

## Communication

# Women Entrepreneurship: Painting It Bright While Missing the Dark

**Reena Biju & George Kandathil**

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This paper critically analyses the ongoing global and Indian narratives and actions related to women entrepreneurship which shows a consistent long-held focus on its benefits, particularly construing it as a means to women empowerment. These brightening dominant narratives miss the costs that women entrepreneurs pay and their sources. Based on the recent research on critical entrepreneurship, the authors foreground the invisible and argue that the source of the costs is the male-dominant masculine structure that underlies the conceptualization and actions related to entrepreneurship. The costs, particularly related to emotional labor which even the recent research ignores, and its source disempower women entrepreneurs. Hence, for the talks and actions on women entrepreneurship to be meaningful, we need broader discussions of affective or emotional, cognitive-structural and behavioral costs that women entrepreneurs are made to bear in their day-

to-day life and an interrogation of the masculine entrepreneurship-related discourses and actions.

Women entrepreneurship has been increasingly recommended as an effective means for job creation, poverty alleviation, social change, and women empowerment in workplaces, to name a few. A recent illustration occurred on March 8, 2019 during the launch of 'Speed Mentoring for Women by Women' program – a startup India related Central Government initiative-wherein aspiring women entrepreneurs were 'given opportunity' to interact with renowned 'women leaders' to gain more empowerment and create social impact([https://www.startupindia.gov.in/content/sih/en/women\\_entrepreneurship.html](https://www.startupindia.gov.in/content/sih/en/women_entrepreneurship.html))

The discourse and actions that highlight the bright side of women entrepreneurship, particularly as a women empowerment tool, is not confined to India but widespread across the globe. A recent example is the 'International Women Entrepreneurs Summit 2018' which was organized by the South Asian Women Development Forum (SAWDF), a

*Reena Biju* is Doctoral Student, Organizational Behaviour Area, Institute of Management, Nirma University, Ahmedabad. *George Kandathil* (E-mail: [gmk@iima.ac.in](mailto:gmk@iima.ac.in)) is Faculty, Organizational Behavior Area, Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad

SAARC recognized body (<http://sawdf.org/portfolio-item/international-women-entrepreneurs-summit-2018/>). However, the growing research on the gender aspects of women entrepreneurship points to potential dark sides of women empowerment through women entrepreneurship. Hence, instead of excessively focusing on the bright sides, workplace leaders and policy makers should consider the dark side of women entrepreneurship and related women empowerment and should be willing to interrogate the widespread hype and hope around it.

### **Painting it Bright**

Women entrepreneurs are considered as ‘untapped source of economic growth’, development and empowerment (Minniti&Naudé, 2010). Organizations as varied as charity organization and NGOs, knowledge institutes and business associations, transnational public institutions, national and local governments, and private companies have adopted programs or policies to stimulate women entrepreneurship (Vossenber, 2013).

The World Economic Forum has been consistently promoting women entrepreneurs, ‘particularly of color’ as ‘the way forward’ to empower them and strengthen the economy (World Global Gender Report, 2012; 2018), and the media seems to have celebrated this news (<https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/wef-2018-first-to-be-chaired-entirely-by-women-and-this-indian-woman-entrepreneur-is-among-them/1022212/>; <https://www.mastercar>

[dcenter.org/insights/leading-women-gender-2018-davos-agenda](http://dcenter.org/insights/leading-women-gender-2018-davos-agenda); <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/not-just-a-man-s-world-all-women-chair-for-2018-world-economic-forum/story-hGiSTkk3PV9dfYXEyEOAIM.html>). A similarly celebrated initiative is Cocoki, a Rwandan ‘ground breaking’ sewing cooperative with more than 40 women employees, supplying home décor crafts and fashion accessories to high-end retailers like Anthropologie and DANNIJO and US-based high-profile fashion designer, Nicole Miller. A set of newsprint media ranging from the Washington Post to the Huffington Post to InStyle has highlighted Cocoki as a ‘great women entrepreneurial success’ and a women empowerment. Further, promoting women entrepreneurship has been associated with enhancing organizational and leadership abilities, fostering creativity and engendering women empowerment (The New Times 2012 <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/50238>). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor has been consistently advancing similar arguments (e.g., GEM 2016-17 women’s entrepreneurship report; GEM 2018-19 global reports)

Similar to the global narrative above academic scholarship, in general, also has been showcasing the social benefits of promoting women entrepreneurship that includes women empowerment. For example, female entrepreneurs have been identified as the engines and agents (connoting empowerment) for growth of the economies in developing countries; a growth which enhances welfare, prosperity, innovation, employment, wealth

creation and empowerment (Brush et. al., 2009, Vossenber, 2013). Women entrepreneurship has also been linked to increase in sustainable economic, social and ecological practices, women empowerment (Qazi & Rashidi, 2018) and reduction in poverty (Sutter et al., 2019).

This pattern of brightening women entrepreneurship as a panacea, particularly in connection with women empowerment, is repeated in general in the Indian narrative as well.

### **The Indian Narrative**

As is the case with the global narrative, the pattern mentioned above cuts across the discourses of policy makers, practitioners, and academic in India. We have already mentioned the launch of 'speed mentoring'. Further, the reports of Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY), which provides loans for entrepreneurial ventures, highlights that the main beneficiaries are women (74% in 2018) (<https://www.livemint.com/Politics/hQCZDk7xDPPBBPLwq8I9NN/Banks-have-given-Rs6trillion-Mudra-loans-to-12-crore-benefit.html>, <https://www.mudra.org.in/offerings>). There are many similar Central Government initiatives that targets women empowerment through women entrepreneurship. Recent examples are the 2018 NITI Aayog's unveiling of Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP) while celebrating the International Women's Day and the 2015 Skill India program. The stated objectives of WEP include 'building an ecosystem for women across India to realize their entrepreneurial aspirations'

(<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=177141>). (<https://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/society/skill-india-a-new-programme-to-belaunched-in-march-2015>). Similar to the central government initiatives and policies, many state government initiatives, for example Kudumbashree of Kerala state, also consider women empowerment through entrepreneurship as an effective way to eradicate poverty (<http://www.kudumbashree.org/pages/171>).

Corporations and other workplace organizations also narrate (and act on) women entrepreneurship as a significant benefit and a route to women empowerment. For example, EY Foundation in India, (member firm of Ernst & Young Global Limited) runs a program supporting women entrepreneurs which claim to have raised women's living standards and empowered them (<https://www.ey.com/gl/en/about-us/corporate-responsibility/ey-corporate-responsibility-empowering-women-entrepreneurs-in-india>). Similarly, elite management academic institutions have been running woman entrepreneurship to 'empower women'; for example, the Indian Institute of Management-Bangalore's (with Goldman Sachs) startup program to empower women with no previous entrepreneurial background (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/iim-bangalore-ties-goldman-sachs-launch-womenstart-programme-74446>).

The academic scholarship on women entrepreneurship in India is largely reflecting the global academic discourse, connecting women entrepreneurship to

various benefits that are mentioned above, particularly women empowerment (Chitakunye, 2018). For example, some scholars argue that social entrepreneurship in India leads to women empowerment (e.g., Datta & Gailey, 2012), and further to reduction of gender vulnerabilities, agency building, and wellbeing and economic empowerment of women (Samantroy&Tomar, 2018).

While collectively the above discourses glorify women entrepreneurship, particularly in relation to women empowerment, an emergent stream of academic research points to the potential costs to women that the way entrepreneurship is currently conceived of and practiced creates for women and that likely disempower them.

### **Missing the Dark: The Disempowering Costs**

In many countries including India, there is a widespread perception that entrepreneurship is appropriate for men but not women. This perception stems from associating entrepreneurship with male stereotypes (Aidis et al., 2007; Bird & Brush, 2002). Women, as active participants in the society, are also made to internalize such perceptions. For example, in their 17nation study, Langowitz and Minniti, (2007: 356) found that “women tend to perceive themselves and their

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business environment in a less favorable light compared to men” based on the internalized dominant masculine values.

These internalized cultural values and stereotypes often lead to not only gendering of jobs and occupations, as predominantly feminine or masculine (Heilman, 1983), but also accepting the gendered nature as natural truths (Redion-Collot et al., 2017). Consequently, within the predominantly masculine entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs with feminine gender orientation would find it difficult to be seen and accepted as legitimate entrepreneurs by themselves as well as others unless they display masculinity. Thus, women do not feature within the imagination or mental frame of what an entrepreneur is or should be (Achtenhagen & Welter, 2005; Baker, Aldrich & Liou, 1997). Further, with the global narrative such as those we have already mentioned, women entrepreneurs are typically compared with men, and are portrayed as lacking masculine characteristics that are required for success (Ahl, 2004; Ahl & Marlow, 2012). Thus, women are typically characterized as incomplete men who need empowerment, power being seen here as mostly masculinity (Ahl & Marlow, 2012).

Minniti (2009) and Jennings and McDougald (2007), Brush, de Bruin and Welter (2009) argue that familial responsibilities, for example care taking (which in most cultures are assigned to women) significantly reduce their likelihood of becoming an established entrepreneur. The reduction occurs not only due to the additional responsibility but also poten-

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tially because of the expectation from women to be feminine in domestic sphere while discharging these responsibilities. These normative expectations from women entrepreneurs to be the best both in domestic front, by being feminine and displaying it and in professional front, by being masculine and performing it while suppressing their femininity, put them under constant contradictory pressures and stress (McGowan et al., 2012; Marlow & Dy, 2017). Hence, to the extent the discourse and actions on women entrepreneurship are unfolding within the male-dominated conception and actions of entrepreneurship, women entrepreneurship discourses and actions can reproduce the male-domination, disempowering women or predominantly feminine-oriented entrepreneurs. The male domination is reproduced at least to the extent women are forced to frequently display masculinity which otherwise they have not habituated and rather have been made to habituate and internalize femininity. This domination is disempowering at least to the extent it forces women to suppress their habituated and internalized femininity and display the opposite (i.e., masculinity) in order for them to get accepted as a legitimate entrepreneur. The implication is that the bright sides of the women entre-

preneurship can be meaningful only if we start systematically interrogating the social structures of male-domination within labor relations in the families and workplaces. Otherwise, more importantly, it can ironically disempower women in the name of empowering them.

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Even the foregoing research narrative is mostly confined to the cognitive and structural aspects of women entrepreneurship, ignoring affective side while acknowledging that entrepreneurship is affect-laden (Morris et al. 2012), and that it involves significant management of emotions at workplace (Cardon et al. 2012). Hence the recent call for exploring the link between women entrepreneurship and emotional labor (Burch et al. 2013). Emotional labor is built around the idea that it is a real form of labor that can leave the employee feeling mentally or emotionally exhausted after its performance (Morris & Feldman 1996). Entrepreneurship is emotionally labor-intensive particularly for women when it involves putting up a male-oriented appearance and performance, which through habituation can lead to forced internalization of the masculine values. Thus, as we explain next, emotional labor becomes a significant disempowering cost that women entrepreneurs pay as a result of the gen-

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### **Attention Emotional Labor**

The missing discussions on affective side of entrepreneurial efforts have gender implication putting typically women entrepreneurs at a disadvantage. Studies on emotional labor and on leadership propose emotional labor as one of the crucial works that involves significant work-related stress, specifically emotional stress (Humphrey & Pollack, 2008) when leaders' gender orientation does not match the desired orientation which is masculine within the current imagination of entrepreneurship. Thus, to the extent we consider women entrepreneurs as leaders at workplace (which most research studies and practitioner discourse do either explicitly or implicitly), they face potential work stress that emanates from the gender orientation mismatch with the dominant male-desirable gender orientation. More importantly, for women who have internalized femininity face contradictory pressures. On the one hand, in familial spheres of life, to be accepted as 'good woman', they have to display their femininity regularly. Simultaneously, in professional sphere, to get accepted as legitimate entrepreneurs, they have to frequently display masculinity leading to

emotional suppression and faking which can create significant undesirable outcomes for women. For example, emotional suppression and faking that entail surface acting can lead to anxiety and fear (Yik, Russell & Steiger, 2011; Wagner et al., 2014). Other harms include emotional stress and burnout that include emotional exhaustion (Grandey, 2000). The quantum of emotional labor and the attendant undesirable outcomes are likely more significant in the case of start-up women entrepreneurs who cannot risk a failure but have to get accepted as legitimate entrepreneurs to establish themselves. Yet, the focus on emotional labor and related costs, or in other words broadly the affective costs, that woman entrepreneur's face, is largely missing from the discourse of academics, practitioners and policy makers.

Hence, generation of a broader discourse on affective, cognitive-structural and behavioral costs that women entrepreneurs incur in their day-to-day functioning along with a systematic interrogation of the male-dominated structures within entrepreneurship can be a starting point, as we move ahead with promotion of women entrepreneurship, particularly in the name of women empowerment.

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