaps in an ecosystem that has long been geared towards a neurotypical experience.

The authors also consider the benefits of neurodiverse entrepreneurship that they have found through a wide range of interviews with women who are living and breathing the daily rollercoaster of self-employment. Case studies of women at various stages of business, life and diagnosis showcase small business development in a neurodiverse sphere, immediately providing rich context to the robust academic research that is also presented. The authors build on this foundation to put forward proposed entrepreneurial frameworks that might support neurodiverse women at whatever stage of self-employment they find themselves, putting the research they articulate into practice. Consideration is also given to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the authors comment, this is an encouraging time for a wider, societal discussion about neurodiversity and work in general. Developments in organisational approaches to encouraging and supporting neurodiverse workers are to be welcomed; what is also now needed is a larger conversation about neurodiversity and entrepreneurship – its benefits, its challenges and a celebration of the exciting things that can happen at the intersection when the two worlds meet. This book is an impressive milestone in moving that conversation forward.

Rob Edwards, Founder, Neurodiversity & Entrepreneurship Association

Finally, an intersectional approach that combines gender, neurodivergence and business – not a combination you see much talked about! By collecting first-hand accounts, Gibb and Bennett provide detailed insight into the experiences of neurodivergent women in both the corporate world and entrepreneurial spaces. Neurodivergent individuals will find this book extremely relatable and validating, as well as breaking some of the isolation felt as a woman in business. Neurotypical people will gain new understanding and appreciation for the neurodivergent experience, while gaining tips and solutions to some of the challenges. It will empower people to become better allies and work together to remove barriers to participation for the neurodivergent population.

K. Bron Johnson, Founder of Completely Inclusive and author of the 'How to _____ Like an Autistic' book series.

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Entrepreneurship, Neurodiversity & Gender: Exploring Opportunities for Enterprise and Self-Employment as Pathways to Fulfilling Lives

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List of Acronyms

ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ADHD	Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DSM-V	Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition
EU	European Union
HR	Human Resources
ION	Institute of Neurodiversity
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QoL	Quality of Life
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
STEM	Science Technology Engineering & Maths
SWAN	Scottish Women's Autism Network
WIN	Women into the Network

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Forewords

LET US START WITH A SIMPLE FACT.... women around the world continue to be discriminated against in so many ways. If you also happen to be a neurodivergent woman, the discrimination piles on further. LET US CONTINUE WITH ANOTHER FACT.... The world needs more women entrepreneurs and if they are neurodivergent it is a plus.

I have been a keen and passionate advocate for equality all my adult life, and the authors of this book beautifully lay out the state of neurodivergent women's entrepreneurship and how to get to a more equitable place for us. Their solid experience, knowledge and insight into women entrepreneurs are evident throughout the book. Their thinking is delightfully aligned with my own with regards to gender equality, neurodiversity and entrepreneurship. The significant amount of input from neurodivergent women makes it an enlightening read, delivered as an enjoyable, colourful kaleidoscope of valuable lived experience.

Being an autistic woman myself, with 40 years working experience evenly split between being employed and being self-employed, I can wholeheartedly empathise with the various statements from the respondents in the book. When I was diagnosed as autistic in my early 50s, my eyes were opened to a whole new dimension of discrimination against women, which this book also touches upon. It is good to know I am not alone!

My late diagnosis meant that I have spent years looking at my life with different eyes. Nothing has changed, yet everything has changed. I can now see and understand why certain things are very difficult for me and I can also see that being autistic has made my career. Looking back, I see that the ventures I have started and my banking career became successful because of my ability to focus deeply on the things that took my interest. This is an ability that many of us have and it should be nurtured more, both in the business world and in education.

The entire area of neurodivergence seems to be set up on the basis of the male presentation of different neurotypes. I was, and still am, appalled to realise how little interest the world has in understanding that women present differently to men. This obviously also affects support strategies and how they work, or not, for neurodivergent women.

Insights through the lived experiences of neurodivergent women is sorely needed, and this book brings us just that wrapped in a lot of super useful information for anyone interested in understanding neurodivergent women's entrepreneurship better.

I am delighted to see this book come to life and shed light on important areas of neurodivergent women and entrepreneurship. In a world where conformity is still prevalent and expected, starting your own business can be a lifesaver for many. No one really knows what neurodivergent women are all about, as we all still get measured against the male presentation. Books like this are needed to change that. I am so happy to see how we are rising in growing numbers to tell the world that we are very much everywhere and have no intentions of staying quiet.

Humans are well developed cognitively by now, but in the area of neurodiversity, we seem to be very underdeveloped in our understanding. Neurodivergent individuals make up a large percentage of the world population, a much larger percentage than currently understood, in my view. We have spent a long time defining various ‘conditions’ and inventing names describing the deficiencies of those ‘conditions’. Enough of that!

I founded the Institute of Neurodiversity ION in 2021 with a group of amazing neurodivergent people. We had only ever met virtually during the year preceding the launch, and I see it as a testament to how neurodivergent people can do great entrepreneurial things together when interested and passionate. We all brought our entrepreneurial skills to the table and made what will hopefully grow to be a global organisation with over a million members and representing us in 100+ countries.

Now is the time to embrace the fact that humans are mostly the same, and the differences we do have, whatever they are, should be fully accepted. We should all be united as human beings and inhabit our planet in a sustainable way, so that we can all prosper.

This book will help us all on the journey to greater understanding and acceptance, and I applaud Dinah and Yolanda for filling the gap.

Charlotte Valeur
Founder and Chair,
The Institute of Neurodiversity ION

I was so excited to be working on the Scottish Women’s Autism Network’s peer-mentoring project with Dinah Bennett, whose work I had followed since we first met as students (a long time ago!). Dinah is a brilliant networker, positive, generous, passionate and smart. Roni Casement, our Project Coordinator, and I met with Yolanda and immediately agreed there was a connection and resonance; she was our obvious choice to deliver the external evaluation of the project, through which she modelled an autism-specific QoL tool. We all learned a great deal, and the year-long project was an enriching experience for us all. I designed the project content, tapped into my existing networks for input, such as our outdoors sessions delivered by Scottish Forestry, and Dinah brought her professional expertise with huge enthusiasm and skill. Our relationship on the project was as co-supervisors – I knew about Autism, and Dinah knew about mentoring, coaching and entrepreneurship.

This is a timely, important book. As we begin to find ways to carry on our lives, to work in a world that includes COVID-19 and potentially other viral pandemics, so much of our collective attention is focused on the exposed inequities in society, on different, more creative and more flexible ways of working, and on how to build a more inclusive society.

The narratives around autism and neurodiversity overall have already been shifting and growing, and included in those narratives are challenges to the outdated, but still prevailing, ones of deficit and burden. At SWAN, we focus on assets and abilities, human rights and inclusion. Each of the chapters of this book addresses key issues that underpin – or raise barriers against – these and autistic and other neurodevelopmentally ‘different’ (to what?) individuals achieving their full potential, accessing the quality of life others take for granted, contributing their talents and gifts, and inputting into the economy.

One of the most challenging sessions of our SWAN project was the one in which the term ‘networking’ was debated – heatedly – by the group. ‘We can’t network’, was the cry, ‘we’re autistic women, we don’t network’. ‘Interesting’, was my response, ‘that you are excluding yourselves from something only because of your ideas of it. We’re not asking you to change to fit someone else’s ideas of “normal” but to look to building on what works for you. And by the way, SWAN IS a network and one that you’re part of! It just looks and feels different because it’s ours!’

And so, I am more than delighted to see this book emerge out of the shared experiences of that initial pilot project. Part of a profoundly important, energetic and positive social movement, there is a need for this book, for the understanding and ideas it contains, for its insight into the richness and colour of our human diversity and how best to enable and include all of us in society. There is a great need for it, and I believe Yolanda and Dinah have done it great service.

Dr Catriona Stewart OBE

Reading this book gives me hope....

This book provides neurodivergent individuals and allies with insights about the importance of building trust in our own abilities and potential, by removing the limitations and barriers that have been placed upon us by society and by being able to connect the dots.

I often wonder about life chances, about making my own opportunities in life as a working-class Black girl growing up in East London and about the combined impact of the intersection of my environment, culture, class, gender, race, education and disability in order to reach my full potential and achieve my career aspirations. Had I not broken away from the norms in order to change the narrative and hack the education system, to become more than a statistic, to engage in entrepreneurship, I would not have become my true self. How do you see endless possibilities when you do not have the right grades?

I would not have known who I could have become if I listened to what I couldn’t be. Lack of sound career advice is a common issue, reinforcing the feeling of not being good enough. Taking a job that you don’t want – unless it is a

means to an end, such as bringing in an income straight away while working on your goals – isn't a good thing. The workplace continues to fail us and lacks opportunities for mentorship, accessible role models and cultural understanding. The 'right' person won't always make it into the room, hence many of us resort to setting up our own business.

I think this book highlights the importance of working from the inside out, using imagination and creativity to form an entrepreneurial mindset. From the point of view of a natural risk-taker, it is about staying focused, being consistent, listening to your gut, having compassion and working towards a strengths-based approach. Real golden nuggets have been captured in this book by listening to the neurodiverse lived experience. The writers give us much to think about.

There will always be hurdles, but it's about knowing how to jump over them with clarity, self-awareness and collaborative thinking. It is about being able to count on the supportive infrastructure of allies. Inclusion is about empowerment and the ability to amplify other people's voices, creating positive role models that people from all walks of life in our community and society can aspire to, something this book does so well.

A sense of belonging is so important. It can be a lonely place when speaking from a cultural perspective. As a Black woman it is still rare to see anyone who looks like me in a leadership position, particularly in the dyslexic and neurodiversity space. Stereotypes still play a leading role, compounded by instances of macroaggression which I have experienced first-hand. Understanding the reason why and taking action should not require changing my cultural identity to fit in just because of the colour of my skin or gender. I no longer apologise for being dyslexic as diversity is good for business.

Without a seat at the table for all, stories of lived experience can be misunderstood or misrepresented. This book helps us to always consider the barriers we can remove to help others to be an authentic version of themselves.

Marcia Brissett-Bailey
*Neurodiversity Narrative Changer and
Co-Founder of BDA Cultural Perspective Committee*