



GRASS CEILING

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Ireland

Persistent gender norms, the importance of “finding a tribe” and the critical role of stakeholders: Key takeaways from the Irish Living Lab

Introduction

The Irish Living Lab (LL) of the GRASS CEILING project took place in the urban adjacent region of the south east of Ireland, encompassing the counties of Waterford, Kilkenny, and Wexford. The aim of the Labs was to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by six women innovators and to support their entrepreneurial projects over the three years of the project. This summary establishes the profiles of the women innovators, along with the specific operational approach of the Irish Living Labs and key learnings from the process based on feedback from the women.

Case study results and learnings

Composition and organisation of the Living Lab

The six (initially seven) participants in the Irish Living Labs ranged in age from the mid-20s to the late 50s and included the youngest innovator from across all nine GRASS CEILING Living Labs. All women, except this youngest participant, who was an aspiring entrepreneur in 2023, were established innovators at the start of the project. Most women combine their innovations with caring responsibilities. Three women have small children, another woman has adult children, and one is the primary carer for an adult brother with severe special needs who lives with her. Through observations during the Living Labs, it was assumed that all participants were middle-class, and they all noted that having private funds to invest was critical to the development of their innovations.

Seven of the nine Irish Living Labs were held in person. Six of these took place in different locations on the Waterford campus of South East Technological University (SETU). One Living Lab session took place in the factory/café space of a Living Lab participant, located approximately 90km from SETU. Two Living Lab sessions were online, taking place on the Zoom platform. Having most sessions on the university campus gave the Living Labs a formal feel.

Innovation process and observed changes

As most participants were established innovators at the start of the project, they would probably have developed their projects independently of their participation in the Living Labs. Moreover, mentoring sessions, such as those in Dutch and Scottish Labs, were not a feature of the Irish Labs. However, a noteworthy aspect of the Irish Living Lab is that in the second year of the sessions, one innovator sold her business to the youngest Lab participant and aspiring entrepreneur. The reason she gave for this sale was the demands of childcare.

Stakeholder interaction

Stakeholders, understood as representatives of government bodies, banks and innovation support organisations, were involved in only two of the nine Living Labs. This was criticised by the women, who wanted more decision-makers to hear their stories, suggestions, and concerns, so changes could be made to the current funding and policy landscape to benefit future women innovators.

The women were especially critical of the representative of the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) in the online session for LL3, who they felt was not hearing their concerns around the need to simplify cumbersome funding applications and models of entrepreneurship, favouring export ambition and scaling upwards, which do not suit many women innovators focused on community, circular economy and sustainability.

The final Living Lab, which included representatives of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCG), was favourably received by participants who felt that their points were being heard and that they could really be contributing to a positive change in existing policy and funding models.

Perceptions and collective learning

The women mentioned regularly that they valued the opportunity to come together in a women-only space to share frustrations, successes and advice with each other. One spoke of the value of “finding a tribe” with women on similar entrepreneurial paths. It was clear that the aspiring entrepreneur benefited greatly from having established entrepreneurs to give feedback and guidance, while the established entrepreneurs gained valuable confidence through sharing experiences and advice. However, the women commented that they did not stay in contact between Living Lab sessions.

Conclusion

Living Labs are valued by participants as a safe and supportive space for sharing successes and challenges in a women-only environment. They also provide an important platform for capturing the barriers faced by women, such as regressive gender norms in caring roles, issues with current funding models and patriarchal understandings of entrepreneurship. However, it must be acknowledged that Living Labs also face key challenges: the adaptation of methodological tools to meet the needs of experienced innovators, expectations of mentorship models involved, and effective engagement with stakeholders throughout the process. A key takeaway from the Irish Living Labs is the importance of embedding stakeholders in each session for women to appreciate the true value of their participation and to understand their critical role within the wider aim of the project of effecting evidence-based policy change.

Location:

Ireland

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