

Reframing Women Entrepreneurship: Unpacking Gender Roles, Balance, and Empowerment

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Abstract: Entrepreneurship is inherently shaped by gender, with norms and expectations influencing how women experience their roles as entrepreneurs. Traditionally, entrepreneurship has been aligned with masculine traits such as assertiveness and risk-taking, perpetuating stereotypes that often conflict with societal perceptions of femininity. This disconnect frequently gives rise to biases and structural barriers, including significant disadvantages in securing financing. Beyond financial challenges, women entrepreneurs also contend with gender discrimination and issues related to work-life balance. While there is evidence of a gradual shift toward a more inclusive entrepreneurial image, entrenched gender biases continue to shape the experiences of women in this field. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that entrepreneurship can offer women a means to navigate and counteract gender discrimination. It provides a degree of flexibility and autonomy, enabling a more favorable work-family balance. For many women, entrepreneurship not only serves as an escape from workplace biases but also creates opportunities to assert greater agency and independence in their professional lives. This study seeks to explore how gender influences women's experiences as entrepreneurs. Using a qualitative approach, interviews with 12 growth-oriented women entrepreneurs reveal complex gendered discourses that both reflect and challenge the dominant, traditionally masculine narrative of entrepreneurship. Through discourse analysis, three distinct discourses were constructed, highlighting how deeply embedded gender norms shape women's entrepreneurial journeys. These findings provide valuable insights into the unique challenges women encounter and highlight the potential of entrepreneurship as a strategic avenue for achieving work-life balance and personal agency. By examining these gendered discourses, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how entrepreneurship can evolve to be more inclusive, recognizing and addressing the distinct obstacles women face. This research thus underscores the importance of shifting away from a monolithic entrepreneurial model to a more diverse, inclusive one that respects and supports varied gendered experiences in the entrepreneurial landscape.

Keywords: Discourse, Gender, Stereotypes, Entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

Previous studies have demonstrated that the barriers to women's career advancement are not due to a lack of interest, but rather to gendered structures and practices in the work life. Masculinist career models are problematic for women, as women typically have multiple roles (Biese and Choroszewicz, 2019). Especially mothers experience discrimination in work life, as they are often seen as unreliable employees, and their childcare responsibilities are considered an obstacle in their careers (Chung and van der Horst, 2017). Some researchers frame entrepreneurship as a pathway for women to navigate and overcome gender discrimination in the workplace. Thus, entrepreneurship is seen as a last resort to balance work and family life (Burton et al, 2019; Yang et al, 2023). Biese and Choroszewicz (2019) have studied the opting out phenomenon of women from the agency perspective and they see that opting out can be a way for women to develop the agency to create alternative work solutions. Opting out doesn't necessarily mean leaving the workforce; it can represent a new way of working, such as through entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship offers women an opportunity to achieve a better work-family balance while preserving their individual agency.

Critical research suggests that the discourse of gender equality in entrepreneurship often benefits only a select few, influencing women's aspirations and shaping their behaviours (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Ahl, 2006; Lewis, 2014). Meanwhile, entrepreneurship literature commonly links entrepreneurial traits to traditionally masculine qualities, creating a hierarchy that portrays women as lacking in entrepreneurial potential, ambition, and essential traits (Bruni et al., 2004). This masculinized discourse casts femininity as deviating from the entrepreneurial ideal (Ahl, 2006), reinforcing a perspective that sidelines women entrepreneurs and diminishes the perceived value of their businesses (Gupta et al., 2013; Hamilton, 2014). Consequently, entrepreneurial discourse remains heavily influenced by masculine ideals (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Henry et al., 2015).

The aim of our study is to explore the ways in which gender influences women's entrepreneurial experiences. Using a qualitative approach, we interviewed 12 growth-oriented women entrepreneurs. Through discourse

analysis, we identified three key gendered discourses that highlight the complex ways in which gender shapes entrepreneurial experiences, challenging the traditionally masculine narrative of entrepreneurship.

2. Women Entrepreneurs and the Experiences of Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a gendered phenomenon (Jennings and Brush, 2013). Gender, deeply embedded in cultural and social structures, influences the way in which women entrepreneurs experience their lives as entrepreneurs. Although the image of an entrepreneur may be changing (Elliott, Mantler and Huggins, 2021), entrepreneurship has traditionally been considered a masculine domain, associated with traits such as risk-taking and assertiveness (Ahl, 2006). Thus, there is a level of mismatch between the female gender stereotype and the stereotypical image of an entrepreneur, which leads to biases and barriers in e.g. financing (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Bianco, Lombe and Bolis, 2017; Marlow and Swail, 2014; Malmström et al, 2024).

But how do women entrepreneurs themselves experience gendered entrepreneurship? Lewis (2015) shows that a woman entrepreneur's firm can become a type of identity workspace, more empowering than a traditional workplace. Entrepreneurship can be a means of contesting or challenging existing gender norms but also a space in which social gender expectations are enacted (Bianco, Lombe and Bolis, 2017), or where idealized femininity taking on multilayered requirements is performed (Heizmann and Liu, 2022). Zhu, Thornhill and Hsu (2021) find that women entrepreneurs are more likely to persist in underperforming businesses and argue that this is due to an identity connection with their business. Oliveria, Basini and Cooney (2021) show that women entrepreneurs can experience misalignment with what is expected from an entrepreneur: their own orientation may differ. Even women entrepreneurs who, on surface level, overcome gendered constraints, experience underlying tensions (Doshi, 2022). At the same time, women can actively seek to establish an entrepreneurial identity that differs from the traditional masculine view (Kubberød, Jones and Pettersen, 2021).

Work-life balance is one of the elements in which the gendered nature of entrepreneurship is apparent. While male entrepreneurs seek work-life balance by obtaining family support at home, women entrepreneurs work to create work-family synergies (Eddleston and Powell, 2012). For instance, opting out can enable women to gain agency and develop alternative work solutions that align with their responsibilities and goals (Biese and Choroszewicz, 2019). The literature suggests that the sphere of family is more important for women entrepreneurs (see e.g., Brush, de Bruin and Welter, 2009; Rashmi and Kataria, 2021). Women experience work/family role conflicts that are lessened with family support (Welsh et al, 2021), and family support is critical for women entrepreneurs' success (Welsh et al, 2023). Contrary to Biese and Choroszewicz's (2019) arguments, results by Dihn et al (2021) suggest that self-employment may in fact entrench gender inequities in work opportunities, leading to mothers fitting work even more on around family care. However, mothering can also form the basis for becoming an entrepreneur in the wider career-life context (Hudson Breen and Leung, 2020).

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employs both Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Discourse Analysis (DA) methodologies. Originally developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), AI focuses on identifying organizational strengths and core values rather than concentrating on problem-solving (Sorensen et al., 2022). Stavros et al. (2015) describe AI as a process of uncovering the best in people and organizations, maintaining a positive outlook throughout the change journey. According to Cooperrider et al. (2003), Appreciative Inquiry (AI) unfolds in four stages: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Deliver. The Discovery stage focuses on identifying what energizes and sustains an organization by uncovering its strengths. The Dream stage involves envisioning future possibilities and imagining the desired outcomes. The Design stage centres on collaboratively shaping the path toward change, while the Deliver stage emphasizes implementing and maintaining the transformation over time.

In this study, these four stages were adapted to focus on women entrepreneurs rather than organizations, tailoring the process to explore their strengths, aspirations, and potential. A total of 12 women entrepreneurs participated in interviews guided by Appreciative Inquiry (AI) principles. Table 1 presents the women entrepreneurs. Selection criteria included the entrepreneur's age, as well as the age and location of their business. All participants were growth-oriented entrepreneurs with employees. The interviews took place in two phases during the spring of 2023, with each participant being interviewed twice, 2–4 weeks apart, for a total of 24 interviews. The first round of interviews focused on the discovery and dream stages, while the second round centered on the design and implementation stages related to innovation. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and pseudonymized to ensure confidentiality during analysis.

In the analysis, discourse analysis was employed as a methodological approach to explore how women construct their entrepreneurial identities. Discourse is a way of speaking— - how we use language in different contexts and how we give meanings to things. One advantage of discourse analysis is its ability to uncover underlying ideas and assumptions that are often taken for granted in a given context and may be challenging to expose through other methods (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). In this research, discourse is also viewed as performance; it organizes or disrupts gender identities (Ashcraft, 2004). This perspective emphasizes the process by which discourse generates or diminishes differences in gender identities. According to Ashcraft, a performance perspective reveals how discourses construct gender while positioning these differences within social codes. Discourse, then, is seen as an ongoing, productive, and interactive performance of identities. Other scholars support this view on the central role of discourse in producing gender identity (Butler, 1990; Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Gherardi, 1994).

Table 2: Entrepreneurs and their businesses.

Entrepreneur	Business
Ann	Handicraft shop
Betty	Respite care
Cora	Jewellery online store
Dina	Home help service
Erica	Human resources services
Felicia	Textile factory
Grace	Digital secretary
Holly	Optician
sabel	Health and wellness
Jane	Psychologist and rehabilitation
Katherine	Restaurant and experience services
Lucy	Funeral home

The analysis applied Willig's (2013) discourse analysis method. Initially, we took notes on the different ways women discussed their gender and entrepreneurship (Willig, 2013, p. 131). We observed three recurring patterns in how they constructed their entrepreneurial identity as women. Next, we focused on the action orientation of the texts, asking what might be achieved by framing women's entrepreneurship in this specific way within this discourse (Willig, 2013, p. 132). Finally, we analysed the subject positions provided by the discourse, examining how women positioned themselves within it.

4. Findings

We identified and interpreted three discourses within women's entrepreneurship—Problematic Gender, Complex Balance, and Empowerment through Redefinition—each providing a unique perspective on the entrepreneurship of women.

4.1 Problematic Gender Discourse

This discourse centers around the ongoing dialogue about gender roles and expectations. It explores the challenges and opportunities women entrepreneurs face in entrepreneurship traditionally dominated by men, addressing societal norms, stereotypes, and the pursuit of recognition and equality. Women in this discourse share the weight of traditional gender roles, particularly in relation to their familial responsibilities and societal perceptions.

“As a woman, the responsibilities within the family are quite different from those of a man. For example, I'm 56 years old, a wife, mother of six adult children, and grandmother of 14. I also have aging parents and a business with its own challenges. It's common to feel that, while men have responsibilities too, it seems more natural for them to be away for work for weeks at a time. This is something I've struggled with.” (Dina)

Women discuss on how being a woman entrepreneur is shaped by societal views of gender. For example, women are discussing how entrepreneurship is still often seen as a male-dominated field, with old-fashioned stereotypes lingering.

“Entrepreneurship has traditionally been seen as a man’s world, with men doing the big things in business while women stayed home, maybe selling knitted socks on the side! There’s still some of that outdated thinking tied to gender roles.” (Grace)

Some women highlight the feeling of being out of place in male-dominated spaces, expressing a sense of imposter syndrome. Women position themselves as outsiders in a male-dominated world, experiencing feelings of being out of place or having to fight to be taken seriously.

“This morning was a clear reminder of how male-dominated this world can be. I looked at the participant list yesterday and felt out of place, seeing all the 50- to 60-year-old men and just a few women. It made me question what I’m doing here and whether I know anything. It’s not the way I should think, but it was hard to shake that feeling.” (Felicia)

Meanwhile, one entrepreneur shares personal experiences of gender vulnerability, noting how male figures still comment on her decisions in a way that reinforces traditional norms. She recounts a particularly hurtful comment about her mastectomy and how it affected her son, reflecting how society often ties women’s bodies to ideas of femininity and motherhood.

“One man actually said to me, ‘Since you’ve removed both your breasts, have you thought about how that will affect your son, who will never see a woman with breasts?’ While I was doing everything I could to stay alive. This was a reminder that, even though women’s status has improved, some men still feel entitled to say such things when a woman is vulnerable.” (Holly)

The discourse also touches on issues of perceived competence and ageism, discussing how being young and female in business can lead to being underestimated. Women recall a time when their competence was questioned due to assumptions about their gender and age.

“I work in production and logistics, and when I started 10 years ago, I had to fight against the bias that a young woman can’t handle such work. I remember once meeting a 50- or 60-year-old man, and he assumed my father had hired me, not knowing I had founded the company myself.” (Cora)

“It was more about facing resistance or doubt because of my age. I don’t know if it was just my own perception, thinking that people saw me that way, or if it actually came from outside. There were definitely experiences where someone didn’t take me seriously.” (Jane)

Here women take the position of being undervalued based on their gender and age. They confront societal stereotypes that undermine their competence, leadership, and authority. In summary, this discourse sheds light on the ongoing struggles women face with gender expectations in entrepreneurship, and the balancing act between professional and personal roles.

4.2 Complex Balance Discourse

This discourse focuses on the intricate challenge of balancing entrepreneurial duties with family commitments, emphasizing the importance of achieving harmony between work and home life for overall well-being. A common theme is the tension between pursuing entrepreneurial ambitions and the responsibilities of motherhood. Women express concerns about overworking and the need to establish a healthier work-life balance to ensure they can be present for their children. Women express a deep sense of responsibility for being present in their families’ lives, which shapes how they approach their business. This often leads to internal conflict, as reflected in the following examples:

“I struggle a lot with the fact that work takes up the lion’s share of my time, and I want to do more and be a better mom or something like that... but I guess that’s the eternal issue of being a woman—no matter what you do, you’ll always run into that same issue.” (Dina)

I often reflect on my own childhood. I don’t want to work as much as my mom did. I don’t want that. I don’t want to work so much during my free time, and I don’t want to travel so much. (Felicia)

Women highlight how entrepreneurship requires passion and dedication, often sparking numerous ideas they feel compelled to pursue. However, family responsibilities sometimes impose limitations, forcing them to prioritize the most essential tasks. Time is acknowledged as the biggest challenge, but this is also seen as an opportunity to refine their focus and pursue only the most important ideas.

"Well, the challenge is that when you're an entrepreneur, you're usually pretty passionate about your work. Otherwise, you wouldn't be doing it; it requires so much effort. Then, you get ideas, and you want to execute them, but family really is, in a way, a factor—you can't ignore that, for better or worse. I think of it like this: it makes you drop the unnecessary things and focus on the essential and the really good ideas. .. But yeah, time is definitely a challenge. That's probably the biggest one." (Ann)

Women take on the position of balancing multiple roles —entrepreneur, mother, wife, and caregiver. They express a constant negotiation between their professional and personal lives. The presence of a supportive partner is viewed as crucial in managing the demands of both family and career.

"Well, originally it was kind of like, if my partner hadn't supported or encouraged me, I probably wouldn't have become an entrepreneur. And maybe... He probably didn't know back then what all this would entail! And of course, I didn't know either. But it's a big thing, if you think about it, that you have to tolerate the fact that the other person is also working from home, and sometimes there are things that just have to be taken care of, no matter what. ... Yes, his role is really significant. If that support wasn't there, or if it caused arguments or resistance, it would be (really bad). And also, over the years, he has seen me get tired, and there's been burnout, not just from work, but also from other things. He had to carry the family as well—we have several kids. If you didn't have a partner who participates in everyday life, it wouldn't work at all." (Jane)

Overall, this discourse reflects the ongoing negotiation these women face at the intersection of entrepreneurial goals and family responsibilities. Their narratives illustrate the struggle to balance personal ambitions with societal expectations, shedding light on the structural challenges women navigate as they pursue fulfillment in both their careers and family life.

So of course, these things have an impact—being an entrepreneur as a woman is different from being one as a man, but... Hmm. But it's not impossible." (Ann)

4.3 Empowerment Through Redefinition Discourse

The discourse on empowerment is particularly focused on women's empowerment in entrepreneurship. It emphasizes efforts to challenge gender norms, enhance self-esteem, and foster women's leadership and agency in both business and society. Women express a desire to challenge traditional gender roles. Women talk of wanting to become strong female leaders, despite feelings of insecurity in male-dominated spaces. They want to break stereotypes about entrepreneurship being a male domain, encouraging women to pursue larger business ventures rather than small-scale, part-time endeavors.

"I want to create a positive environment where women feel confident enough to pursue entrepreneurship on a bigger scale, rather than just as a side job. We need to encourage women to dream bigger and go after their goals." (Grace)

The importance of nurturing and expanding networks for female entrepreneurs is a recurrent theme. Women adopt an empowered position by recognizing their personal growth and confidence. They reflect on how entrepreneurship has allowed them to step out of their comfort zones, confront fears, and take on leadership roles.

"Yes, I do want to be brave, it really comes down to courage. Just being visible and having that presence has felt very scary for me, for example, I've always thought 'I could never do that, I'm not cut out for it.' But now I've started taking steps in that direction, and I realize it's something I have to work on. So yes, one day I want to be able to confidently be a strong female leader." (Felicia)

The presence of strong female role models is also discussed as a crucial factor in encouraging women to pursue entrepreneurship. Women take the position of a role model for others, particularly other aspiring female

entrepreneurs. They see their own success as paving the way for other women to follow, encouraging them to break free from traditional gender expectations.

"Well, for me, it really brings out the idea that I think it's amazing to enable the growth of female entrepreneurship, and especially those female entrepreneurship networks and such. And I think it would be great if more and more female entrepreneurs succeeded in growing a bigger business, not just employing themselves." (Grace)

"I hope I can somehow encourage more people to even consider becoming entrepreneurs and understand that women can succeed just as well... in the same way as men. I have received feedback—just last weekend, I got feedback, something like, 'It's so great to watch you succeed,' and kind of like that." (Erica)

There is a powerful message encouraging women to pursue their dreams boldly, challenging outdated stereotypes that position entrepreneurship as a male-dominated field. It emphasizes the importance of inspiring women to aim for larger entrepreneurial ambitions, rather than limiting themselves to part-time or small-scale ventures. The women also emphasize their sense of agency in shaping their lives, asserting autonomy in structuring their work in alignment with their personal values.

"I'm working a four-day work week. I started it in August when I returned to work, and I've continued with it. A lot of it depends on yourself—how you do your work, and then how the teamwork functions, and having good people around you. I see that now and in the future, even more so, as a core thing—that I want more than my mother did, to keep work at work." (Felicia)

But on the other hand, I want to show by my own example that it is possible to do the things you enjoy and move forward with your own goals, even when you have children. I've had several, so maybe I'm some sort of example of that." (Ann)

Overall, this discourse reflects a vibrant narrative of women entrepreneurship, highlighting the empowerment that comes with the importance of challenging stereotypes, and the courage to pursue dreams. This collective voice fosters a sense of hope and determination among women aspiring to succeed in business.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how gender shapes women's entrepreneurial experiences. Our analysis identified and interpreted three key discourses related to these experiences, as outlined in Table 2. Aligning with Boddington (2023), we argue that examining the influence of gender norms across various dimensions of entrepreneurial practice reveals a more nuanced understanding of the structural factors that constrain specific practices. Similarly, diverse subject positions create varying opportunities for women entrepreneurs to act and navigate their roles.

Table 2: Discourses and descriptions.

Discourse:	Description:	Subject Positions:	Action Orientation:
Problematic gender	Addresses the external social pressures and stereotypes that women face in business.	The Outsider	Highlights tensions between personal and professional identities, particularly how women must navigate gender stereotypes and imposter syndrome.
Complex Balance	Focuses on internal struggles of balancing professional and personal roles, especially in the context of family responsibilities.	The Juggler	Emphasizes the difficulty of balancing entrepreneurial work with motherhood highlighting the emotional strain this creates. It also stresses the importance of supportive partners.
Empowerment Through Redefinition	Emphasizes the importance of challenging gender norms, dismantling stereotypes, and cultivating leadership qualities.	The Role Model	Is oriented towards overcoming internal fears and societal expectations, with a focus on growth, confidence, and breaking new ground as leaders in the business world. The discourse is about changing perceptions of what women can achieve

Discourse:	Description:	Subject Positions:	Action Orientation:
			and leading the way as role models for others.

The first discourse, *problematic gender*, focuses on how societal norms and traditional gender roles impact the experiences of women entrepreneurs. It underscores the challenges they face in balancing personal and professional identities, particularly in dealing with gender stereotypes and imposter syndrome. Women are constructed like outsiders and undervalued in their entrepreneurial careers. However, in this discourse, women do not fully enact social gender expectations (Bianco, Lombe, and Bolis, 2017); rather, they recognize and identify them. Hence, this discourse reveals a strong awareness of how entrepreneurship is still often viewed as masculine, where women entrepreneurs and their characteristics are considered less significant (Lewis, 2006; Gupta et al, 2013; Hamilton, 2014; Henry et al, 2015). This discourse brings to light the persistent gender biases in entrepreneurship, fostering a greater awareness of how societal norms and traditional gender roles continue to shape perceptions and also experiences of women.

The second discourse, *complex balance*, addresses the tension between pursuing entrepreneurial goals and managing family responsibilities. It emphasizes the challenges of balancing business endeavours with motherhood, highlighting the emotional stress that accompanies this juggling act. This discourse underscores the importance of achieving a harmonious balance between entrepreneurial success and personal well-being while fulfilling family obligations. It also points to the critical role of having supportive partners, aligning with findings from Welsh et al (2023), which indicate that family support is crucial in narrowing the gender gap in entrepreneurial success. Furthermore, this discourse sheds light on stereotypical gender roles, as women frequently navigate multiple responsibilities, including those of parents, caregivers for their own parents, and business leaders (Biese and Choroszewicz, 2019). While entrepreneurship is often viewed as a pathway to harmonizing work and family life (Burton et al, 2019), our study reveals that achieving this balance remains a significant challenge.

Yang et al. (2024) suggest that mothers are more likely to start a new business as a way to mitigate the motherhood penalty they might encounter in wage employment due to employer discrimination. However, our results indicate that entrepreneurship is not immune to the influence of stereotypes and societal norms, much like traditional employment. Despite the common perception of entrepreneurship as a realm of freedom and innovation, it remains shaped by deeply rooted cultural expectations and gendered norms that affect how entrepreneurs are perceived and how they navigate their roles in the business world.

The third discourse highlights the *empowerment* of women in entrepreneurship. It focuses on challenging gender norms, deconstructing stereotypes, and cultivating leadership skills. In this discourse women push boundaries and strive for greater business ambitions. This discourse highlights the aim of cultivating a sense of empowerment, growth, and ambition among women, motivating them to undertake larger business ventures rather than limiting themselves to small or part-time enterprises. This discourse focuses on transforming perceptions of women's capabilities and positioning them as role models for others. This challenges the prior studies that associate women with lower entrepreneurial potential and ambition (Bruni et al, 2004). This discourse also highlights that the gender gap in growth ambitions may be due to structural and entrepreneurial ecosystem-level factors, not ambition itself.

In conclusion, these three discourses collectively highlight the complex and gendered nature of women's entrepreneurial experiences. They emphasize the need for an entrepreneurial ecosystem that recognizes women's diverse paths, values their contributions, and actively addresses gender disparities. Despite the growing prominence of post-feminist perspectives (Meliou and Ozbilgin, 2024), our findings indicate that the entrepreneurial landscape is still largely influenced by predominantly masculine norms (Jennings and Brush, 2013; Henry et al., 2015). The results further reveal that women are increasingly distancing themselves from the traditional masculine narrative of entrepreneurship, actively shaping an entrepreneurial identity that departs from the conventional masculine framework (Kubberød, Jones, and Pettersen, 2021). In this context, the discourse on empowerment through redefinition suggests that the image of an entrepreneur is evolving (Elliott, Mantler, and Huggins, 2021), becoming more diverse, particularly among women entrepreneurs. While women entrepreneurs recognize and confront the challenges posed by the masculine ethos of entrepreneurship, the influence of social norms continues to shape their experiences.

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