

# Women entrepreneurs sensemaking and exercise of power and authority: Towards more agentic understandings

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# Power is important.....

- Central to everyday entrepreneurial activity
- Inherent in entrepreneurial relations and social processes
- With growth need for power and influence expands, becomes more complex
- Is context specific
- But is largely unexplored in entrepreneurial context
  
- How do women entrepreneurs make understand power and how do they exercise it?

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# The Issue

- A dominant focus in gender and entrepreneurial studies adopts women's subordinate positioning
  - men: 'better fit for the contemporary entrepreneurial landscape'
  - 'othering' of women-owned businesses
  - can reinforce a deficit model of women who lead entrepreneurial businesses
  - mask women's agency in complex power dynamics
  - how women make sense of and enact power may impact strategies they adopt to start and grow businesses and policies targeted at women and their businesses

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# Women Entrepreneurs, Gender and Power

- Gender as a variable
  - dualistic notions of power, reproduce an entrepreneurial male norm, personal agency is active and self-sufficient, othering of women
- Gender as socially constructed
  - gender embedded in entrepreneurial relations and activities
  - Women: consciously agentic developing socio-cultural and political knowledge
  - Agency relational, shaped by context
- Postfeminist analytical lens
  - Aligns with neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse of individual choice and empowerment
  - Danger that structural inequality will be silenced

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# Understandings of Power

- Power over
  - property or possession, one actor effects change in another's behaviour, relational; domination and restrictive
- Power to
  - Power as basis for action, more consensual and ability-based, ideas of empowerment and autonomy, relational
- Power with
  - Relational and mutual understandings, power = something people do, bi-directional, invested in relationships, ideas of reciprocity

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# Research Design

- Power and gender = socially constructed, focus on how and why
- A critically reflexive methodology (Stead and Hamilton forthcoming) – to challenge the normative
- UK: women less likely than men to start and grow.
- Use of phenomenological techniques to elicit experience (micro-perspective) and organise data
- Reflexive cycles of analysis to reveal critical issues of power
- 5 entrepreneurial women leaders – interviews and observations; focus on everyday interactions, giving voice to women

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# Case Study 1: Mary

‘he’s very autocratic in his leadership style... I just don’t have that...’ ‘

‘putting my arms around the whole thing and leading as a team...’

‘I wish I was more decisive and more visionary..’

*Power over (autocratic) pitted against power with (democratic)*

On a day to day basis us (the board) are equal... But then obviously I am the owner, so we’re not really... I am weighted, but we run it as a team...’

*Power with which morphs into power over– mobilising power, positioning as an autocrat*

‘realising that everybody is running a business just the same as you..’

*Power to - becoming more empowered to take action*

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## Case Study 2: Julie

My husband is really laid back, I'm more common on, come on..'

'we've always had staff meetings, tired to involve and inform....'

'originally it was very family, very close knit and then as it evolves and gets bigger, you have to start drawing lines...'

*Power with – privileging a collective approach, but also a power over (authority as an owner)*

'I do find if I ask for something to be done it is done...'

*Power over – essential to getting things done as a women*

'He's brill.. We have a really good rapport.. It was his appraisal recently and I said I'm so proud.. I got him to do NVQs....'

*Power to – dynamic, evolving capacity to get things done, investing*

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# The story so far..

- Are women 'walking the walk?' or 'talking the walk'?
- Tension and complexity – doing power was a site of struggle
- Disconnect – between how women account for power and the tension in their perceptions of their agency vis-à-vis their exercise of power
- Multiplicity and duplicity – dynamic and socially constructed nature of entrepreneurship....
- Women – aware of how gender and power operate to bring about structural inequality (balancing motherhood with a career, relationships with employees tempered by gender)
- Mobilised different modalities of power to get things done...

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# The story so far..

- Power with – articulated as a preferable female mode of power BUT a deficit (and weaker) model
  - More appropriate in early stage of business and their own career
- Power over
  - Preferable to growing a business (yet as masculine viewed as negative and resisted by women)
- Power to
  - Bridging mechanism – focus on collaboration and creating structures within their businesses; maybe more socially acceptable form of power

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