

# Gender and entrepreneurship: past achievements and future possibilities

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this short commentary reflects upon how feminist theory might be used to advance the contemporary gendered critique of women's entrepreneurship. Drawing from gender theory, a diverse and complex critique has arisen to challenge the discriminatory discourse of entrepreneurship that fundamentally disadvantages women. To progress debate, the author suggests that greater attention should be afforded to feminist theories as explanatory analyses for such subordination and particularly to challenge contemporary postfeminist ideas which fuel a false promise of entrepreneurship for women.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A conceptual paper drawing upon extant literature to develop suggestions for future research.

**Findings** – Conceptual arguments challenging current approaches to analysing the relationship between women, gender and entrepreneurship.

**Research limitations/implications** – Somewhat controversially, it is suggested that such a critique might encourage us to refocus research such that it challenges, rather than seeks to confirm, the axiom that under current conditions, entrepreneurship is "good" for women and society so ergo, we need more women entrepreneurs. Greater acknowledgement of feminist theory will also facilitate a stronger intersectional analysis, vital if we are to acknowledge how socio-economic and contextual diversity constrains or enables entrepreneurial behaviour.

**Social implications** – This article challenges contemporary researchers to reconsider current thinking regarding the value of entrepreneurial activity for women.

**Originality/value** – The commentary concludes by identifying how the next generation of scholars might take such ideas forward to build upon established foundations.

**Keywords** Gender, Intersectionality, Women, Postfeminism, Feminism, Entrepreneurship

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Preamble – setting the scene

Since the 1990s, it has been my privilege to engage with a community of like-minded colleagues, many of whom have been instrumental in creating and supporting this journal, who care passionately about the impact of gender upon women's entrepreneurship. It is evident that we all share a common objective to critically analyse and challenge gendered biases within entrepreneurship research which disadvantage women. This objective has been articulated through a multiplicity of iterations which have grown richer in recent years

Thank you Colette Henry for inviting me to contribute this article but more so, for your tireless advocacy for women in the context of entrepreneurship whether as an activist, editor, author or organiser. It was a privilege to contribute a paper to the IJGE in its formative years and to do so again – it surely cannot be 10 years! Over that time, it has been gratifying to see the journal strengthen in terms of status and influence. There will surely be more great things to come in the next 10 years; Rock on!



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as a testament to the complexity and sophistication of this debate. Looking back upon my experiences, my first engagement with entrepreneurship in the 1990s arose from a research appointment related to exploring “small firm” management practices – in that era, entrepreneurship as a theoretical field of study was barely recognised within the UK and European debate. Rather, the emergent debate focused upon self-employment and small firm management; this was deemed an applied subject supporting the neoliberal agenda (Marttila, 2013). As such, research efforts focused largely upon quantifying performance thus, the key issue revolved around how many self-employed/small firm owners were operating, how could their numbers be increased and how could they be encouraged to grow their ventures (Greene and Patel, 2013)?

Entering this environment, what was immediately apparent was the overwhelming dominance of men within this field – as academics, business advisors, practitioners and subjects of research. It was indeed, the era of “small businessmen” across the spectrum in every sense. As Holmquist and Sundin (1988, p. 1) observed, research in this field was “by men, about men and for men”. At this time, such social discrimination was rarely recognised or even considered to be important given assumptions that entrepreneurship was a neutral site of profit creation at the market level, and productivity at the societal level (Perren and Jennings, 2005). When issues such as inequality and exclusion were acknowledged – whether as gender, ethnicity or class – the focus was upon identifying pathways to encourage under-represented or disadvantaged groups into entrepreneurship. The allegedly meritocratic context of entrepreneurship was deemed an enabling space where individuals could apply agency to exploit their potential while reaping personal gain through the exercise of agency and choice (Ogbor, 2000; Acs and Szerb, 2007). Under such logics, structural exclusion and disadvantage are translated into individualised challenges that could be addressed through economic participation in the guise of entrepreneurship which in turn, contributed to national wealth and productivity.

Such logics have been highly instrumental within the debate surrounding women’s engagement with entrepreneurship. Women were a “problem” category in this debate; emerging research in the early 2000s noted their persistent under-representation as entrepreneurs and for those that did engage, a tendency to select into marginal, crowded sectors with poor growth prospects (Carter *et al.*, 2000; Fielden and Davidson, 2005). Women appeared to lack the ambitions or indeed, competencies to enter and succeed as entrepreneurs with implications for their own self-development and that of the wider economy (Fasci and Valdez, 1998; Small Business Service, 2003). There was little recognition that first, the allegedly feminised profile of sectoral concentration, home-based firms and marginal performance is generic to the majority of the small firms (Aldrich and Ruef, 2018; Anyadike-Danes *et al.*, 2015). Second, although there are some significant sex differences such that women are significantly under-represented as owners of growth-oriented firms and more likely to operate part-time ventures there was a little acknowledgement that this profile represented the end product of structural *gendered* subordination (Marlow, 2002). Rather, the headline facts of “fewer women, under-performing firms, risk adversity, home based, growth resistant” were taken as indicative of a form of feminised entrepreneurial deficiency which required fixing through dedicated efforts to restructure individual women’s attitudes to, and engagement with, entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006). Basically, as individuals, women just needed to try harder (Marlow, 2014).

Happily, however, a distinct critique gained traction emerging from the late 1990s recognising that the negative impact of social constructions of gender, specifically femininity and its dissonance with preferred entrepreneurial characteristics (Ahl, 2006), were uncritically transposed upon women as a sex category. This led to assumptions of an

essentialised deficit within women that they could and should change (Fasci and Valdez, 1998). Such change could be achieved by supporting, advising and training women to adopt prototypical entrepreneurial attitudes – so be more agentic, more risk tolerant, competitive and self-confident – in so doing, this would enable more women to create new ventures, matching the attainments of their male peers (SBS, 2003). Of course, within our community of gender scholars, we are familiar with these arguments and the ensuing academic critique (Bruni *et al.*, 2005; Ahl, 2006). This critique has dissected and dismissed the notion that “if only women were more like men” (Marlow, 2013, p. 10) then their persistent underrepresentation as entrepreneurs, and the underperformance of their ventures, would be solved! From the debate regarding gender bias within the entrepreneurial debate, it is apparent that with regard to women entrepreneurs, as alluded to above, the *outcomes* of structural discrimination were confused with the *antecedents* of behaviour.

Revealing such assumptions has enabled research to progress in terms of complexity and sophistication. Thus, adopting a gendered critique has equipped us to challenge essentialised discriminatory assumptions regarding women and entrepreneurship (McAdam, 2013). The notable gender effects in this debate resonate with socially embedded expectations which assume upon feminised deficiencies enacted within specific contexts such as that of entrepreneurial behaviour (Ahl and Marlow, 2019). Fortunately, our community of practice has worked collaboratively to advance theoretical critiques, drawing upon a gendered analysis, which reveals the socially constructed nature of this alleged feminised deficit regarding women’s entrepreneurship. This stance has, in turn, informed methodological developments enabling the generation of more apposite empirical evidence to illustrate conceptual analysis (Henry *et al.*, 2016). In particular, there has been more engagement with feminist methodologies using a feminist standpoint (Harding, 1987) articulated through post-structuralism which reveals how meanings are founded upon an axiomatic masculinised view (Ahl and Marlow, 2012) which occludes discriminatory foundations. More recently, there is an emergence of narrative analyses which delve into contemporary representations of women entrepreneurs and how this again, fuels normative notions of who and what is a desirable woman business owner (Byrne *et al.*, 2019). Critical realist analyses are also emerging which illustrate the intersection of structure and agency to reveal how gender discrimination is produced and reproduced across contexts (Dy *et al.*, 2017). Thus, methodological advances moving beyond “traditional” surveys, often gender blind or gender biased given the variables used (Jayawarna *et al.*, 2015), will enhance future critiques.

Consequently, as Jennings and Brush (2013) note, the debate regarding gender, women and entrepreneurship is now a “maturing” field with associated research published in a wide range of top-rated journals, has a sound evidence base, commands recognition in the policy arena and has a distinct presence within leading conferences in the USA and Europe plus a dedicated annual conference event (Diana) to progress theory and practice. And of course, the *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* has made a distinct and invaluable contribution to supporting and developing this dedicated field of research. The debate has progressed from assumptions that men are naturally entrepreneurial and can act as role models for women to emulate to a more critical, conceptually embedded reflections drawing upon feminist theory. This, of course, begs the question of how our field of research might now progress; the possibility I would like to explore in this paper explores potential opportunities regarding the influence of feminist theories upon analyses of women’s entrepreneurship; their relationship with intersectionality and how this intertwined debate might be instrumental in shaping future argument. Exploring the relationship between gender, feminism and entrepreneurship lays the foundation for such arguments.

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### **The philosophy of entrepreneurship and gendered assumptions**

In 2005, Perren and Jennings argued that the dominant research approach within entrepreneurship was embedded within a functionalist paradigm *characterised by an objectivist perspective and rooted in regulation [ . . . ]. [this informs] a relatively narrow range of metatheoretical assumptions* (2005, p. 146). As such, the ontological foundations of entrepreneurship research were premised upon revealing positivist relationships between variables which would enable and increase rates of entrepreneurial behaviour. Again, the assumption being that entrepreneurship is first and foremost, a mode of value creation whereby, in the context of enabling market conditions, positive economic outcomes ensue for individuals and society. Axiomatically, therefore, successful entrepreneurial activities have an economic logic that in turn, generates positive social outcomes; these might be in the form of job creation, the impact of wealth creation on well-being or the problem-solving field of social entrepreneurship. This ontological stance has been nurtured since the 1980s given the increasing dominance of neoliberalism as an underpinning state ideology across the globe (Couldry, 2010). The benefits of neoliberalism are celebrated through the promise of rewards from agentic individualism made possible by the removal of collective regulatory constraints prompting diverse forms of entrepreneurialism (du Gay, 2004). This may, for example, take the form of reducing state welfare provision to prompt greater individual responsibility or encouraging greater entrepreneurialism in corporates (Harvey, 2007). Notably, however, this discourse has encouraged and expanded entrepreneurship in the guise of self-employment and new venture creation as a route to self-actualisation and personal reward (Ahl and Marlow, 2019).

This functional paradigm underpins the debate informing women's engagement with entrepreneurship. For although there has been an increasingly complex and sophisticated engagement with a gendered critique of entrepreneurship (McAdam, 2013; Jennings and Brush, 2013), this discourse arose from, and remains largely situated within, functionalist assumptions. So for example, early analyses of women's entrepreneurship were openly premised upon the notion that women's essential lack of entrepreneurial propensity and the alleged under-performance of their firms had to be corrected on the basis that: first, entrepreneurship is good for the economy, good for society and axiomatically, therefore, good for women (Foss *et al.*, 2018; Ahl and Marlow, 2019). Second, women are not fulfilling their entrepreneurial potential [this theme emerged within early policy directives upon women's entrepreneurship (SBS, 2003) and remains alive and well today (Deloitte, 2016)] and this is detrimental for them personally and society as a whole and third, the solution is to change women so everyone can benefit from their entrepreneurial activity (Ahl and Marlow, 2019). The gendered critique has challenged these simplistic assumptions using analyses illustrating how socially constructed forms of subordination prevent women from fulfilling their alleged "entrepreneurial potential" by selecting into self-employment, entering higher value sectors or scaling up their firms. What is lacking in the contemporary debate, however, is a more fundamental, politically informed challenge regarding assumptions of the benefits of entrepreneurship that is, we are still looking to fit women into entrepreneurship rather than questioning how entrepreneurship might fit women?

### **Feminist theory and entrepreneurship**

To address such questions, I suggest feminist theory could be used to encourage greater reflexivity and inform future critiques. The dominant functionalist ontology which underpins the majority of entrepreneurship research presumes upon a liberal feminist stance that, in turn, underpins prevailing gendered critiques (Calas *et al.*, 2009). As such, the basic assumption is that for women, entrepreneurship is a desirable career from which many are

excluded because of gender-based inequalities which fuel negative stereotyping, constrain access to entrepreneurial resources or generate sexist business advice. From this liberal feminist perspective, to ameliorate such disadvantage generic socio-economic adjustments around education, overt sexism, career segregation etc. are required to ensure that women can pursue entrepreneurial activities upon an equitable basis (Carter and Williams, 2003). As Greer and Greene (2003a, p. 13) observe, however, the assumption that men and women are fundamentally similar and, *equally free to progress based upon talents, skills and willingness to work* does not acknowledge equality with whom, how this informs the notion of “progress”, nor does it question, “progressing to what?”.

Although largely premised upon liberal feminist assumptions, the extant debate has been pivotal in revealing the degree of gendered disadvantage experienced by women but, the assumption remains that entrepreneurship is a desirable neutral market-based activity primarily focused upon profit maximisation which in turn, reflects and values masculinised characteristics given their preferential fit with this model. Thus, the emphasis here is upon finding routes to let women “into” this field of activity (on an equal basis with men) without challenging its hegemonic roots; the epistemology of entrepreneurship remain intact in terms of the tired, and to my mind, pointless questions we continue to ask of it for example, how can we encourage more women to create new ventures and then, push them to grow such ventures? What would this field look like using a feminist critique to challenge this epistemology regarding what constitutes knowledge in this field:

[...] if one begins enquiry with what appears problematic from the perspective of women’s experiences, one is led to design research for women [...] to provide for women explanations of social phenomena that they want and need [...] not the questions that men want answered (Harding, 1987, p. 8).

Should we be asking: what is it about the ontological basis of entrepreneurship that makes it inaccessible to women and, as an adjunct of contemporary neoliberalism, is entrepreneurship a “good” option for women either as a route to value creation or for their well-being? How can we use women’s experiences of entrepreneurship to challenge axioms that venture growth is normal and desirable? How can we encourage more networked, co-operative ways of working within entrepreneurship? How can feminist advocacy groups develop collective politically informed challenges to the conditions under which women perform entrepreneurship? How can we move away from the “yearning discourse” within policy and advocacy documents with subtexts of: *if only* women would create as many firms as men, *if only* they would grow their ventures – then they would be productive members of society.

To challenge this model, we can draw upon alternative feminist perspectives to expose and dispute the functional/liberal hegemony. It is acknowledged that since the late 1990s, collective feminist perspectives have been used to critique women’s entrepreneurship (Mirchandani, 1999; Greene and Greer, 2003b; Calas *et al.*, 2009) but this discourse has secured little traction. What has emerged in its stead are postfeminist assumptions which closely chime with the melded discourses of neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism (Lewis, 2014). Postfeminism, however, is a repudiation of feminism in that it rejects the need for a collective politically informed debate but instead, suggests that within the contemporary era of emancipation, women can apply entrepreneurialism of the self to achieve their ambitions (Deloitte, 2016). Postfeminism has been developed as a cultural trope drawing upon shifts in the presentation of young, savvy, liberated women, largely in developed economies, using “girl power” and related forms of femininity to advance personal ambition (McRobbie, 2009; Pritchard *et al.*, 2019). This discourse is articulated through broad sensibilities including the



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application of agency as a pathway to achievement, a denial of structural barriers as the source of inequality and a makeover paradigm to create a subjectivity congruent with desirable feminised norms represented by popular role model exemplars. Evidence presented from developed (Adamson and Kelan, 2018; Byrne *et al.*, 2019) and emerging economies (Iyer, 2009) offers empirical illustrations of such subjectivities.

This discourse “calls” women to entrepreneurship given it presents an individualised opportunity to exploit the agentic potential and in so doing, generate personal wealth and social value (Ahl and Marlow, 2019). Postfeminist sensibilities map onto the promise of entrepreneurship as it is offered to women – prioritising individualism, that structural gendered constraints can be navigated if women “make themselves over” into preferred entrepreneurial prototypes and commodification of femininity through product and service offerings. This postfeminist discourse underpins generic policy initiatives in the USA, UK and Europe (Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Ahl and Marlow, 2019; Berglund *et al.*, 2018) aimed at encouraging more women to select into self-employment and to grow their ventures. Take the example of the UK – persistent themes within the policy and popular discourse suggest the need to: encourage more women into entrepreneurship to realise unexploited individual potential (agency: used to create value); the need to become more self-confident (makeover, be more like men); the efficacy of self-employment as a flexible solution to work-life balance (individual solution to a collective problem). Such themes featured in policy and advocacy initiatives in the early 2000s (SBS, 2003) and persist today (Deloitte, 2016). Such calls to the enterprise are supported through cultural tropes; popular entrepreneurial female role models based upon white, heterosexual, young, attractive, middle-class women (Byrne *et al.*, 2019). In a further twist to this debate, Mattel now produces an “Entrepreneur Barbie” as a contemporary cultural icon (Pritchard *et al.*, 2019) whose body image reflects the aesthetic labour necessary to enact desirable femininity but to meld this with entrepreneurial success, she is afforded an office, briefcase and smart suit.

There is an emergent critique of the postfeminist underpinnings of entrepreneurship (Lewis, 2014; Pettersson, *et al.*, 2017; Ahl and Marlow, 2019). Such work exposes the political nature of the intertwined discourses of neoliberalism, entrepreneurialism, postfeminism and women’s entrepreneurship arguing that their complementarity generates invidious assumptions of normativity. Rather, there is a melded ideology here which commences from the premise that more entrepreneurship is desirable; individuals can be assisted to adapt the self to take advantage of the opportunities it offers and those successful in this endeavour will release agentic potential to their own benefit and that of society *per se*. In effect, there is a fundamental ideological rupture between the principles of politically informed collective feminist activism and the individualised rationale underpinning the postfeminist sensibilities informing the contemporary discourse of women’s entrepreneurship. The very nature of entrepreneurial activity appears to represent the antithesis of feminism yet, feminist theories are surely those which could reveal the manner in which women are positioned within this discourse.

### **Moving forward**

Thinking about what such arguments might look like, we might commence by being more discerning regarding the two key themes which underpin research into gender, women and entrepreneurship that is: first, we need more women entrepreneurs and second, how can we “support” existing women entrepreneurs to be more productive. Using a feminist stance, perhaps we should dispute the first point that “more is good”. Instead, perhaps increasing the stock of women entrepreneurs in advanced economies is bad for women and of limited value to national productivity? As evidence suggests, women’s self-employment is largely concentrated

in feminised sectors with associated constraints upon returns and scalability (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). A feminist critique might suggest the solution to this might not be to encourage women to use their agency to shift to alternative, higher value-added sectors but rather, recognise that just as in the case of employment, collective structural discrimination and occupational segregation are influential. Such effects require collective recognition and a collective response; they might be negotiated through an agency but will not be solved. Such arguments, alongside revelations of the lack of welfare or employment benefits for the self-employed such as adequately funded maternity leave, minimum wage, discrimination protection etc. (Stumbitz *et al.*, 2018) and data indicating that particularly for women, mean incomes from self-employment are significantly lower than those from employment (Yuen *et al.*, 2018) could be applied to collective political lobbying. This may provoke debate regarding the false promise of entrepreneurship as a site of opportunity for women.

It could be suggested that individual strategies cannot address structural subordination and to promulgate arguments to the contrary is toxic and potentially misogynistic (blaming women for being victims of subordination). From this stance, should we argue that more enterprise is good for women or perhaps, while structural subordination remains a feature of women's lives, collective lobbying for better quality employment might be a more productive route to improving women's position in society? As Klyver *et al.* (2013) argue, efforts to explain low rates of entrepreneurial activity amongst Scandinavian women are, to paraphrase somewhat, a "no-brainer". Why would those women in good quality employment with institutionalised workplace benefits, job security and equality protection (although under attack) (Berglund *et al.*, 2018), a feature of Scandinavian workplaces, for self-employment much of which is defined by insecurity, long hours and poor returns?

The second strand of this debate focuses upon the performance of women-owned firms and how this might be enhanced. Again, analyses of such would look different from a feminist perspective which, it should be emphasised, would argue that women should be able to pursue entrepreneurship – but on their own terms. The purpose of this commentary is not to suggest that entrepreneurship is something women cannot or should not pursue; indeed, there are many instances where the autonomy of enterprise and escape from career discrimination are clearly positive for women. It is, however, perhaps a little ironic, or indeed sad, that a response to continuing collective employment discrimination is a flight to the individualised enterprise. If entrepreneurship is going to continue to be dangled in front of women as desirable, perhaps we should think more about ideas around what entrepreneurship can do for women rather than vice versa. This might encompass opportunities for learning, expanding networks of knowledge, collaborate networking in terms of innovation and creativity. This need not fall into the essentialist trap that women are naturally more collaborative, or other such nonsense, but rather present alternative versions of how entrepreneurship might generate collective value to individuals and society. Moreover, a feminist stance might perhaps, commence from a different point of enquiry by, for example, acknowledging that most entrepreneurial activity occurs in families and households (Carter *et al.*, 2017) so is intrinsically collaborative questioning why most research efforts persist in studying "the entrepreneur" as if he/she is an atomistic actor operating outside the socio-economic context (Watson, 2009). Developing alternative notions of performance and added value would also demand different ontologies regarding how the role of entrepreneurship is understood which in turn, would encourage enquiry where:

[. . .] feminist challenges reveal that the questions asked – and even more significantly, those that are not asked are at least determinative of the adequacy of the total picture [. . .] defining what is in need of explanation for only from the perspective of bourgeois white men leads to partial and even perverse understandings of social life (Harding, 1987, p. 7).

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Without this critique, the voice of entrepreneurship remains masculine while the voice of contemporary women's entrepreneurship is embedded in postfeminist sensibilities whereby structural discrimination is reformulated into individual problems. Although the gendered critique has exposed the masculinised discourse and identified how gendered ascriptions disadvantage women, without a feminist critique it may possibly be working to further disadvantage women. Within the field of entrepreneurship, gender "sticks" to women (Kelan, 2010) in that men assume the role of humans and women are "othered" through gendered critiques; the emergence of this critique has been largely distilled into a focus upon women's enterprise with events, conference tracks, journal articles, research projects overwhelmingly concentrating upon women as representative of gendered debate. On one hand, this creates a discourse – "by women, for women, about women" which accords with feminist calls for protected spaces which celebrate women's desires, priorities and experiences. Such spaces are found within dedicated streams at conferences focus upon gender and entrepreneurship (where gender has become a proxy for women) or workshops and meetings focused specifically upon allegedly women's issues' so notions of subordination and exclusion are passed back to women to be dealt with by them. Surely, however, these are broader social issues for society as a whole? So, on the other hand, if this is subverted into a debate on masculinised terms on how to get more women involved in an activity which is possibly detrimental, whereas assessments of their competency are prejudicial, this may not be a healthy space.

Moreover, does the channelling of gender debates into separate spaces in conferences, professional development workshops etc., predominantly attended by women, suggest that other fields of entrepreneurship research are gender-neutral? There could be a danger of fetishising gender to the detriment of a broader critique. An alternative approach might, in addition to creating protected spaces which have been influential in raising the visibility and status of the gender debate, be to lobby for greater acknowledgment of how this construct pervades notions of opportunity, effectuation, resource-based view, theories of planned behaviour, closure and exit for example. It appears that creating a separate space means that such "mainstream" research themes are rarely troubled by gendered critiques and when they are, the focus is specifically upon women's experiences, the disadvantages they encounter and how these might be realigned so they can be deemed legitimate within such debate. The gendered critique has been ideologically syphoned into women's entrepreneurship whereby women, not entrepreneurship, becomes problematised (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018). Could we find a clearer path to problematise how entrepreneurship is still analysed, researched and normatively embedded upon a discriminatory foundation? This was surely the original point of the women/gender debate that seems to have been turned back on itself as with the recognition of gender (women) as a critical issue, the baton to progress this debate has neatly been passed back to women. A feminist informed critique would look further to question the masculinised, market-based antecedents of entrepreneurship, how this is articulated through gender but importantly, might generate broader questions regarding the whole ethos of the entrepreneurial project rather than dissecting it into discrete elements, one of which has become gender/women.

Feminist informed critiques would also progress the growing recognition of intersectional analyses within our discipline (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Dy *et al.*, 2017). It is increasingly acknowledged that while gender is enacted as a multiplicity, it is a universally ascribed social ascription which acts to subordinate women but such subordination is intersected by a myriad of other social ascriptions. These might reflect race, ethnicity, age, class, sexual preference for example; each of these ascriptions will coalesce with gender to position women within society (Anthias, 2008) which in turns shapes broader



life chances including entrepreneurial experiences. There are a number of implications of intersectional critiques. That a broad focus just upon gender as universal subordination is relatively meaningless as it is too blunt an instrument to nuance experience but subscribing to this stance limits the scope to analyse category themes and trends ultimately leading to reflexive states where only the single, contextualised example is a valid research site (Gough, 2003). Drawing upon feminist critiques which analyse the confluence of issues such as race and gender would offer understanding how these social forces “position” women in the entrepreneurial discourse – equally, the ignored issue of the class could be brought into the debate through feminist analyses. It would be particularly interesting to use class-based critiques to expose the false promise of entrepreneurship as a meritocratic mechanism of social emancipation and how this is enacted through gendered discourse.

### Context

Contextually sensitive feminist analyses would also offer a pathway to engage in broader debate regarding Western-centric bias within the study of gender, women and entrepreneurship – assumptions that the global North is the dominant template for research, policy and practice are endemic within the debate. Indeed, much of the work cited in this commentary applies only to the USA or the UK, this ignores the evidence that the majority of the self-employed are in the global South largely because of limited access to secure formal employment and fragile institutional stability rather than some specific form of entrepreneurial orientation (Aldrich and Ruef, 2018). For women, where such conditions are exacerbated by conservative, patriarchal cultural norms, the context for entrepreneurship adopts a different ethos and articulation – a route to combine economic participation and observe patriarchal norms (Yousuf Danish and Lawton Smith, 2012) (but this does nothing to challenge such norms rather, is just circumnavigation). Is this the role of women’s entrepreneurship – to navigate one’s own repression? Equally, micro-finance for women in the deprived areas of the global south to create new ventures has been promulgated as an emancipatory opportunity to earn an income, gain status and generate welfare benefits by returning value to the community (Mayoux, 2000). What, however, might a postcolonial feminist critique of this argument look like? Postcolonial feminism is:

[. . .] an exploration of and at the *intersections* of colonialism and neocolonialism with gender, nation, class, race, sexualities in the different contexts of women’s lives, their subjectivities, work, sexuality, and rights (Mishra, 2013, p. 129).

Would individualised self-employment be deemed emancipatory or perhaps, reminiscent of arguments above, it might fragment the collective consciousness of subordination? Perhaps it converts the poverty inducing structural legacy of colonialism into an individualised opportunity for women to address this legacy through micro-entrepreneurship? Alternatively, perhaps the initiation of collective social projects, rather than individualised micro-enterprise, might enlighten, challenge and empower women traditionally silenced within this debate. Equally, there is a growing debate around the possibilities of entrepreneurship as an emancipatory route for women refugees (Al-Dajani *et al.*, 2015; Mawson and Kasem, 2019). There is again, an axiomatic assumption that a self-employment is a positive option for refugee women as it enables them to navigate language, skills and discrimination challenges while generating income. Yet, issues of addressing trauma and stress related to their life experiences while engaging uncertain poorly remunerated self-employment appear to be glossed over (Al Dajani and Marlow, 2013) as again, entrepreneurship is deemed the panacea of agency and opportunity rather than shifting even further responsibility upon women to manage families, displacement and now, income

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generation. It is now necessary to extend the reach of research upon women gender and entrepreneurship beyond assumed norms of the global north to recognise and include those beyond this narrow space and question how entrepreneurship is used as a tool to direct women into self-employment as a duty and community responsibility.

### Concluding observations

As noted in the introduction, I have been immensely privileged to engage with a like-minded community of colleagues who have drawn upon sophisticated argumentation while generating a wealth of empirical data to critically evaluate how women are positioned with the contemporary entrepreneurial discourse. Much has been achieved in a very short time generating a complex, well-informed encompassing gender critique; this foundation should now provide the confidence for us, as a community of practice, to adopt a more reflexive approach to our research focus – to challenge the questions we ask and why we ask them (Harding, 1987). To do this, drawing upon a collective feminist critique to expose what we are studying and how we are studying may, I suggest, be one way forward. I would emphasise that my point here is not to suggest that entrepreneurship as a form of socio-economic participation should be eschewed by women – we have every right to participate and benefit from opportunities it offers; my point is to question the conditions of the offer, how it camouflages discrimination and may damage women.

Decisions regarding how to advance this debate are a baton to be handed to the next generation of researchers who, I believe, will generate a more diverse, informed and challenging critique as they develop their ideas to advance knowledge. So, for example, I have learned much from working with a range of younger colleagues with a diverse international profile who bring new ideas and expertise to the table. I would like to thank them all for sharing their ideas. In particular, Angela Martinez-Dy has helped me develop a broader notion of the multiplicity of gender as an enactment, the criticality of intersectionality and how this “positions” women in society whether as refugees in the Middle-East or as digital entrepreneurs in the UK. As a committed feminist and activist, Angela is also well positioned to critically evaluate the arguments I have briefly outlined here, assess or dismiss their possibilities and hopefully, develop the themes further in the future – which is in good hands given the richness and talent of the forthcoming generation of scholars.

Polemically, I have suggested we are at self-reflective cross-roads where we might challenge the architecture of prevailing debate regarding the extent to which entrepreneurship is actually “good” for women in the current neoliberal, functionalist iteration. If we question its capacity to enhance social and economic well-being, might this provoke politically inspired collective feminist theories to inform this critique – can we generate a politically informed feminist critique of entrepreneurship? What might this look like and what are the implications for how we conduct our research and the questions we ask? I hope some of these questions might inform further research and self-reflexivity that ultimately, might make things a little better for women *per se*.

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