



EMERALD POINTS

**DO WOMEN  
ENTREPRENEURS  
PRACTICE A  
DIFFERENT KIND OF  
ENTREPRENEURSHIP?**

**ALISON THEAKER**



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# DO WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS PRACTICE A DIFFERENT KIND OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP?

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Emerald Publishing Limited  
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2024

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

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

ISBN: 978-1-83549-539-1 (Print)  
ISBN: 978-1-83549-538-4 (Online)  
ISBN: 978-1-83549-540-7 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# ABSTRACT

While the number of women-owned enterprises has been increasing, they account for only 35% of business ownership. This study examines female entrepreneurs' experiences with the aim of understanding whether their entrepreneurship practices conform to existing models. Because motivation affects how entrepreneurship is undertaken, the concept of whether 'success' has different meanings for them than are suggested by mainstream entrepreneurial theory is also explored.

A qualitative study of women entrepreneurs was undertaken in the United Kingdom, in Devon. Thus, the entrepreneurs studied operate in a rural environment. How this context affected the model of entrepreneurship was also considered.

The research contributes to knowledge by identifying the entrepreneurship model of successful women entrepreneurs. While the model of entrepreneurship practised by women entrepreneurs mainly supported mainstream definitions, the accepted 'start, scale, sell' model is challenged.

As a result, the term 'woman entrepreneur' is suggested to be somewhat problematic, as it seems that women simply practise entrepreneurship. This challenges the preconceptions people may have about businesses run by women.

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# INTRODUCTION

Whilst the number of women-owned enterprises has been increasing in recent decades, women still only make up 35% of business owners (Correa, 2021). Societal stereotypes see the entrepreneur as typically male, and women have to manage this disconnect with their own desires and experience (Kobeissi, 2010; Wilson & Tagg, 2010). It has been argued that women's entrepreneurship differs from men's because women may tend to have other ambitions for their business than purely growth, so success comes with different criteria (Baker & Welter, 2017; Hovorka & Dietrich, 2011; Sharafizad & Coetzer, 2016). This would suggest that women entrepreneurs practice a different form of entrepreneurship than male ones.

The aim of this study is to explore the assumption that the model of entrepreneurship practised by women is different from that practised by men, and whether 'success' does in fact have different meanings for them than are suggested by mainstream entrepreneurial theory. This is part of the wider aim for the research undertaken which aimed to find out whether mentoring was a vital element in the success of women entrepreneurs.

This study will explore one category of under-studied female entrepreneur: those who live and establish businesses in a rural environment in a developed economy. It is known that the entrepreneur is subject to the norms of the location in which they are based (Deller et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2016; Webster, 2017). This rural context may play a part in whether women's entrepreneurship follows a different route.

Enabling women's entrepreneurship has been suggested as a major element to increase economic activity (Naminse et al., 2019; Oduol et al., 2017; Petridou & Glaveli, 2008; Stefan, 2014). Indeed, policy in developed countries has also emphasised women's entrepreneurship as a solution to underdeveloped areas. Entrepreneur support programmes often focus on encouraging women to start up their own businesses, but this leads to questions of what is meant by 'entrepreneurship' and what influence context has on women's experience of entrepreneurship. It also presumes that women's entrepreneurship may be different from that of men.

There are some well-established differences between female and male entrepreneurs. One of these is that women entrepreneurs experience additional barriers to starting and running their businesses because of their gender. Questions have been posed regarding differences between the motivations of female and male entrepreneurs, with some research suggesting that the motivation of women in general can be affected by how empowered they are in society (Kobeissi, 2010); their experience of discrimination in the workplace (Ascher, 2012) and gendered teaching in higher education (Cochran, 2019). Whilst some observers are critical of the arguments that women and men are motivated differently (Baker & Welter, 2017), others suggest that women may actually be practising a different entrepreneurial model so their motivations would automatically not conform to the mainstream (Cabrera & Mauricio, 2017; Ettl & Welter, 2010).

In this study, the nature of entrepreneurship practised by women entrepreneurs will be examined, to discover whether this follows the model put forward by extant entrepreneurship theory. Whilst this model purports to be gender blind, it is based on a masculine model (Burns, 2016). The assumptions about whether women define success differently will be explored, as well as whether the rural context influences women's entrepreneurship.

The research questions investigated are:

- Examine the nature of entrepreneurship practised by women entrepreneurs.
- Discover the definition of success for women entrepreneurs.
- Evaluate the effects of the rural context.

An initial review of the literature was undertaken in the following areas: leadership; entrepreneurship; gender and entrepreneurship; entrepreneurial models; motivation and success; the context of entrepreneurship generally and in the United Kingdom and support required by women entrepreneurs. The methodology explains the interpretivist approach taken. A detailed account is given on how thematic analysis was undertaken, followed by an analysis of the data compared to the literature. Final discussion and conclusion reflect on how far I was able to answer the research questions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This discussion of literature around gender and entrepreneurship starts with an overview of gender perceptions in business in general before covering a definition of entrepreneurship itself and associated characteristics. The underrepresentation of women entrepreneurs is examined, leading to a discussion of whether women practice a different form of entrepreneurship from the norm. Whether motivation to start a business and classifications of success are gendered are considered. The context of entrepreneurship is examined and what support is needed to encourage entrepreneurship concludes the literature review.

### BUSINESS LEADERSHIP AND GENDER

‘For most of the twentieth century, it was assumed that leaders had to be men’ (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2016, p. 599). Women occupied the minority of positions on the boards of major companies. Research by McKinsey showed that most companies were taking action to rectify this, from setting up diversity training, management targets, redesigning recruitment processes and encouraging flexible work patterns. Research suggested that increased representation of women at board level benefited organisations (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2016).

Despite this, the glass ceiling was in full force, ‘the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements’ (US Department of Labor, 1995, p. 13). This phenomenon is held to be an underlying reason why women find it hard to gain top leadership positions.

Three elements affected this – human capital, gender differences and prejudice. Human capital consists of education, work experience, development opportunities and work-home conflict. In terms of education, more women than men were taking undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. However, women were still undertaking the majority of domestic tasks and thus had to cope with a ‘double shift’. Those who took time out to have children were often marginalised. Women also tended to get fewer training and development opportunities (Northhouse, 2015). Women had a different management style, more relational and transformational. Women who adopted a masculine style to gain senior roles were regarded as aggressive. Prejudice and the adoption of gender stereotypes by both men and women also worked against women attaining higher leadership positions. High-achieving women were less likely to be married or have children, suggesting that women had to make a choice that their male counterparts did not. This meant many women gave up a corporate career because they wanted something different from life. A focus on internal factors (education, experience, human capital) led to a suggestion that women needed to improve their skills and be ‘fixed’ in order to become entrepreneurs (Cabrera & Mauricio, 2017).

Women entrepreneurs view other women as delegators, open, communicators, networkers and meek. Men are classified as risk takers, self-reliant, arrogant, insular and poor communicators. But when applying a more androgenous list of personality traits, no clear pattern of sex differences emerges. This challenges the stereotypical view presented in the literature and suggests that there were few differences between the leadership behaviours of men and women. The question of perception is one which reappears in much of the current research (Wilson & Tagg, 2010).

However, Gerzma and D’Antonio (2013), investigating whether masculine or feminine qualities were regarded as beneficial to today’s leaders, found that perceptions were changing. In a study of 64,000 participants across 13 countries, they asked half of their sample to classify 125 traits into masculine, feminine and neutral qualities. They then asked the second half of the sample to rate the same list of qualities, without any gender assignment, as desirable for leadership, success, morality and happiness. Feminine qualities were more valued in all of these areas. In particular, masculine qualities such as aggression and control were less positively viewed than feminine qualities of collaboration and sharing credit. The main qualities which were highly valued were: connectedness, humility, candour, patience, empathy, trustworthiness, openness, flexibility, vulnerability and balance.

This review of how leadership relates to entrepreneurship led to a consideration of that concept in general.

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The concept of entrepreneurship is not new. Cantillon, writing in the early 1700s, felt that the entrepreneur was pivotal in making a contribution to society's economic value, and was motivated by potential profit (Hebert & Link, 1989, p. 41). Later writers were concerned with how entrepreneurs identified opportunities. Schumpeter (1934, cited in Burns, 2016, p. 9) saw opportunities arising from the personal attributes of the entrepreneur and their willingness to create change.

Several character traits were associated with entrepreneurship. These include the need for independence and to be one's own boss. Entrepreneurs tend to have a high need for achievement and recognition for their success. The acceptance of risk and uncertainty is important. However, Burns also suggests that whilst willing to accept risk, entrepreneurs do not like it and will avoid or minimise it. They have a high level of 'self confidence... in their ability to complete tasks successfully' (Burns, 2016, p. 63). Opportunity recognition is often included in the list, creating new goods and services and creating value that affects wider society (Kirzner, 1973 cited in Burns, 2016, p. 9). Making a profit is based on filling knowledge and information gaps.

As the majority of entrepreneurs tended to be male, research into entrepreneurial characteristics focused mainly on men. A common framework includes a mixture of characteristics and skills: opportunity recognition; relationship building; analytical thinking; innovative approach; operational involvement; focus on human resources; strategic awareness; commitment; learning and personal strength (Man et al., in Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2013).

Entrepreneurial thinking has also been the subject of much research, to try to discover the key characteristics of successful business people. Bricolage is suggested as a way of entrepreneurial thinking, taken from the French word for DIY. It involves combining existing resources and applying them to new problems. Structural thinking may be an alternative, where the entrepreneur takes their existing knowledge of a market or technology and makes a creative leap (Hisrich et al., 2017). Effectual thinking was conceived by Sarasvathy (2001). She suggested that managerial thinking was normally causal, using given means to satisfy a pre-determined goal. Entrepreneurial thinking on the other hand was effectual, where a different goal could be imagined from existing resources. She suggested five principles, which she called bird in hand (taking action with what you have), crazy quilt (making partnerships), affordable loss (focusing on what you are prepared to lose), lemonade (embrace surprises rather than be rigid) and pilot in the plane (focus on what is within your own control). She does not differentiate between male and female

entrepreneurs, but implies that entrepreneurs do not follow the rational route which is often presumed by many textbooks (Burns, 2016).

Baker and Welter (2017, p. 170) suggest that the model which is most examined in literature and research is really only a subfield of entrepreneurship which they propose should be renamed ‘nexus studies’. This concerns ‘externally financed, non-family, profit focused growth ventures in developed economies... started by..economically privileged men with their eyes on the prize of a lucrative “exit” event’. They purport that this model does not relate to how entrepreneurship is practiced by most people.

Brush et al. (2009) reviewed literature on women’s entrepreneurship and found that the majority took a ‘gender as variable’ approach, looking at finance, attitude to growth, management, networks and childcare for women entrepreneurs. Few adopted a ‘gender as lens’ approach. They suggested extending the basic entrepreneurship constructs of market, money and management (Schumpeter, 1934; Penrose, 1958; Aldrich, 1999 cited in Brush et al., 2009, p. 9) with a consideration of the social context of endeavour. They added ‘motherhood’ to represent the household and family context, and ‘macro/meso’ to encompass policies, culture and support services. They also advised consideration of Kantor’s (2002, cited in Brush et al., 2009, p. 11) of ‘women exclusive constraints’ which would affect women only, and ‘women intensive constraints’ which would affect both men and women entrepreneurs but would impact more on women.

Building on the literature, for the purposes of this study, the definition of an entrepreneur is: ‘an individual who sees an opportunity in the market and acts upon it’ (researcher’s definition).

## THE GENDER PAY GAP IN A WOMEN-DOMINATED INDUSTRY

Some industry sectors show the effects of gender more starkly. Public relations (PR) is an overwhelmingly female profession, yet women are underrepresented in top management positions. Nearly two-thirds of the industry is female (63% in 2013), yet there is a substantial gender pay gap of £6,725. It is difficult for women to reach senior jobs, and women with 17–21 years of experience in the industry are earning £18,000 less than men with similar experience (Stimson, 2018).

My research into barriers to women’s progression in PR showed that this was an unacknowledged issue in the industry at the time (Theaker, 1995). Lack of career guidance, sexual harassment and discrimination, working

practices with a long-hours culture were all found to be influential in creating an imbalance of gender representation at senior levels. Women found that the single biggest barrier was a difference in management style, with a more feminine style being undervalued. Women who wanted to progress left the mainstream, corporate world and set up their own agencies so that they did not have to adopt a masculine style. This chimes with the research on entrepreneurial motivation below.

One of my recommendations was to create a transparent career structure in the industry, so that the skills needed were clearly set out and could be updated. Co-incidentally, I was able to action this recommendation as the first Head of Education for the then Institute of Public Relations, setting up the first Continuous Professional Development scheme in the PR industry in Europe in 1999. Yeomans (2014) suggested that different negotiating styles were partly responsible for the gender pay gap, and that universities should do more to equip women graduates with the ability to gain a fair recompense for their work. This has echoes of 'blame the victim' rather than putting responsibility for equal salaries on employers.

Subsequent research by Pinch and Whenman (2017) found that women avoided addressing the pay gap for fear of being labelled as aggressive. Male leaders exhibited bias towards men, and senior women who had had to make choices to forego family life were less than sympathetic towards younger women. Women felt reluctant to be assertive and ask for more because they feared being labelled negatively. They cited a culture of bullying, especially in agencies. Their research recommended more transparency about salaries at all levels, and to encourage senior women to do more to mentor younger women and offer positive role models.

Moving on from this example, the question of why there is an imbalance in entrepreneurship between men and women was explored.

#### WHY AREN'T THERE MORE WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS?

Women may be more affected by social norms, and thus cluster in female-dominated sectors (Hovorka & Dietrich, 2011). Women often have less prior business experience and human capital than men (Ettl & Welter, 2010).

Differences could be exacerbated by women's experience of gendered institutions in higher education. In the United States, many entrepreneurs start their journey by undertaking entrepreneurship qualifications. Whilst women

accounted for 57% of undergraduates, only 34% of entrepreneurship students were female. Women were more likely to think that they would not fit into such a course because of a lack of female role models. Female students felt they were treated differently than male students, that they had to prove themselves and felt isolated. They believed they had to 'make up for' being a woman and were often devalued by their male peers. Women also felt they had to be 'Super Women'. They were frustrated because the male students often left the bulk of the logistics to women and took strategic roles (Cochran, 2019).

Motherhood is still considered primarily a woman's task in society and women may feel guilty if they neglect either their family or their business. They may find it difficult to distinguish between their professional and personal lives. As a result, they may enter markets in 'acceptable' areas and set up smaller businesses (Ettl & Welter, 2010).

The Diana Project in 2007 assumed that women's entrepreneurship was just entrepreneurship, and was not different or similar to that practised by men. They focused on the issue of growth and why businesses run by women tended to be smaller. Finance seemed to be the main cause of this limitation to growth. The Project then examined research into equity investments over the previous three decades, and studied women who applied for venture capital. Only 3.5% of venture capital was invested in women-led businesses for the period 1988–98, and less than 10% of the decision makers in venture capital firms were women. Thus some of the limited growth of women's businesses could be due to the gendered approach of business financiers (Holmquist & Carter, 2009).

The high failure rate of women-led SMEs could be related to the lack of planning, and that strategic planning is more likely to lead to sales growth. It has been suggested that women entrepreneurs tend to focus on improving existing products and extending promotional activities rather than adopting strategic planning strategies. They tend to plan less than one year ahead (Rowley & Mitchelmore, 2013).

Because the stereotypical picture of an entrepreneur is male, women have to deal with the contradiction between their feminine identity and being a business owner. This affects both the prospective entrepreneur herself and the stakeholders of her business (Swail & Marlow, 2018). Women starting their businesses may therefore construct what they consider a legitimate entrepreneurial persona to influence potential stakeholders. Women may do this by inviting men onto the board of their company to add legitimacy, by adopting more masculine behaviours and observing men to pick up clues as to how to be an entrepreneur. They may employ men as the selling face of the organisation. Other strategies involved developing a 'bitch reputation' or being 'hard