

# Elgar Encyclopedia of Innovation Management

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ELGAR ENCYCLOPEDIAS IN BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT



Cheltenham, UK • Northampton, MA, USA

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Published by  
Edward Elgar Publishing Limited  
The Lypiatts  
15 Lansdown Road  
Cheltenham  
Glos GL50 2JA  
UK

Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.  
William Pratt House  
9 Dewey Court  
Northampton  
Massachusetts 01060  
USA

Authorised representative in the EU for GPSR queries only: Easy Access System Europe –  
Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia, [gpsr.requests@easproject.com](mailto:gpsr.requests@easproject.com)

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

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025933275

This book is available electronically in the **Elgaronline**  
Business subject collection  
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035306459>

ISBN 978 1 0353 0644 2 (cased)  
ISBN 978 1 0353 0645 9 (eBook)

## 45. Gender and gendering

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### Outline of the topic

Traditionally, innovation research is silent on gender. As innovation research focuses mostly on innovation outcomes, processes and systems, it lacks an explicit focus on individuals (innovators), making gender hidden in the majority of innovation studies. However, studies adopting a ‘gender-as-variable’ approach assume a binary view to focus mainly on differences between men and women in innovation activity. Some studies investigate (women’s) everyday innovations, innovations in care work, or analysis of policy from a gender perspective. Through these works, the gendered understanding of innovation becomes evident. Recently, gender research in innovation has evolved towards understanding gender dynamics, that is, femininities and masculinities, as part of the innovation processes. Finally, the feminist perspective has the potential for change in order to foster a more inclusive innovation discourse and practice. This entry focuses on depicting these different conceptualizations of gender and related streams of research in innovation studies.

### Conceptual overview and discussion

Alsos and colleagues suggest that the innovation literature is characterized by gender blindness, masking how masculinities and men have been prioritized in innovation and hiding how innovation is fundamentally gendered. However, there is an emergent focus on gender in innovation studies. Historically, the most common stream is the gender-as-variable (sex) approach, often with a focus on differences and similarities between men and women in innovation. These studies typically recognize men and women as part of cisgender and focus on differences in innovation activity in businesses owned by women or men, or on differences between men and women in patenting or research commercialization in the university context. The gender-as-variable perspective has been criticized, both for ignoring transgender and gender-non-conforming individuals and for reproducing women’s underperformance by

emphasizing how women are less innovative and participate less in innovation than men. However, the perspective has been fruitful, for example, when investigating innovation policies. The gender equality myth can quickly be dismantled when demonstrating how innovation funding or support services are targeted primarily to men innovators, men-owned businesses and male-dominated industries. Consequently, these studies enable identifying structural factors that exclude women from innovation. For example, only a fraction of all venture capital funding is targeted to women, even in the Nordic countries, despite these countries being praised for their gender equality. It is important too that future research includes transgender and gender non-confirming individuals.

Besides the ‘gender-as-variable’ perspective, other alternative approaches to gender are deemed necessary to understand innovation as a gendered concept and to show how masculinity, science and engineering and innovation are intertwined. Research offers evidence of how male and masculine connotations of innovation continue to be reproduced in different ways while also being context biased and ethnocentric. Innovation is gendered by conceptualizing innovations as products and technology that take place in manufacturing despite efforts to broaden the innovation concept to cover also service industries and public sector organizations. When innovation takes place in the latter domains, it has different gender meanings and can thus represent a threat rather than an opportunity to unleash innovation potential.

Taking a process perspective to gender enables investigating the processes in which the relationship between gender and innovation is challenged and transformed. Understanding gendering processes enables one to analyse not only how women are constructed as absent and men as visible in innovation processes but also reveals how these gendered stereotypes in innovation processes, policies and networks can be challenged. For example, existing research has illuminated the gendered processes of innovation by raising questions of visibility and legitimacy and showing how an ‘invisible’ and ‘unrecognized’ woman innovator can take action and gain legitimacy. By gendering the product, a female innovator can reclaim her position as a legitimate actor. A process perspective helps researchers to examine how the discourse of

innovation is created and recreated throughout gendered innovation processes, as well as how gender is produced and reproduced in innovation discourses. Gendered innovation processes and the gendering of innovation practices are ‘sticky’ – difficult and slow to change – which calls for a better understanding of the inherent power structures in innovation work.

To conclude, while some advancement in innovation research has taken place when it comes to gender, the innovation literature would benefit from a more thorough theorizing on gender. Specifically, it is important to have gender studies that do not build solely on the gender-as-variable and the binary perspective essentializing women and men but contribute to understanding the gendered construction of innovation as well as the gendering practices of doing (and undoing) gender in innovation. Furthermore, to advance research in gender and innovation, it is possible to draw on the studies of masculinities and femininities on the one hand, and feminist scholarship on the other hand, to reimagine innovation anew from a feminist perspective. I will discuss two examples of these approaches next.

## Application

Pecis contributes to understanding how innovation processes are gendered by showing how specific forms of masculinities and femininities are constructed, enacted and resisted. Her analysis challenges the binary and dichotomous reproduction of men and women and of masculinities and femininities and focuses on how gender is done, undone and redone continuously in everyday social interactions. This draws attention to how *all individuals do gender* and how femininities or masculinities are not properties of women or men and are never fixed or essential. Masculinities and femininities are simultaneously constructed in innovation work and destabilize the specific form of masculinity as the norm. The empirical findings of the study show how women innovators conflate a specific form of femininity with competitiveness, emotionality and dexterity in innovation. It is a form of femininity – rather than masculinity – that is enacted in daily innovation practices. Both women and men create discursive positions to resist the association of femininities/masculinities in innovation. Research participants in both male- and female-dominated

contexts challenge and establish the connection between being a woman and participating in innovation processes. This is informative on how *gendering and innovation are intertwined*: innovation participants operate from gendered frameworks, creating tensions throughout the process. By providing a gendered account of innovation that takes into account the fluidity and interactions between femininities, the study highlights how innovation practices embed multiple forms for masculinities and femininities.

Pecis and Berglund approach innovation as a context to counterforce the individualizing perspective in innovation. To do so, they rely on feminist studies of innovation in a dialogue with critical race theorists to reveal how innovation is shaped from the margins. As such, they contribute to the intersectionality research agenda in innovation. Intersectionality allows for challenging binary thinking by promoting an understanding of how different identities at the intersections of race/class/gender/sexuality – and related systems of oppression, domination or discrimination – overlap and contribute to positioning individuals as the ‘other’ excluded from innovation. The *intersectional lens enables grasping the multiple inequalities of groups of people* in subordinate positions. The argument is that it is not sufficient to view all women as a homogeneous group; rather, one needs to understand the plurality of the experiences of women in innovation. Intersectionality challenges the neoliberal, postfeminist narrative that all women should and can take part in innovation if they just made the effort. Instead, the intersectional approach enables recognizing the unequal structures in innovation, hindering the ability of ‘all women’ to do this work. Pecis and Berglund approach intersectionality both as structural (to understand who occupies positions at the margins and those at the centre) and as political (to innovate race/gender relations from the margins). As such, they suggest envisioning innovation anew to *open spaces for feminist resistance and for reimagining innovation radically in a feminist way*. Innovation is political and radical, and in this way the feminist ambition of shattering gender oppression, sexism and racism can be re-envisioned as forms of innovation. In an organizational context, gender-equality measures could be understood as organizational innovations to disrupt the ongoing understanding of innovation. Alternatively,

focusing on gendered social innovation can offer a more inclusive approach to innovation, thereby democratizing it.

### Critical summary

Innovation is gendered. This can be seen in what is considered to be an innovation, where innovations can be found and who can be an innovator. While innovation research is still largely silent on gender, there is an emergent research stream on gender and innovation. However, existing research to a large extent focuses either on examining the differences between men and women or on understanding the opportunities and challenges of (cis-gender) women as innovators.

Further research is needed about the complex ways of doing and undoing femininities and masculinities in innovation work to grasp the complexity and flexibility of these positions. Besides focusing on the experiences of women, we need further research on how men (and non-binary individuals) in different positions and contexts experience innovation activities and what kinds of masculinities

and femininities innovation work invokes. Feminist approaches can be helpful, both to reveal unequal structures and also to open up spaces for feminist resistance and reimagining innovation in radically new ways.

### Further readings

- Alsos, G. A., Hytti, U., & Ljunggren, E. (Eds.) (2016). *Research handbook on gender and innovation*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
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- Messerschmidt, J. W. (2018). *Hegemonic masculinity: Formulation, reformulation, and amplification*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Pecis, L. (2016). Doing and undoing gender in innovation: Femininities and masculinities in innovation processes. *Human Relations*, 69(11), 2117–2140.
- Pecis, L., & Berglund, K. (2021). Hidden in the limelight: A feminist engagement with innovation studies. *Organization*, 28(6), 993–1017.