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Exploring experiences and potential of neurodivergent women entrepreneurs: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Background Neurodivergence is a complex phenomenon involving unique cognitive and behavioral characteristics. Neurodivergent women face significant challenges in the world of work, which can be mitigated through self-entrepreneurship.

Methods: This qualitative study involved four neurodivergent women engaged in entrepreneurial activities. Semi-structured interviews, conducted via videoconference and analyzed using an inductive thematic approach, explored the participants' work and entrepreneurial experiences.

Results: Participants reported diverse experiences, some coming to entrepreneurship after other work experiences and one who had never worked as an employee. Interviews revealed difficulties related to the burden of care during the COVID-19 pandemic, sectoral resistance due to gender, and the challenges of running an entrepreneurial business.

Conclusions: The study highlights the importance of targeted support for neurodivergent women in entrepreneurship, suggesting the need for inclusive policies to reduce barriers and foster their professional success. Practical implications include the development of workplace accommodations, such as flexible work conditions, awareness training for employers, and funding programs tailored to neurodivergent entrepreneurs. These findings can inform future support initiatives and interventions to improve the employment inclusion of neurodivergent women.

Keywords: *neurodivergent; women; entrepreneurship; qualitative research; interviews*

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Introduction

Neurodiversity is a peculiarity of human behavior involving modes of socialization, perception, and communication that differ from neurotypical ones (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). The term "neurodivergence" refers to a set of characteristics and traits tending to be associated with neurodevelopmental disorders such as learning disabilities, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), language disorders, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), coordination disorders (Bennett & Gibb, 2022; Thapar, Cooper, & Rutter, 2017). According to estimates, 8% to 20% of the world's population appears to have some neurodivergence (Bennett & Gibb, 2022; Nowak & Jacquemont, 2020). Although the various strengths of neurodivergent people, such as solid creativity and problem-solving skills, have been highlighted, such individuals are often unemployed, perform tasks below their abilities, and perceive job dissatisfaction (Cadwell, Harris, & Renko, 2016; Bennett & Gibb, 2022; Harris, Renko, & Caldwell, 2013). This work scenario is even worse if the neurodivergent person is a woman (Hennekam, Hayward, & Bastian, 2024).

For example, characteristics of autism are often described based on the male population, ignoring the fact that there may be specific cognitive differences between autistic males and females (Lai et al., 2013; Hull et al., 2017; Beery & Zucker, 2011). This condition is compounded by clinicians' inexperience and lack of knowledge in assessing autism in females. In addition, females tend to mask the characteristics of autism, thus being better able to conform to social norms (Lai et al., 2013). This behavior, termed camouflaging or masking, occurs mainly in formal settings, such as the workplace (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). However, masking is not without risk; it is found to be associated with poor mental health (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

The work conditions of most neurodivergent women are highly complex and characterized by dissatisfaction, burnout, and demotion. To give one example, ADHD women perceive their functioning as an obstacle to job success and report feeling confused and chaotic in their work relationships (Schreuer & Dorot, 2017), but some have also stated that they can find alternative and creative solutions to their attentional problems (Henry & Hill Jones, 2011). When girls exhibit disruptive, hyperactive, impulsive, or disorganized behaviors, they risk harsh social judgment because they violate the norms of female behavior. In an attempt to avoid social sanctions, many girls with ADHD expend excessive amounts of energy trying to hide their problems, which in turn go unrecognized by others (Quinn, 2005, 2008; Waite, 2010).

Despite the difficulties, women with ADHD report that they consider their employment important to their identity and not just a means by which to support themselves economically (Schreuer & Dorot, 2017).

The neurotypical person concept anchors current work policies, relationship management, and feedback (Leoni et al., 2020).

Scientific studies show how neurodivergent entrepreneurs can develop innovative and creative solutions to our society's problems (Bennet & Gibb, 2022; Bruyère & Colella, 2022; Caldwell et al., 2016). In Western countries, including Italy, one out of every five businesses is owned by a woman (Istat, 2021), so it seems very clear that entrepreneurship is still predominantly attended by men. However, several projects have been proposed since the 1980s to support women entrepreneurs and would-be entrepreneurs (Horiuchi & Scholar, 2019). These projects were mainly aimed at supporting the confidence and motivation of women entrepreneurs and overcoming obstacles related to the belief that women have fewer skills needed to set up and run a business (Horiuchi & Scholar, 2019).

Since the 2000s, support networks for aspiring female entrepreneurs have sprung up to bring such professionals into mixed entrepreneurial networks (Maritz & Laferriere, 2016). From an equity perspective, it is crucial to consider the role of neurodivergent people within companies and enterprises, empowering people to develop and express their potential individually (Iacomini, 2023).

Small businesses have sprung up in recent years, mainly through the efforts of parents, to employ adults with intellectual disabilities (Thoresen et al., 2018). Such businesses come to life and develop based on the interests and strengths of neurodivergent people (Thoresen et al., 2018). According to some authors, small businesses represent a new possibility for neurodivergent individuals to find employment, although research on this topic is still scarce (Dotson et al., 2013; Iacomini et al., 2022). To date, research on these types of businesses has identified several benefits for neurodivergent individuals who are part of them, such as improved quality of life and more satisfying and enjoyable work employment compared to laboratory experiences (Dotson et al., 2013; Maritz & La Ferriere, 2016; Conroy, Ferris, & Irvine, 2010; Ostrow, Smith, Penney, & Shumway, 2019).

So far, most of the studies in the literature have involved male participants, and there are still few studies on neurodivergent female entrepreneurship (Hennekam et al., 2024). Furthermore, it has been found that neurodivergent people face more obstacles in the world of work than neurotypical people, and these obstacles are more significant if the neurodivergent person is female (Hennekam et al., 2024). A qualitative approach is particularly suited to investigate these obstacles because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of neurodivergent women entrepreneurs. In other words, using qualitative methods, such as interviews, can provide a richer and more holistic understanding of their perspectives, which quantitative methods may not adequately capture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through interviews,

this study aims to investigate the entrepreneurial experience of a group of neurodivergent women to contribute to disseminating a more accurate knowledge of this condition.

Method

Participants

Four Italian women entrepreneurs aged 40 to 51 (mean age = 45) participated in the study. The voluntary response to a recruitment announcement through social platforms recruited the participants. At the time of the interviews, only one of the participants had been diagnosed, specifically with ADHD. Although the other interviewees did not have a specific diagnosis, they claimed to be neurodivergent or identified with some neurodivergent characteristics. Following other previous studies (e.g., Botha & Frost, 2020; Nocon et al., 2022), it was decided to also investigate the experience of self-diagnosis as a process that can help counter discrimination within the neurodivergent community.

All participants in this study held a master's degree, but only one had earned a PhD. The socio-economic status of participants was high, with an annual income of more than

40000€. Three participants had embarked on entrepreneurial careers following other work experiences, while only one had never had experience as an employee.

Although a larger sample would undoubtedly have been preferable, awareness of the appropriateness of data from a broader perspective is equally important in qualitative research (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Participants signed the informed consent form that described the purpose of the study and emailed it.

Procedure

Interviews procedure

We conducted semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions to ask more direct follow-up questions. The interview questions (Table 1) were constructed based on existing literature on neurodivergent characteristics and experiences of entrepreneurship and self-employment (Iacomini et al., 2022). The interviews were conducted by an experienced neurodivergence psychologist using a videoconferencing application, lasted up to one hour, and were audio-recorded. Afterward, the authors transcribed the interviews to proceed with the analysis.

Analysis of the interviews

An inductive thematic approach was used for the data analysis of the interviews. First, codes were assigned to the interview texts. Then, the coded data were categorized into common themes, from which the main themes that constitute the main findings of this study were

extracted. The direct quotes of the participants' words selected best illustrate these themes.

Three of the authors of this study reviewed and coded the interview transcripts as a validity check. Another careful reading resolved any disagreements on data coding.

To illustrate how the coding process was applied, we provide a specific example from the "Experiences" theme. This theme captured the personal and professional journeys that shaped the entrepreneurial paths of the neurodivergent women in this study. These experiences were categorized and assigned specific codes to enable more precise analysis. For example, the code "*on-the-job training*" was assigned to experiences where participants emphasized the importance of hands-on, practical learning in their professional development. One participant explained: "Professionalism I developed in the field. "I did not do specific training but have much experience"; another interviewee shared "You learn directly in the field. You learn by making mistakes; I made a lot of mistakes; I made some entrepreneurial mistakes". To list another example, the code "*parenthood and work-life balance*" was used for experiences involving balancing work responsibilities with family life. One participant remarked, "When I became a mother, it was difficult"; another interviewee said, "I, on the other hand, started as an employee, and I as a woman, as a mother, in order to balance work, I created a job that could fit with the role of a mother."

Table 1. Interviews' questions

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- 1) Tell us about your work history.
 - 2) How did you enter the world of entrepreneurship? What factors prompted you to make this choice?
 - 3) How did you develop professionalism, and what difficulties did you experience?
 - 4) Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your work regarding time spent, restrictions, and care loads?
 - 5) Did you also encounter industry resistance related to being a woman?
 - 6) What are your previous experiences before starting this activity?
 - 7) What models were made available to her? Which one particularly inspired you?
 - 8) Did she have to do "ad hoc" training to enter the world of entrepreneurship?
 - 9) We are interviewing women entrepreneurs, some of whom claim to be neurodivergent. Do you find yourself? If so, how did you discover your neurodivergence?
 - 10) Have others experienced being a woman as a discriminating factor?
 - 11) What does "success" mean to you?
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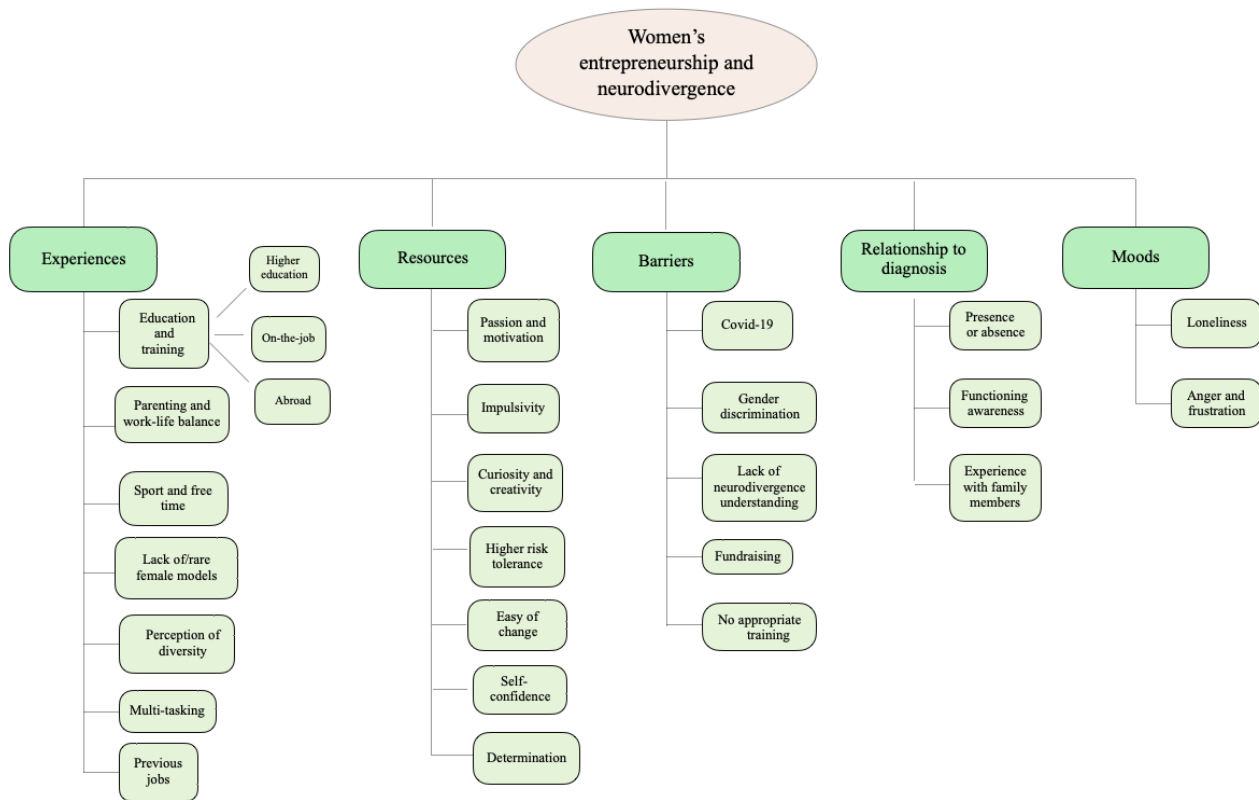


Figure 1. Results description diagram

Results

Based on the analysis of the interviews, some central themes emerged: experiences, resources (i.e., characteristics of neurodivergence that are experienced as strengths), obstacles, moods, and relationship with diagnosis. The diagram in Figure 1 describes the results. For each theme, excerpts from the interviews of the study participants will be given to enrich the description of the results.

Experiences

All interviewees have completed higher education in different fields (e.g., psychology, communication sciences, exercise science, and aerospace engineering), attending postgraduate courses after graduation or Ph. Ds. Similarly, all participants emphasized the importance of this training for their professional development. Two of the respondents mention overseas training experiences within their background. This experience reflects the importance of education in the professional development of neurodivergent individuals. Educational success is often seen as a critical factor for overcoming the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals (Bennett & Gibb, 2022).

Sports and leisure are two aspects that return in the interviewees' experiences, making

them think about their role in the path of a neurodivergent person. One of them, for example, tells of having played basketball; another started a business centered precisely on sports; and another states that she writes books in her spare time.

Except for one of the participants who recounts that she has never worked as an employee, the others state that they have had professional experience as employees, some even in a managerial capacity. A common characteristic of almost all participants' experiences is multitasking, the ability to perform multiple tasks simultaneously or change multiple jobs. For example, one of the participants says, "In the same year, I was teaching pilates in the morning, in the lunch break I would go to an elderly gentleman to do gymnastics, then in the afternoons I would alternate between volleyball, athletics, swimming. In the evenings, I taught soccer and was a trainer." Another recounts, "I ended up wrapping up because I work three times as much as before, but I have a hard time saying no, and I work a lot more than before." All interviewees reported the parenting experience and its role in their professional development. For example, one respondent explains, "When you have a family, and you have schedules to keep home and children, it becomes more natural to evolve toward a position of tranquility; also because it takes emotional strength, organization, and freedom to be able to move around at work." This trait reflects the problem-solving and creative capabilities associated with neurodivergence, which are frequently highlighted in studies of neurodivergent entrepreneurs (Caldwell et al., 2016).

For all of them, starting their businesses has contributed positively to work-life balance. One reports, "I created my company where work-life balance first." Another report instead, "Being a mother did not create conflict with being an entrepreneur." The third participant states, "I created a job that could go well with being a mother." Finally, the last one states, "As an employee, I was forced to do my 8/9 hours of work. Now, from home, I have my own space and time for family management. I work more but see my children more."

Resources

Among the characteristics of neurodivergence that prove helpful in professional development, specifically in starting a business, there is a strong motivation, passion, or particular interest. These characteristics align with previous research showing that neurodivergent entrepreneurs often display high levels of creativity and problem-solving skills, essential for tackling complex challenges (Caldwell et al., 2016). One of the interviewees said, "I was projected into the world of aviation, being a child of art. My dad is an airplane enthusiast and has flown a lot. He used to take me to see airplanes as a child. From there, my passion was born." Three participants also reported the ability to organize among their strengths: "I used

mental schemes to remember and remembered things I could connect" or " I can organize myself: make certain things from home and other things do them on the spot. That pushed me to determine if and how to change my approach." A common characteristic of all participants is impulsiveness. One participant states, "I never said no to anything, even if I did not like it. I started, and when I had the opportunity, I left what I did not like and kept what gave me the most personal and financial satisfaction." Next to impulsiveness, other resources are curiosity and creativity, which are detectable in the interviewees' words.

One of them says, for example, " The light bulb went on, and I said to myself "but I can change how I approach my work." Another says, " I learned another way of doing pilates, which gave me the incentive not to give up." These characteristics are the basis of starting entrepreneurship for all respondents in their field. Ease of change is another peculiarity of the experiences described in the interviews. One participant said, " Instead, I decided to stay at home, I canceled the nest egg, lost my deposit on it, stayed at home [...] Within five years, I had to reinvent myself all the time ". This ease of change is undoubtedly accompanied by a greater tolerance for risk and the search for challenging situations for the person. This characteristic has been shown to contribute to entrepreneurial success, particularly in neurodivergent individuals (Iacomini, 2023). One of the interviewees responds as follows, " I always jumped in. It happened to me that I was asked to take over a role without the right preparation. However, I always said yes, I never backed down [...] in the end, when I decided to quit my employee job, I did it by taking this leap in the dark because I only had a contract in hand that did not give me the same income that my employee job gave me."

Among the resources identified is self-confidence:" When I trusted my instincts, everything always went well" or " I do my own business and set up my own business and see how it goes; I created my own professional identity." The last characteristic, related to the previous one, is determination, for which we quote the words of one of the interviewees: " I want to be a mother, I want to be a wife, and I want to be a recognized professional, and I want to have the possibility to do it in freedom, without wanting to give something up."

Barriers

The results reveal that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on work life and entrepreneurial experiences emerged as a recurring theme in the interviews, particularly regarding changes in work dynamics and personal roles. For example, one interviewee emphasized how the pandemic allowed her to reassess her work-life balance, especially about working from home. She found herself working even more, albeit from home, which allowed her to balance family responsibilities better. While the pandemic prompted greater flexibility

in certain areas, it highlighted resistance, particularly in industries that still highly value in-person presence. The comparison to pre-pandemic work experiences reveals how deeply the world of work has shifted, but also how some industries remain reluctant to retain innovations that emerged during the crisis, such as remote work.

One obstacle to their professional development that all the interviewees report is gender discrimination, which manifests itself in different forms. This barrier is consistent with existing research, which indicates that neurodivergent women encounter more significant obstacles in the workplace than neurotypical individuals or their male counterparts (Bennett & Gibb, 2022). All participant reports need more understanding of the social context. One of the interviewees states, "We women have different points of view, which are necessary but do not match the financial patterns." Another participant claimed, "It is much more difficult for us women to be women, to be mothers, to be entrepreneurs of ourselves with certain standards because we are never cleared." All of the participants tell of having experienced gender discrimination even before they became entrepreneurs.

One of them, for example, claims, "Mostly they are males working in nonprofit sectors. I have often been subjected to unpleasant phrases because they do not allow you to tell your story." At the same time, another respondent states, "We women go through life with an idea of us that makes us feel inadequate; we think that stepping out of the box is arrogance." Another participant explains, "After eight years, you become good and experienced at your job, and you hear the same things over and over again from your senior and male colleagues [...] You are an enemy within the organization, especially if your role requires you to be the controller of the company," and adds "The pattern has been to be able to do what a man does, no more and no less in quality of roles held, experience, and economic compensation because there is also that aspect."

In this regard, another respondent also reports among the aspects related to gender discrimination that of earnings: "I opened a business because when I returned from maternity leave, they did not leave me at home; however, they lowered my salary."

An additional obstacle reported by three of the respondents is the need for more understanding of neurodivergence in the social context. This barrier is evident in the words of one of them, who states, "Neurodivergence is little known, so they do not see that you are neurodivergent; they see you as an agitated nut." Another participant points out, "There are people who want to go deeper and are intrigued by diversity and others who are not. So, they tend to push away. That is why I think it is essential to provide information about this. Anyone can potentially enter this sphere (a child or a sibling), and you may not know or understand it. Knowledge helps rapprochement." This misunderstanding also manifests in the need for more

suitable workspaces for neurodivergent staff.

One participant emphasizes the difficulty in obtaining funds to start her own business, "I won several competitions, but I got few funds from private investors." Another respondent says that she did not get any funds to start her business, while other reports that she did not have to ask for any particular funds for her company.

Moods

Concerning starting a business, one of the participants reports an initial feeling of loneliness in the social context, "Being the only one and isolated was the most complicated point." Loneliness is also reported by another of the participants, "The greatest difficulty has been loneliness because it is difficult to find someone your equal [...] Because you cannot unload with anyone, because they look at you and say "what are you doing?", "but how do you do it?", "stop!" along with the need to belong to a conscious community "I still cannot find anyone who occasionally gives me feedback on how to recover energy to start again. This mirrors findings in the literature, where neurodivergent individuals frequently struggle with loneliness due to a lack of peers who understand their experiences (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Another feeling that is reported is anger. One of the participants, referring to previous work experiences, states, "Every aspect highlighted for improvement was seen as punctiliousness, little work experience because you are young, you are a woman, and you do not understand that certain things have to be handled this way because "it has always been done this way." When I used to hear these statements, my veins would close because if you want to be a professional, you adapt to today's needs and requirements."

Relationship to diagnosis

Only one of the interviewees reports having received a diagnosis of ADHD in adulthood: "I have a diagnosis of ADHD. I work in the industry but did not know I was in the [...] For me, the diagnosis was not a break but a strength. It has not been impactful at work but has impacted my personal life." The other three participants state that they identify with neurodivergence, showing a strong awareness of their functioning. For example, one of the participants states, "You struggle a lot, and more the more you are aware of your difference, and that difference wants to bring value," and again, "When they ask me questions, I start by giving systemic answers, while they are looking for consequentiality, and this is evident to me, but I cannot avoid it." Another of the participants states, "I am neurodivergent. I used to study and listen to music or TV, and even now, I cannot do anything while doing housework. Even when talking, I get lost because my mouth is too slow compared to my brain."

The last participant stated, "I have a predisposition to isolate myself," and again, "I

think I am a straightforward person who has less of a problem with telling it like it is or interfacing with people in a more transparent way in ways that sometimes I perceive to be difficult. Instead, it is my way of relating." Two of the participants report having had direct experience with neurodivergence through family members: "My son at age 5 took the test and was found to be High Intellectual Potential, and last year, on the advice of the psychologist, it was also done to my daughter, and she too is APC" or friends "I had another neurodivergent friend, we used to have the conversations we talked at the same time, and neither of us listened". These findings align with existing literature on the delayed or missed diagnoses among neurodivergent women and the tendency to mask characteristics (Bennett & Gibb, 2022). Participants noted that while self-identification can empower individuals to embrace their differences, formal diagnosis offers important advantages, including access to tailored support systems and more excellent validation in professional contexts. This finding contrasts with research that indicates that masking behaviors often lead to emotional exhaustion and hinder self-advocacy in a professional setting (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Table 2 summarizes the results that emerged from the thematic analysis by reporting in general terms the obstacles and resources related to entrepreneurship for neurodivergent women.

Table 2. Summary of barriers and resources for neurodivergent women

Category	Barriers	Resources
COVID-19 Impact	Reorganization of work-life balance due to home-office adaptation	Greater flexibility in working hours, tough with increased work hours at home
Gender discrimination	Gender bias, particularly in male-dominated sectors	Strength and resilience from navigating gender biases and pushing for inclusive practices
Understanding neurodivergence	Lack of awareness about neurodivergence in professional settings	Neurodivergence seen as a strength, fostering creativity and problem solving
Industry resistance	Resistance to innovation, especially in sectors valuing traditional in-person models	Adaptability to new work formats, including remote work, and embracing challenges in innovation.
Financial Barriers	Difficulty accessing funding for entrepreneurial ventures.	Strong self-motivation and passion driving entrepreneurial efforts despite financial challenges.

Isolation	Social isolation due to lack of understanding from others and workplace exclusion.	Independence and self-reliance, creating entrepreneurial ventures that align with personal values.
Work-Life Balance	Balancing caregiving responsibilities with professional commitments.	Strong organizational skills, multitasking, and flexibility in managing personal and professional roles.
Emotional Barriers	Loneliness and emotional exhaustion from societal expectations.	Self-confidence, determination, and resilience gained through overcoming personal and professional struggles.

Discussion

Analysis of the interviews revealed central themes regarding neurodivergent women's experiences, resources, obstacles, states of mind, and relationship to diagnosis in the entrepreneurial context. Participants reported pathways to higher education in different fields, highlighting how higher education was critical to their professional development. This result aligns with existing literature emphasizing how a lack of early diagnosis and appropriate support can negatively affect neurodivergent women's school and work careers (Bennett & Gibb, 2022). The multitasking and variety of professional experiences from the interviews reflect the problem-solving and creativity skills often associated with neurodivergence (Caldwell et al., 2016). However, these skills are often accompanied by a strong perception of being different from neurotypical colleagues, which can fuel isolation and loneliness (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

Characteristics associated with neurodivergence, such as solid motivation, particular interest, impulsivity, curiosity, creativity, and ease of change, have been identified as critical resources for starting entrepreneurial activities. This finding is in line with evidence from previous studies, which emphasize the abilities of neurodivergent entrepreneurs to come up with innovative and creative solutions (Iacomini, 2023; Bennett & Gibb, 2022; Caldwell et al., 2016), adapt quickly to new circumstances, and deal with challenging situations (Maritz & Laferriere, 2016). Self-confidence and determination are other characteristics that emerged, reflecting the importance of psychological support and motivation, as emphasized in support projects for women entrepreneurs (Horiuchi & Scholar, 2019).

Interviews show that, among the barriers, Covid-19 played a significant role, forcing

participants to reorganize their work lives. This observation aligns with broader research on the pandemic's impact, disproportionately affecting female entrepreneurs, especially those managing caregiving responsibilities (Bennett & Gibb, 2022).

Other barriers identified were gender discrimination and lack of understanding of neurodivergence. These findings are consistent with what has been reported in the literature regarding neurodivergent women's work difficulties, which are often worse than their male counterparts (Bennett & Gibb, 2022). Neurodivergent women are frequently subjected to social judgment and prejudice, often due to a lack of awareness of their condition (Santos et al., 2022).

In addition, difficulties in finding funds to start businesses underscore the importance of targeted policies and support programs (Maritz & Laferriere, 2016; Iacomini et al., 2022).

Participants report feelings of loneliness and anger, reflecting the emotional challenges associated with entrepreneurship and neurodivergence. Loneliness was cited as a significant difficulty, indicating the need to create knowledgeable, supportive communities. This feeling of isolation is often associated with a lack of social understanding and support (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019).

Only one of the respondents received a formal diagnosis of ADHD in adulthood. In contrast, the others showed a strong awareness of their neurodivergence, albeit in the absence of a formal diagnosis. This finding seems in line with what previous studies have reported concerning delayed diagnosis in neurodivergent women and their tendency to mask their characteristics (Bennett & Gibb, 2022; Santos et al., 2022). As described by Cage and Troxell-Whitman (2019), masking behaviors often lead to emotional exhaustion and hinder self-advocacy in professional settings. Further exploration of the relationship between self-identified and formally diagnosed neurodivergence could reveal whether significant differences exist in entrepreneurial experiences. This study suggests that participants faced common challenges, such as societal prejudice and limited resource access. However, formal diagnosis may offer advantages, including access to tailored support systems and more significant validation in professional contexts. Conversely, self-identification might empower individuals to embrace their differences without the constraints of clinical definitions, potentially fostering greater flexibility in navigating entrepreneurial challenges.

One innovative aspect that emerged from the interviews' analysis is the awareness and acceptance of one's neurodivergent characteristics as a strength rather than a limitation. This approach could significantly change the perception of neurodivergence in the business context, promoting a model of inclusion and enhancement of cognitive diversity (Iacomini, 2023; Hennekam et al., 2024). Caldwell et al. (2016) and Bennett and Gibb (2022) similarly argue that reframing neurodivergence as a strategic advantage fosters organizational inclusivity and

promotes innovation. For instance, neurodivergent individuals often exhibit a higher tolerance for risk, a crucial characteristic in entrepreneurship (Iacomini, 2023; Caldwell, Harris, & Renko, 2019). The findings from this study align with existing literature that highlights the unique contributions of neurodivergent entrepreneurs while emphasizing the necessity of targeted interventions to address the barriers they face, particularly in terms of understanding, funding, and creating inclusive business environments (Iacomini, 2023; Krzeminska et al., 2019).

In addition, the importance of work-life balance suggests the need to develop more flexible and inclusive company policies that can facilitate the reconciliation of these two spheres. Creating work environments that are better suited to the needs of neurodivergent people could significantly improve their job satisfaction and quality of life. Finally, the strong determination and resilience of neurodivergent women entrepreneurs provide an example of how challenges can be turned into opportunities, providing a positive role model for other women in the same situation. Promoting success stories and creating support networks can help reduce the gender gap in entrepreneurship and enhance the unique skills of neurodivergent people.

The study has some methodological limitations. First, the sample is relatively small, with four women interviewed. This limited number of participants reduces the generalization of the results. Findings are specific to the Italian context and should be cautiously extended to similar settings with consideration of cultural nuances. Larger and more diverse samples in future studies could enhance generalizability and explore variations across demographics, industries, and cultures. Longitudinal studies may reveal how experiences evolve.

In addition, only one of the participants had received a formal diagnosis of ADHD. This variability in diagnosis could affect the consistency of the reported experiences and the validity of the conclusions. Moreover, recruitment through social platforms might have introduced a potential self-selection bias. Participants who respond to such calls may already possess a certain level of engagement or interest in the topic, potentially skewing the findings. Future studies should complement this approach with alternative recruitment methods to ensure a more diverse representation of experiences and perspectives.

Therefore, although the study provides a useful initial picture of the entrepreneurial experiences of neurodivergent women, further research with larger samples and different methodologies would be needed to expand the findings.

Conclusion

The study explored the entrepreneurial experiences of a small group of neurodivergent women entrepreneurs, highlighting the challenges and opportunities they face in the business world. The results highlight the need for greater understanding and support for neurodivergent women in entrepreneurship. Participants reported experiences of creativity and innovation but also significant difficulties navigating work environments often designed for neurotypical people. This study underscores the importance of developing more inclusive business policies and practices that enhance the unique potential of neurodivergent people by fostering a work environment that allows all individuals to express their abilities fully. Employers and colleagues must be provided with training programs to foster a better understanding of neurodivergence and reduce workplace stigma.

Additionally, flexible work conditions, such as remote working options and individualized schedules, should be introduced to accommodate the specific needs of neurodivergent employees. It is also essential to create targeted funding programs and resources to support neurodivergent women entrepreneurs in starting and scaling their businesses. Moreover, building platforms and initiatives to connect neurodivergent women entrepreneurs can help reduce isolation and foster supportive networks. Further research with more diverse samples is essential to deepen our understanding of these dynamics and inform more effective and targeted interventions.

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