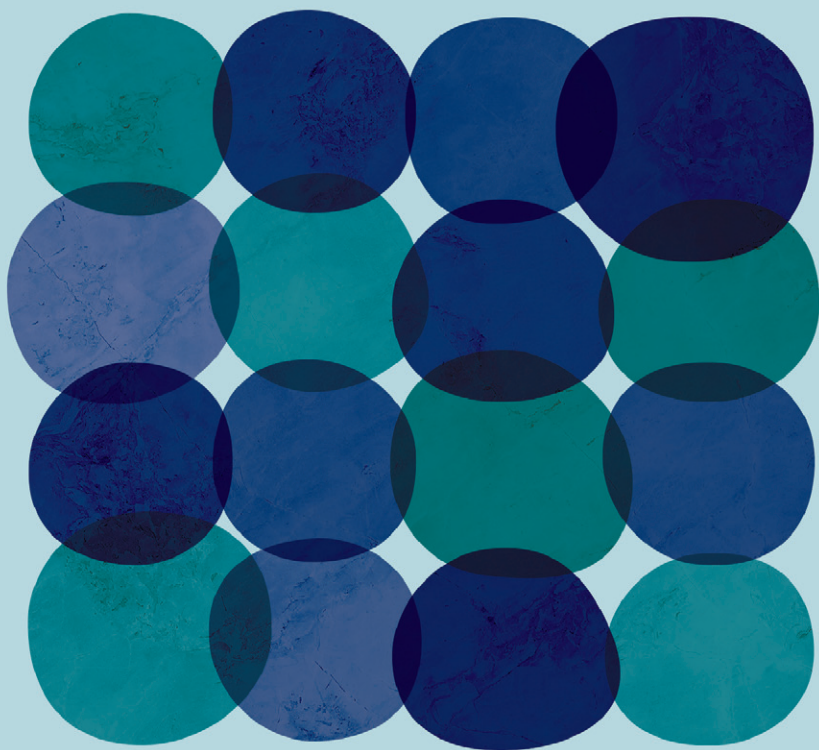


# ENTREPRENEURSHIP, NEURODIVERSITY & GENDER



Exploring opportunities for enterprise and self-employment as pathways to fulfilling lives

DINAH BENNETT  
YOLANDA K GIBB

# **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.*

This page intentionally left blank

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

BY

**DINAH BENNETT**

*International Consultants for Entrepreneurship  
and Enterprise Ltd, UK*

And

**YOLANDA K GIBB**

*Women's Economic Imperative, Spain*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2022

Copyright © 2022 Dinah Bennett and Yolanda K Gibb.  
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

**Reprints and permissions service**

Contact: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80043-058-7 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80043-057-0 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80043-059-4 (Epub)



ISOQAR certified  
Management System,  
awarded to Emerald  
for adherence to  
Environmental  
standard  
ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985  
ISO 14001



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# Table of Contents

List of Acronyms	<i>ix</i>
Forewords	<i>xi</i>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	<i>1</i>
<b>Chapter 2 Core Concepts</b>	<i>15</i>
<b>Chapter 3 Working for Others</b>	<i>35</i>
<b>Chapter 4 Entrepreneurial Journeys</b>	<i>53</i>
<b>Chapter 5 Enterprise Learning and Skillsets</b>	<i>73</i>
<b>Chapter 6 Creating Support Ecosystems</b>	<i>95</i>
<b>Chapter 7 Looking to the Future</b>	<i>117</i>
Bibliography	<i>137</i>
Further Reading	<i>145</i>
Index	<i>147</i>

This page intentionally left blank

# 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

This page intentionally left blank

## 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*

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Context

The book grew out of our involvement in the co-creation of an innovative peer-to-peer mentoring programme launched by Scottish Women's Autism Network (SWAN) and Scottish Autism, and led by Dr Catriona Stewart. One of the authors was heavily involved in the delivery (Dinah); the other was the external evaluator of the programme (Yolanda). The overall programme was designed by autistic women and delivered by a neurodiverse team. Presented very much as a co-production, it focused on developing mentoring skills for a group of adult autistic women, providing them with a number of frameworks and associated information to enable self-directed personal development for mentors and mentees. This included consideration of future career options. The programme specifically covered the potential opportunities related to self-employment or entrepreneurship. Implementation was organised around a series of interactive workshops, some aimed at the mentors only, some aimed at the mentees only and others bringing the entire group together.

For young people coming out of education, the general emphasis of career advice is usually on finding employment rather than becoming self-employed or setting up your own business. It was perhaps unsurprising therefore that the latter options were not uppermost in the minds of the young autistic women participating in the programme. A search for initiatives that provide young people with real insight into self-employment or entrepreneurship as a viable career option revealed that they continue to be relatively thin on the ground, even for those who target the general public. A literature search, supplemented by conversations, a variety of interested parties and experts, confirmed that much more could be done to ensure that young people are better informed about self-employment and entrepreneurship, even if the option is not for everyone.

A key initial premise when we began to write the book was that enterprising skills and capabilities could be leveraged by autistic women and girls to develop satisfying careers that represent a real alternative to finding work in the corporate environment. Many autistic women are creative, see things differently and can be very innovative. When we ran business idea generating sessions with a group of autistic women and girls, the lists of ideas were abundant and creative, more so than many of the ideas that we typically see when running these types of sessions with other segments of the population. At the same time, it was clear that the

## 2 *Entrepreneurship, Neurodiversity & Gender*

support ecosystem to help autistic women to turn their ideas into reality was either lacking completely, inaccessible or insufficiently targeted at their needs. This is a gap that we felt needed to be addressed.

As the programme progressed and with an emphasis on co-production, ongoing input and feedback from participants were encouraged and responded to. This created an interesting and constructive dynamic. It became increasingly clear that some areas of the programme had to be approached differently and adjustments made to ensure its success. A number of the physical characteristics of the workshop environment had to be tweaked to make the autistic girls and women feel more at ease in the space and to facilitate their learning. We also had to adjust some of the terminology we were using, as some terms came heavily loaded with preconceptions as to what they entailed. One such term was networking, which was initially viewed by participants as a very 'neurotypical' practice, despite the fact that networking was already present through the SWAN, as one of the autistic women explained. At the time, the term was considered to be completely irrelevant by some participants, until we began to unpack the concept and build it back up again in a way that made sense to the group. This experience reinforced our conviction that there is a gap in supporting entrepreneurship and self-employment, perhaps requiring the 'translation' of certain concepts around enterprise and entrepreneurship so that they fit into the neurodivergent space.

The way in which many of the participants on the pilot programme embraced these concepts as we moved through the programme not only provided us with some very useful lessons but also spurred us on to think more deeply about the connections between the enterprising characteristics needed to detect an opportunity and create a solution to take advantage of it on the one hand, and the high degree of creativity and problem-solving exemplified by the autistic women and girls participating in the programme. Further discussions around this subject ultimately led to an initial meeting with a potential publisher. From there the small seed of an idea very quickly turned into a proposal for the book that you now have before you.

Given that the initial inspiration for the book was our experience with the peer-to-peer mentoring programme, our proposal originally focused on autistic women. But as we researched and continued to expand our network within the neurodivergent community, we began to question our focus. As we moved into the research phase for the book we had the opportunity to meet a number of very inspiring individuals, many of whom were either self-employed, or had founded a company on their own or with a partner, or were working in an organisation that was providing some kind of support or service in the area of neurodiversity, employment and entrepreneurship. Over the course of these discussions, complemented by our reading of secondary materials, we expanded our interviews with autistic women to include a more diverse group, including women diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia and other conditions. Sometimes the women we interviewed identified with more than one of these categories. This process prompted the expansion of the focus of the book to include neurodiversity. One of the benefits of this term is that it is truly inclusive and does not merely divide the 'neurodivergent' from the 'neurotypical'.

Since beginning our research for the book shortly before the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic at the beginning of 2020, we have seen increasing interest in neurodiversity, although still mainly with the focus of getting neurodivergent individuals into the world of work. There are also some signs of interest and support for self-employment and entrepreneurship, though not necessarily with a gender lens. The book draws together important strands related to gender, neurodiversity and entrepreneurship, building on the convergence of a number of relevant trends: the increasing number of women who are diagnosed as autistic (and with ADHD), some of them very late in life; the dramatic changes in the world of work, fuelled by the impact of the pandemic that forced businesses to change their way of working and led to the prevalence of home-based working whenever possible; the technological changes underpinning the move to virtual; the gradual reduction of the prevalence of corporate or institutional careers that typically involved gradually moving up the ladder in a large organisation; the rise of the gig economy and associated flexible career configurations and a greater prevalence of self-employment; and the increasing understanding that entrepreneurship and self-employment are potential options that can enable autistic women to increase their confidence, competence and resilience, thereby contributing to the development of more satisfying careers and lives. We hope that this book will spark a multidisciplinary and inclusive dialogue about what is needed as a basis for action and to contribute to setting an agenda for future research.

## **From the Authors**

Given the nature of this book, we felt it important to provide readers with some brief insights into the background and personal motivations that inspired us to take on this endeavour.

### *Dinah*

When my daughter was growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, I thought I had a child who just wasn't applying herself. Her neurodiversity was only fully diagnosed once she started university at 19. I think of her childhood and wish I'd known about neurodiversity back then – how differently I would have parented. As it is, my cherished neurodivergent daughter hasn't looked back since her diagnosis – achieving and exceeding her career goals. I now have the good fortune to work with her, as well as many other neurodivergent colleagues, and I know first-hand the (in)valuable complementary skills neurodivergent people bring to any situation.

For me, this book has its provenance in my work to support women, all over the world, to either set up and grow businesses or alternatively to think of ways they can use their skills to generate income to support themselves and their families. Invited to co-create an enterprise skills programme with a group of autistic women, I began researching what is already out there on the subject – the answer is, almost nothing. 'Developing enterprise skills' and 'neuro-diversity'

#### 4 *Entrepreneurship, Neurodiversity & Gender*

rarely appear on the ‘same page’. If you’re neurodivergent, the resources available are mainly focused on helping you to ‘get a job’, for example, by improving your CV writing and interview skills.

Our research brings to light the continued widespread lack of awareness about neurodiversity among employers, despite the increasing activity which has begun to make inroads into the subject matter. In the course of my research we consulted neurodiverse women and men, many of whom had worked for large organisations. They tell the same stories – how their employers didn’t accommodate the simplest requests that would have made a huge difference for their well-being and value to the firm – the most frequent request being for a quieter office and dimmed lighting. As a result of their working conditions, they suffered (needless) mental trauma which led to their unemployment. Or, in some cases, it spurred them into shaping their own futures, through self-employment or by creating their own ventures.

The aim of this book is to be a resource for the neurodivergent, but it is also to raise greater awareness of how neurodiversity has to be viewed, accepted and understood, as an augmentation of wider diversity and intersectionality. Everyone brings different gifts to the party. I now recommend all the organisations I work with widen their diversity agenda and open their eyes to how to nurture the neurodivergence within their teams.

#### *Yolanda*

Working on the SWAN programme as an external evaluator meant that I had the privilege of interviewing many of the individuals who participated as mentors, both at the beginning and the end of the programme during the exit interviews.<sup>1</sup> I was also able to observe many of the sessions and analyse the session evaluations completed by both the mentor and mentee groups. Becoming part of the programme gave me the opportunity to engage with the programme designers, the individuals delivering the different parts of the programme as well as the participants in a very relaxed manner over a period of some six months. This was a very profound experience which affected me on a personal level. As the programme and the conversations unfolded, what struck me was the degree to which I identified with many of the stories of the women, which in turn led to a fair degree of introspection even after the programme finished and some discussions with members of the wider programme team, which included autistic and neurotypical individuals.

As life took over, self-reflection took a back seat. Not long after we began the writing of this book, we delved into the existing literature and secondary sources available, including some academic literature, but also many books and articles written by practitioners, including many neurodivergent individuals. As we interviewed the women who so generously shared their experiences, broadening

---

<sup>1</sup>Initially conceived, designed and led by Catriona Stewart, funded by the Scottish Government, with Scottish Autism providing administrative support.

our scope to include women identifying with ADHD and other neurodivergent groups, I again became conscious about the degree to which many of their stories resonated with me and resumed my parallel journey of self-discovery while I continued to work on the book.

As a child I tended to spend more time on my own than with friends, mostly with my nose in a book. Having changed country of residence at ages 8 and 12 and subsequently moved again to attend university, I initially put the lack of sustained friendships down to not having remained in one place for long enough, but this trend continued through high school and university. I realised that small talk and unstructured social time have always been a nightmare for me, and yet I have no problems speaking to large audiences. I'm not the best at keeping in regular contact with people although I think about them a lot more, and yet when a real connection is established, it is easy to pick up where we left off. I treasure the small number of deep and enduring friendships I have enjoyed since my early thirties. Having travelled extensively and lived in a number of different countries, I've also found navigating new cultures and situations much easier than dealing with more run-of-the-mill situations close to home, largely because I can go in with the idea that I need to figure out the rules of the game as I proceed, and no one finds that the slightest bit strange.

As happened to many people, the onset of the pandemic turned my life upside down. Instead of spending about 80% of my time away from home, travelling for purposes of work, I was suddenly locked down at home for months on end (I live in a part of Spain where the containment measures were pretty stringent). While everyone was busy commenting that working from home might be easier and less stressful, the reverse happened to me. Without the 'externally organised' life that had allowed me to combine the need for stimulation and novelty with periods of enforced downtime permitting an undisturbed hyperfocus during long-distance flights or evenings spent in hotels, and with the need to deal with the practicalities of organising and running a conventional life and home on a consistent basis with established routines, I was suddenly lost. All my planning systems and safety nets carefully constructed over the years did not help in the slightest in this 'new normal'. Now that I theoretically had 'all the time in the world', why was I unable to supercharge my productivity? Or even maintain the levels of productivity I had been accustomed to? I spent the first year in lockdown trying to figure this out, getting increasingly frustrated as the months went by. Was I just a scanner (Sher, 2006) or a multipotentialite (Wapnick, 2017) or was something else going on? The truth is, I am still figuring things out.<sup>2,3</sup> But writing this book has been an

---

<sup>2</sup>Sher, B. (2006). *Refuse to choose. A revolutionary programme for doing everything that you love*. Rodale press. This was one of the early books that provided some comfort in terms of it being OK to have a wide range of interests, even if others could not see the connections among them.

<sup>3</sup>Wapnick, E. (2017). *How to be everything: A guide for those who (still) don't know what they want to be when they grow up*. Harper One. This is another interesting approach that provides some support to the idea of a building a portfolio career on the basis of wide-ranging interests that make inherent sense to the individual concerned.

enormously enriching journey, full of inspiring stories, stimulating debates, bursts of self-doubt and a sense of privilege that I have had the opportunity to gain new insights about my inner and my outer world.

## **Scope of the Book**

Having briefly highlighted what brought the co-authors of this book to the decision to write it in order to provide an overall context, and before we introduce some of the key concepts that appear throughout the book and provide some definitions, we would like to give an overview of the scope of the book.

At a macro-level, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) have long been the engine of growth in many economies and the independent owner-managed business tends to be very much embedded in their local ecosystem. SMEs are also an important source of employment, providing interesting and satisfying career opportunities.

Both authors believe strongly in the power of enterprise, self-employment and entrepreneurship as a way of designing a fulfilling career, an alternative to the traditional corporate career. While it has always been an option, in recent decades as traditional careers have become more precarious, the world of work has proved to be a rapidly changing landscape due to technology and globalisation, with new types of jobs that require new types of skills appearing every year. That said, we have long been conscious that career advice still continues to favour the corporate route to employment, and self-employment or entrepreneurship are not usually shown as alternatives when young people are thinking about their future professional trajectory.

The same situation is mirrored by the current thrust of programmes and initiatives related to providing neurodivergent individuals with opportunities in the world of work. Interest in establishing a neurodiverse workforce has certainly been growing among corporates in recent years, at least in some countries. But there is little or no focus on encouraging neurodivergent individuals to consider working for themselves.

In writing this book, we set out to discover examples of neurodivergent enterprise and entrepreneurship and to assess the extent to which this might be a viable career option for neurodivergent individuals. For completeness, we look at both employment and entrepreneurial options in the first section. Not everyone will opt for entrepreneurship, and some individuals will choose to switch between employment and self-employment, possibly more than once over their lifetime. Larger companies may create structures that permit intrapreneurship, offering a degree of flexibility as well as room for innovation and autonomy that might suit some neurodivergent individuals.

A second line of enquiry is to focus on SMEs in contrast to larger corporations as employers of neurodivergent individuals. Little is known about what owner-managed independent businesses are doing to increase the neurodiversity of their staff. Generally it is predominantly larger companies and organisations which tend to have a higher profile and whose activities are highlighted in the press. One phenomenon we have encountered is organisations, either operating on

a fully commercial basis or conceived as social enterprises, that were set up by neurodivergent entrepreneurs or by their family members and allies, with the specific objective of employing neurodivergent individuals.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction, which sets out the context for the book, describes the approach we used to researching and writing the book and provides an overview of its scope.

Chapter 2 focuses on the core concepts around which the book is built. First we look at women's entrepreneurship. We reflect on some of the early research into women entrepreneurs and how the questions around women's entrepreneurship were framed. One interesting point that arises is that initially the research was often framed in terms of how women entrepreneurs differed from the 'norm' of their male counterparts, who had tended to predominate in the research until then. There was a certain degree of discussion around how to support the women, who were somehow 'lacking' (in confidence, resources, skills, networks, for example). Essentially, at least in some quarters, the focus was on 'fixing' the women so they would be able to thrive as entrepreneurs. It was only with time that it was recognised that in many instances both the environment and the context gave rise to the 'problems'. This point of view highlighted the relevance of creating equitable conditions, by making the legal and regulatory framework more gender-responsive and by considering how social norms and gender roles impact the choice and agency of women, for example. It is instructive to note that some of the same issues can be observed when considering the literature related to neurodivergent individuals. Again, from some quarters we have perceived an undertone of neurodivergent individuals being somehow different from an established norm, and a tendency to envisage solutions which will fix them so that they are better able to deal with a neurotypical world. Instead, we should be thinking about how to create more equitable conditions in society and at work in which the entire neurodiverse spectrum of humanity can function effectively.

We then discuss neurodiversity and gender. Initially, given the original impetus for this book, we began by focusing on autism. However, as we began to get further into the research process and talk with people, we found that a number of the individuals we interviewed also identified with other conditions, such as ADHD or dyslexia, making it difficult to draw clear demarcation lines. After some discussion, we decided to broaden our focus, substituting the term neurodiversity for autism in the original title. In our view, neurodiversity encompasses *all* ways of thinking and therefore includes both the denominations 'neurodivergent' and 'neurotypical'. In all honesty, we are uncomfortable with these terms since they perpetuate the idea that the former group diverges from the 'norm' that the latter group represents. Furthermore, the members of both groups represent a spectrum or perhaps a series of archetypes. However, at the time of writing we are unable to offer alternatives, so for the time being the terms stand. We make reference to the fact that both ADHD and autism are more likely to be diagnosed in boys and men, which underlines the importance of the gender lens in this book.

We end the second chapter with a discussion about diagnosis, disclosure and identity. Diagnosis was a critical event for many of the people we spoke to, independent of when it occurred, whether they had received a formal diagnosis or

not and the circumstances that had surrounded the event. Disclosure was often even more important. Some of the individuals we spoke to had made the decision to disclose and made their peace with that decision, although among them were women who highlighted that disclosing sometimes had negative consequences. Others had taken the decision not to disclose, largely because of the negative impact they feared it might have on their lives or careers. And yet others had disclosed their diagnosis and been surprised by the positive impact of that disclosure. Diagnosis and disclosure are closely bound up with an individual's identity, making these choices even more important.

In Chapter 3, we build on the stories of women who have gone down the road of employment. Neurodivergent employees can bring significant benefits to the workplace, something which is beginning to be recognised by at least some employers. We ask whether the recruitment process is more difficult for neurodivergent individuals to navigate and why this might be the case. In addition to representing a stressful process for a potential neurodivergent employee, the built-in biases in these processes can work against them by screening out those applicants who don't fit the preconceived mould of the ideal employee early on.

We also think about what the neurodivergent employee needs in order to survive and thrive in the workplace, and by extension, what it means to create a conducive workplace for everyone. This leads to a discussion of the concept of a good boss, a figure that often has an important role to play in shaping the immediate working environment of an employee. Finally we ask whether the size of the business matters for creating the right environment or is it all just down to good management?

Chapter 4 turns the spotlight on self-employment and entrepreneurship. We have not separated these two options, since we have generally found there to be a continuum, which runs from setting up as a freelancer and beginning to contract certain tasks out to other people, to running a small- or medium-sized company. This part of the book highlights the challenges and successes the entrepreneurial women we spoke to have experienced and what triggered their decisions to set up on their own.

As to the nature-or-nurture debate, or whether entrepreneurs are born or made, the authors firmly believe that both the individual's makeup and her surroundings interact and exert an influence on whether someone opts for setting up on her own. The environment a person grows up in and is operating in has an impact on how that individual develops enterprising tendencies, as do the accumulated experiences over time. Although not everyone responds in the same way, much can be done to ensure that neurodivergent individuals and their neurotypical peers acquire the right skillsets and have the opportunity to be exposed to entrepreneurial attitudes in others and to learn experientially the skillsets that are needed. Neurodivergent women are as heterogeneous as any other group, exhibiting different learning styles and preferences, different personality traits and different ways of doing things.

The chapter is essentially structured around the process of setting up a business, from motivation to idea generation to getting started and surviving the early days. It looks at the barriers and pitfalls encountered and what support neurodivergent women entrepreneurs had or wished they would have had. In addition