

# **Exploring the false promise of entrepreneurship through a postfeminist critique of the enterprise policy discourse in Sweden and the UK.**

## **Abstract**

Contemporary theories of neoliberalism and entrepreneurship are entwined; both hinge upon the use of agency within free markets to realise individual potential, enhance status and attain material rewards. Postfeminism, as a discrete but related discourse, suggests this context is conducive to encouraging women to draw upon their agency, skills and personal profile to enhance achievements and returns. We draw from these related, but discrete discourses, when critically analysing how postfeminist assumptions shape Swedish and UK government policies aimed at expanding women's entrepreneurship. Despite differing historical antecedents regarding State engagement with equality and welfare regimes, we illustrate how postfeminist assumptions have infiltrated policy initiatives in both cases. This infiltration has, we suggest, suppressed criticisms that in a context of persistent structural discrimination, lack of welfare benefits and contrived aspirational role models, entrepreneurship constitutes a poor career choice for many women. Consequently, we challenge the value of contemporary policy initiatives encouraging more women to enter entrepreneurship.

*Key words:* gender, entrepreneurship, policy, postfeminism, equality

## **Introduction**

Within the contemporary neoliberal turn, market logics have infiltrated human subjectivity emphasising self-governance and the enactment of an entrepreneurial self to exploit personal potential and so, assume responsibility for social, economic and welfare needs (Couldry, 2010; Marttila, 2013; Rose, 1993). As such, contemporary articulations of neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism are conjoined; the foundational neoliberal market logic 'releases' the individual to exploit their potential through an entrepreneurial way of being. These constructs

intertwine to inform a hegemonic sensibility which affords individuals the responsibility to take advantage of market opportunities becoming what Gill (2017:608) describes as ‘a central organising ethic of society’. The pervasiveness of this discourse has reached into debates exploring contemporary analyses of women’s position in society suggesting we have entered a postfeminist era (Gill, 2007; Rottenberg, 2014). Whilst there are varied and contested iterations of postfeminism (Gill & Scharff, 2013), the underpinning thesis suggests that in the light of female emancipation and the contemporary emphasis upon the individual, notions of collective subordination are socially redundant and dysfunctional to market operation (Lewis, Benschop, & Simpson, 2018). Whilst postfeminism reaches back to some aspects of established feminist argument, such as the ambition to realise women’s potential and address subordinating influences, it is argued that the pathway to achieving these ambitions is through the individual negotiation of gendered constraints (Braithwaite, 2002; Showden, 2009).

Although postfeminism occupies its own distinct space, it calls upon ‘the grammar of neoliberalism’ (Gill, 2017:162) emphasising individuality, self-governance and entrepreneurialism (Gill, 2017; Lewis et al., 2018; McRobbie, 2009). The manner in which neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism shape contemporary articulations of postfeminism has to date, largely been explored through an illustrative focus upon cultural tropes (Adriaens & Van Bauwel, 2014; Showden, 2009). This focus is now expanding to explore, for example, how postfeminist assumptions are shaping management and organisation studies, the austerity agenda and entrepreneurship (Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2018; Orgad & De Benedictis, 2015; Sullivan & Delaney, 2017). To advance this debate, we critically analyse how postfeminist assumptions have shaped government policy initiatives aimed at expanding women’s entrepreneurship and the assumptions underpinning such initiatives.

Evaluating how policy initiatives are constructed is critical as they represent a political ideological articulation of prevailing normative socio-economic values (Bennett, 2014), not least

in regard to gender. In order to enable a nuanced analysis, we draw upon two differing sites – the UK, a liberal welfare state, and Sweden, a social-democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990), that differ in gender equality policy. Focusing upon these two cases enables us to reflect how, within these differing contexts, neoliberalism has been absorbed into policy initiatives and articulated through postfeminist exhortations for women to engage with entrepreneurship. We commence by introducing our analytical framing and outlining dimensions of postfeminism, we then outline our material and method. This is followed by an exploration of policy for women’s entrepreneurship in the Swedish and UK context. We then consider the implications of postfeminist assumptions reflected in policy and finally, we conclude by questioning the capacity of entrepreneurship to fuel a postfeminist future whereby women can claim new pathways to personal emancipation.

### **Neoliberalism, entrepreneurialism and postfeminism**

Couldry, (2010) traces neoliberalism back to its roots within an economic theory of market functioning developed in the 1920s, noting that within its contemporary iteration however, this market logic has expanded into all other institutional and personal forms of governance. Within this iteration, neoliberalism infuses ways of being and understanding throughout society that ‘upholds the individual as responsible for their own social and economic status’ (De Benedictis & Gill, 2016:2). As such, contemporary neoliberalism constructs a new, agentic citizen who, having absorbed the individualised market logic of neoliberalism as a normative way of being (Couldry, 2010; Jessop, 2002) embraces ‘self-governmentality’ (Rose, 1993). Consequently, the contemporary articulation of neoliberalism transcends the original market logic to create a neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject. One illustration of the confluence of such market and subject logics is the expansion of substantive entrepreneurship, in the guise of self-employment and new venture creation, as the enactment of the neoliberal subject. Entrepreneurship corrals agency, self-efficacy and opportunity seeking together as individuals enact their entrepreneurial potential

through self-employment and new venture creation and in so doing, create their own employment and also, generate new jobs.

Neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism are discrete but intertwined discourses separate from, but related to, the foundational debates informing postfeminism which in itself, has no clear and definitive definition. Recent work in organisations studies (Lewis, 2018; Lewis, Benschop, & Simpson, 2017; Lewis et al., 2018) has converged around the foundational work of Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2004; 2009) who argue that postfeminism should be regarded as a distinct cultural sensibility, comprising of a number of distinct but interrelated themes. A text, image or narrative may be characterised as postfeminist if it includes one, or more, of the following features - defines femininity as a bodily property and revives notions of natural sexual difference; marks a shift from sex object to desiring sexual subject; encourages self-surveillance and self-discipline and a makeover paradigm; promotes consumerism and the commodification of difference; emphasises individualism, choice, and empowerment as the primary routes to women's independence and freedom; and implies that gender equality has been achieved and feminist activism is thus, no longer necessary (Gill, 2007). Lewis (2014) adds a further point, the retreat to home as a matter of choice, not obligation. Successful liberated independent working women are celebrated as those who have effectively used their agency to negotiate the complexities of contemporary society to take advantage of the opportunities offered.

Deconstructing this portrayal reveals a dominant imagery of youthful, heterosexual, conventionally attractive, confident educated women living and working within advanced economies. Maintaining this image requires a constant critical gaze on the self to ensure the subject being reflects such norms to conform as a successful postfeminist woman. So, whilst postfeminism celebrates women's achievements and emancipation, it also reinforces a traditional reproduction of femininity – but with a twist; women are portrayed as having choice but are freely, willingly and proudly *choosing* to enact traditional femininity (Lewis et al., 2018). Thus,

postfeminism is seen as a specific governmentality (Gill 2007, Lewis, 2018), a discursive formation with power implications in a Foucauldian sense (Lewis, 2014), and a gender regime (McRobbie, 2009) – all of which suggest an internalised discourse that governs behaviour.

Accordingly, postfeminism is not a distinct theoretical perspective, but rather a specific discursive regime. Gill's (2007) list of postfeminist sensibilities offers a tool-box of interrelated analytical concepts to characterise and understand the object of inquiry. To further demarcate, postfeminism is not to be confused with post-structuralist feminist theory, which is a distinct epistemological perspective that sees gender as socially constructed as opposed to biologically given, and which interrogates how gender is performed, paying attention to resulting gender hierarchies (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). It is not post-colonial or intersectional theory either, which extends the interrogation of gender constructions to intersecting constructions of race, ethnicity, class and other social categories (Crenshaw, 1991). Neither is it third-wave feminism; a quasi-political movement that emerged as a response to perceived limitations of second-wave feminism and which emphasises sex-positive girl power and created a space for feminist action for women of colour, young women and queer identities (Showden, 2009; Snyder, 2008). As such, postfeminism is *not* feminism, at least not as it is normally defined – as the recognition of women's subordination to men, and the effort to rectify this through collective, political action – but rather a response to feminism. Postfeminism does not negate feminism, rather it co-opts it: 'postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalise aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer' (Tasker and Negra; 2007:2).

The achievements of collective feminist activism are part of the postfeminist story but incorporated and taken for granted (Showden, 2009). Even if one can easily demonstrate that such feminist activism has not yet completed its task in terms of fully emancipating women, advances are evident in terms of regulated equality, the repudiation of discrimination and greater personal

choice on lifestyle and sexual freedom. Postfeminism recognises and builds upon this argument; examples such as the benefits of commodified female beauty are deemed an achievement by women, as workers, sales people, editors or business owners as providing opportunities for financial and personal independence. Postfeminism is thus, paradoxical in incorporating feminist as well as anti-feminist discourses. As such, feminism is individualised by postfeminism and staged in a framework of competition compatible with a neoliberal agenda introducing competition between individual women. Furthermore, postfeminism does not accommodate substantive gender equality, or equality as equal results since this would require redistribution of power and resources through politics and the state, typical of socialist feminism, most closely associated with social democratic welfare states. Any feminist gain is now to be gained on market conditions theorised as a change from state feminism to market feminism (Kantola & Squires, 2012).

Consequently, the adoption of neoliberalism from the late 1970s, particularly in its guise beyond an economic model to encompass entrepreneurial self-governmentality has enabled the conditions for the emergence of postfeminism. As such, the postfeminist woman is a self-governing neoliberal subject who takes responsibility to use her agency by developing an entrepreneurial self to identify and exploit contemporary choices. Yet, postfeminism is differentiated from neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism as women cannot simply use markets and agency to escape gendered constraints but rather, are obliged to use appropriate enactments of femininity to navigate gendered challenges (Adamson, 2017). However, the matrix of appropriate femininities available within postfeminism is broadly reflective of those associated with young, attractive, heterosexual women who embrace consumerism to construct a persona which, although individually enacted, reproduces traditional gender norms (Butler, 2013). Thus, postfeminism offers a conceptual promise of entrepreneurial emancipation based upon choice; however, the

paradox arises as the idealised image of the postfeminist woman, presented as an aspirational subject, denies choice to value diversity or challenge orthodoxy.

### **Postfeminism in entrepreneurship studies**

Mainstream research on women's entrepreneurship is typically set in a male-female comparative frame, where women are on the 'losing side'. This is assumed as women as a category have fewer, smaller and less profitable businesses leading to suggestions of gender related 'under-performance' (Yousafzi, Lindgreen, Saeed, & Henry, 2018). Ahl's (2006) discourse analysis of published research upon women's entrepreneurship argued that the construction of the woman entrepreneur as secondary to her male peer results from normative masculinised assumptions prevalent in main-stream entrepreneurship research: first, that the primary purpose of entrepreneurship is profit on the business level and economic growth on the societal level; second, that entrepreneurship is something male; third, that it is an individual undertaking; fourth, that men and women are different, and finally, that work and family are separate spheres where women prioritise, or ought to prioritise, their family. These assumptions mirror Gill's (2007) postfeminist sensibilities (see Table 1).

*Insert table 1 about here*

Ahl (2006) found that the most frequent rationale for studying women entrepreneurs was substantive or potential contribution to profitability or growth – women's subordination was ignored and issues of power were absent. It was the responsibility of the individual woman to 'make or break it'. This reflects the postfeminist sensibilities of individualism, choice, and empowerment as the primary routes to women's independence and freedom that have become possible as gender equality has been achieved. Similarly, in Lewis' (2014) analysis of constructions of (post)feminine subjectivities in entrepreneurship texts, the most common construction was 'individualised entrepreneurial femininity'; supposedly gender neutral,

meritocratic and with an equal chance of success if sufficient energy and enthusiasm was invested.

The assumption that men and women are different, or have different preferences, is common in entrepreneurship research seeking to explain performance differences in entrepreneurial traits (Ahl, 2006). This reflects postfeminist sensibilities of femininity as a bodily property and natural sex differences. The assumption of entrepreneurship as something male was obvious in measuring instruments comparing men and women (Mirchandani, 1999; Robb & Watson, 2012). Women were assessed as to whether they measured up to the norm, or not, and if not, they were advised to improve themselves – take business courses, increase their management skills, boost their self-confidence, network better et cetera (Ahl & Nelson, 2015; Foss, Henry, Ahl, & Mikalsen, 2018). This reflects the postfeminist sensibilities of self-surveillance, self-discipline and a makeover paradigm, and as noted by Marlow (2013), it effectively introduces a blame discourse – women are held responsible for their alleged shortcomings; structures are not. The assumption that work and family are separate spheres and that women prioritise family reflects the postfeminist sensibility that a retreat to the home is a matter of choice.

In effect, women are positioned as different from male entrepreneurs, normally as inferior, but sometimes as the womanly alternative; Ahl (2006) notes the construction of ‘the good mother’ entrepreneur who uses her relational (maternal) skills for the benefit of the business. Similarly, Lewis (2014) found ‘relational’ and ‘maternal’ entrepreneurial femininity; the former is a transformative leader, shares power, promotes trust and pursues collective goals; the latter has a home-based business offering products or services associated with motherhood. Postfeminist elements relate to an emphasis upon essential sex difference, the commercial valuing of traditional femininity – the commodification of difference – and a desired retreat to the home (Lewis, 2014). Women’s proposed disadvantages are here turned into advantages, but none of them challenge the male norm. In short, the message for women entrepreneurs, as summarised in Table 1, column 3,



is that first, they are responsible for their own success; second, they are different from and weaker than men; third, entrepreneurship is something male so they must ‘work’ on themselves to become successful and finally, they could profitably commodify femininity, or retreat to the home. This clearly reflects prevailing postfeminist sensibilities (Gill, 2007).

We contribute to this body of research through a feminist critique of postfeminist assumptions in government policy initiatives for women’s entrepreneurship, using material from two developed but contrasting economies, Sweden and the UK. We focus upon policy initiatives as exemplars for our arguments as they offer selective evidence based upon prescriptive pronouncements shaped by government objectives into seemingly neutral policy documents. As noted, the centrality of entrepreneurship to contemporary socio-economic development has informed an extensive and diverse body of policy initiatives reflective of governmental interpretations of the role of entrepreneurship within society (Bennett, 2014). Such initiatives also reflect and reproduce approaches to issues such as gender equality and the role of women. These two discourses are folded together within specific initiatives focused upon increasing women’s entrepreneurial propensity and activity on the basis of enabling them to fulfil their personal potential whilst contributing to the generation of wealth. As such, government policy represents the enactment of dominant ideologies transposed into substantive action; dedicated funding to support such initiatives also privileges preferred policy agendas (Barker & Peters, 1993). Accordingly, policy directives are not neutral; they are mechanisms whereby partisan ideas become actions through funded initiatives. Thus, the assumptions that inform such ideals are critical influences given their pervasive representation of normativity. Using a policy critique, we expose how postfeminist ideals have become foundational to government enterprise policy directives.

## **Method and cases**

*Selection of cases:* To enable a nuanced analysis of how government policy initiatives encouraging women's entrepreneurship assimilate postfeminist assumptions we selected the UK and Sweden as our cases. The former, affiliated to the Anglo-Saxon free economy model, has embraced neoliberalism since the 1980s with a radically reduced public sector and an increasingly draconian approach to state welfare provision (McKay, Campbell, Thomson, & Ross, 2013). Such shifts are hailed as encouraging greater entrepreneurialism as individuals are free to realise their potential, yet women remain under-represented. To address this imbalance, there has been a dedicated policy focus aimed at encouraging greater participation. This has been embedded in a discourse of personal self-development whilst contributing to national productivity. Sweden, however, is traditionally associated with welfare capitalism (Esping-Anderson, 1990), where the ideological focus has been upon a collective social and economic model to promote productivity by addressing issues of inequality (Thorsen, Brandal, & Bratberg, 2015). Feminist considerations have been a cornerstone of such policy development (Kantola & Outshoorn, 2007). The foundations of this model however, have shifted in recent years in response to the introduction of neoliberalist policies informing the advent of 'New Public Management' reforms enabling increasing privatisation (Laegreid & Christensen, 2013). Allegedly, such changes have created new opportunities for women to reap the rewards of entrepreneurship by delivering services previously provided by the State. In keeping with the feminist approach underpinning Swedish policy initiatives, such opportunities emphasise the value attributed to specific womanly merits as a resource for entrepreneurial activity which in turn, enhances national wealth.

*Material and search methods:* A broad range of policy documents developed by successive Swedish and UK governments since the 1980s with the aim of encouraging entrepreneurship amongst women were analysed. First, we established background by taking a 'broad sweep' approach when reviewing the generic emergence and direction of policy aimed at encouraging entrepreneurial activity in the UK and Sweden (Greene and Patel, 2013; Lundström & Boter,

2003). This analysis involved internet searches, literature reviews and personal knowledge to identify policy analyses (Ahl & Nelson, 2015; Bennett, 2014; Marlow, Shaw, & Carter, 2008; Pettersson, Ahl, Berglund, & Tillmar, 2017). A wide variety of search terms were utilised (women's enterprise policy support, female entrepreneurship, encouraging women's enterprise) as well as our knowledge of enterprise initiatives as critics of the current approach to the gender, women and enterprise discourse.

We identified shifts within UK policy aims from a 'quantity approach' in the 1980s, aimed at expanding the self-employed population with a move towards inclusion and diversity in the 1990s prompting direct engagement with women's enterprise. In Sweden, there was a shift from policy upon gender equality in the early 1990s to an explicit focus on inclusion for the purpose of economic growth in later decades. Related documents charting such shifts, and the advent of dedicated initiatives focused upon women, are readily available on government websites, generic business advice and support sites and women's enterprise support sites (see examples of such in Appendix One).

For the UK, we critically analysed government policy documents dedicated to expanding women's enterprise and in addition, advisory initiatives produced by advocacy groups such as the Federation for Small Business (FSB) and the contemporary Women's Business Council who commissioned a report by Deloitte in 2016. Initial material drew from the Labour government's (1997-2010) funded research group: Promoting Women's Enterprise Support (PROWESS). The prime rationale for PROWESS being as an advocate for women's entrepreneurship, generating evidence on women's venturing and influencing related policy directives. Discrete government support for women's enterprise has since waned with recent Coalition and Conservative governments (2010+) preferring a generic business support agenda. There were some exceptions with the Coalition government orchestrating an advice webpage for potential women entrepreneurs, 'Women in Enterprise: new support and advice' prioritising a call to enterprise (if

only more women started new firms....). Web information from broader women's advocacy groups who lobby governments, such as the 'Pink Shoe Group' was also scrutinised, noting the need to harness the 'power of personal femininity' to achieve success.

Within Sweden we interrogated policy texts produced since the 1980s by the government and state authorities, chiefly the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, SAERG. These largely related to two specific programmes encouraging women's entrepreneurship; the Resource Centres for Women, initiated in 1993 and Promoting Women's Entrepreneurship, created in 2007 but "gender mainstreamed" into general entrepreneurship policy and support in 2015 (SAERG, 2015). Almost all material pertaining to these programmes was available on the internet with the remainder taken from public libraries; in total, more than 4000 pages of text were collected.

*Analytical strategy:* The material was collated in an excel file, noting type of document, sender, issue date, and main content. From this material, we selected a range of documents for closer analysis; discriminating upon the basis that they provided information on funding, informed programme design and contained explicit reasoning around and motivation for entrepreneurship policy for women (see Appendix One). Our purpose was not to chart policy development (See Ahl & Nelson, 2015; Berglund, Ahl, Pettersson, & Tillmar, 2018) but distil material which focused particularly upon women's enterprise to critically interrogate extant postfeminist assumptions.

We utilised a thematic analysis approach to evaluate how the policy texts configured and positioned women in the socio-material domain commencing by searching for reflections relating to the assumptions in the first column of Table 1 (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). Specifically, we reflected upon assumptions of entrepreneurship as available to all (meritocratic option); that individual women should be more entrepreneurial to exploit their potential, but also, contribute to the national economy (personal and community enhancement). We sought policy solutions to alleged barriers to women's entrepreneurship such as beliefs relating to

entrepreneurial potential (lack of self-confidence/risk aversity), or feminised responsibilities, such as child care. To ensure we were not pursuing a self-fulfilling prophecy, we searched for evidence to contradict these assumptions through, for example, acknowledgement that structurally embedded subordination might hamper entrepreneurial activity. In addition, we scrutinised the material for any references to the need to challenge the prevailing masculinised discourse of entrepreneurship to reassess women's position. We also read extensively to identify any critical reflections acknowledging that self-employment offers few welfare benefits such as maternity, sickness or holiday pay for women suggesting it may be a poor option compared to formal employment (Stumbitz, Lewis, & Rouse, 2018). We found one brief reference to this within the Deloitte (2016) report on women's entrepreneurship suggesting that statutory maternity provision should be improved for self-employed women. Our next step was to critically review the postfeminist assumptions embedded within these initiatives and how they position women within the contemporary entrepreneurship project. To this end we drew on the postfeminist sensibilities as summarised in the third column of Table 1. We analysed each selected text to see if, how, and to which effect it reflected any of these sensibilities. The result is presented below, with illustrative quotes from the texts. Further excerpts are described in Appendix 1.

### **Government support for women's entrepreneurship in Sweden**

Since the 1960s, Sweden has been associated with a distinct State supported agenda to promote women's equality acknowledging feminist debates regarding the need to address forms of collective discrimination through an avowedly women friendly welfare system and family policies (Martinsson & Griffin, 2016). This does not mean however, that the phenomenon of postfeminism is absent; although the term does not have wide circulation within Sweden, associated sensibilities regarding the desirability of finding individual solutions to gender related constraints are emerging (Jansdotter Samuelsson, Krekula, & Åberg, 2012). The debate is nuanced through the auspices of government policy where feminist principles remain, but the

route to attainment is becoming more attenuated and individualised. We illustrate this argument when analysing the shifting ethos of support initiatives to encourage the contemporary expansion of women's entrepreneurship within Sweden (Berglund et al., 2018).

Reflecting broader debates across developed economies pertaining to gender, women and entrepreneurship, the emphasis within Swedish enterprise policy has been to encourage more women to enter self-employment on the basis of personal benefit and contributions to national wealth (Berglund et al., 2018). The Swedish policy context for women's enterprise has a distinctive profile however, given its association with the encroaching privatisation of many aspects of female dominated areas of the public sector services such as health, care and education (Proposition, 1993/94). This shift has been presented as creating new prospects for women to move from employment to self-employment and so, continue to deliver such services whilst reaping the alleged rewards of enterprise. In addition to the privatised delivery of previously public sector services, entrepreneurship is presented as a beneficial socio-economic option per se: "...programmes will aim for more women becoming interested in entrepreneurship and innovation, to increase start-ups, and aim for increased competitiveness, efficiency and growth in established companies that are run by women" (Nutek, 2007:1).

Hence, within the Swedish context, entrepreneurship is stepping in where the State is stepping back assisted by a range of policy initiatives and support programmes to encourage more women to take advantage of emerging opportunities as the economy shifts further towards a neoliberal market model (Ahl & Nelson, 2015). In addition, there is a generic 'call to enterprise' for Swedish women as highly educated, agentic individuals with the scope to develop innovative ventures if offered the appropriate incentives and role models (Berglund et al, 2018). Alongside the delivery of previous public provision such policy initiatives are, we argue premised within, and reflective of, postfeminist sensibilities, as described in Table one.

**1. Individualism.** The first entrepreneurship support programme in 1994, 'Resource Centres for Women', drew from a white paper commissioned to ascertain how rates of women's entrepreneurship could be increased. The text had explicit gender equality goals and was firmly anchored in established feminist thought, both liberal (stress on equal opportunities) and socialist (stress on equal outcomes): 'The goal is to promote women's independence so that women .....can live a dignified life measured by women's standards. This means equal conditions for women and men regarding education, income and influence in society. It means that society's resources – ownership, right of disposition – are equally divided between the sexes' (Friberg, 1993). However, this is the only example from all the initiatives analysed where unequal access to resources was explicitly recognised as an underpinning problem and argued for equality as an outcome. When translated into actual policy, the arguments shifted. The government proposition supporting government financing dedicated resource centres converted women into a means for economic development, rather than vice versa, and also tied this ambition specifically to the restructuring of the public sector: 'Increased entrepreneurship among women – for example businesses created through privatisation of public operations – is an important contribution to renewal and growth in the Swedish economy' (Proposition, 1993/94:134). The onus was placed upon individual women to avail themselves of new business opportunities emerging from privatisation and for the resource centres to assist them in making this choice.

In 2007, with the election of a liberal-conservative government coalition, a new programme, 'Promoting women's entrepreneurship' was launched. This focused exclusively upon the notion of women as an under-utilised resource for economic growth. 'Fewer women than men own businesses in Sweden. There is a great entrepreneurship potential among women. More women that start and run businesses would further Sweden's economic development. It is therefore, important to augment the efforts to promote women's entrepreneurship' (Regeringskansliet, 2007). The policy goal of encouraging more women to choose entrepreneurship for the benefit of

the economy was further emphasised when the programme was extended in 2011: ‘...More women business owners would mean that more business ideas are taken advantage of and that Sweden’s opportunities for increased employment and economic growth is strengthened... The programme will generate more new women owned businesses.... The programme will make more women consider starting a business, chose to run a business full time and employ others’ (Regeringsbeslut, 2011). The policies reflect the postfeminist sensibility of individualism and choice – they are aimed at associating womens engagement with entrepreneurship as a route to broader economic revival. They are however, silent on the implications for women of losing secure public sector employment with extensive welfare benefits.

**2. Sex differences.** The discourse identified the disparity between male and female rates of entrepreneurship as problematic on the basis of unexploited female potential; to address this disparity policy measures reflected assumptions that men and women are different and so, need different measures: ‘Problem descriptions and analyses must take into account that women and men have different needs and conditions. Special measures for women are also needed.’ (Proposition, 1993/94). As noted by Ahl & Nelson (2015), the assumption of sex differences came in two versions: women are inadequate (in relation to a male norm), or they make a unique womanly contribution. An example of the latter can be found in a motion to the parliament preceding the first programme: ‘There is reason to believe that female entrepreneurship is the industry of the future...studies have shown that women’s businesses are more long-lived, stable and grow less dramatically; women have been able to expand in a business cycle when men have been forced to lay off people’ (Motion 1993/94:A460, 1994). The former assumption is more convoluted – policy document texts are crafted to be ‘politically correct’ and unbiased but all elements of the programme were designed to address women’s identified shortcomings – lack of business skills, lack of confidence, and poor networks. An extract from the transcribed parliament debate preceding the first programme is however, explicit upon women’s shortcomings: ‘Women



business owners have and have always had difficulties making themselves understood. Women have a different language than men, and men (...) have not understood. Women have used a vague language because this is their normal way of communicating' (Riksdagen, 1993/94:14).

The assumption of sex differences is fundamental to explain women's minority presence as entrepreneurs; it shifts away from constructed forms of collective discrimination but also, channels into the makeover paradigm. Thus, women and men may be different but, emulating normative [masculinised] examples and role models with assistance from tailored support and advice initiatives will assist women to develop and enact their entrepreneurial potential.

**3. A *makeover paradigm*.** Axiomatically, if women are identified as 'lacking' in terms of entrepreneurial characteristics and competencies, they require support and advice to remake themselves as more adept entrepreneurial actors. To benefit from the advantages entrepreneurship has to offer, women have to adopt appropriate attitudes and develop particular competencies to enhance business skills and confidence. The 2007-2014 programme offered specialised business training services and development projects for women, promoted enterprise activities for prospective female entrepreneurs at universities, mapped and publicised existing women's networks, and trained support staff in gender awareness. These initiatives have focused particularly on generating self-confidence to undertake self-employment, attain business management skills, identify role models and mentors from networks and so, develop both the attitudes and skills to benefit from entrepreneurship. In tandem with this programme, an unpaid ambassador initiative was launched in 2009 whereby 880 female entrepreneurs were asked to volunteer as role models inspiring a variety of audiences but particularly, school girls, to encourage association with such role models and so, encourage them to pursue entrepreneurship as a career.

As Byrne, Fattuum and Garcia (2019) note, high profile women entrepreneur role models predominantly embody specific forms of desirable femininity [white, young, attractive,

heterosexual]. Given their specificity, these standards remain unattainable for many but still, persist as aspirational prototypes. In 2012, SAERG also instituted an annual “Beautiful Business Award” competition for innovative women owned ventures; it is unclear what makes an innovation ‘beautiful’, but the gendered connotations are clear that making over innovation into an object of beauty enhances relevance and understanding for women. Generating a discourse where the onus is upon women to address an alleged feminised propensity for risk aversion (Fine, 2017), relate to gender specific role models who have overcome such weaknesses whilst repackaging entrepreneurial aspects, such as innovation, into more attractive gendered terms resonates with a makeover paradigm. Thus, self-surveillance and self-discipline to recognise weakness - address them and reinvent the self to reflect prevailing entrepreneurial norms - becomes the responsibility of individual women.

**4. Commodification of femininity.** Within the Swedish initiatives, the postfeminist notion of commodification of femininity assumes a distinct shape, tied in to the restructuring of the public sector. The first initiative, in 1994, coincided with the first wave of privatisation of feminised public sector jobs in education, care and healthcare. In effect, women were encouraged to reconstruct their previous employment as self-employment – this would solve residual unemployment effects, chime with the neoliberal call to entrepreneurship and also, contribute more value to the economy: ‘Increased business ownership among women – e.g. such businesses that are created by privatisation of public services – is an important contribution to renewal and growth in the Swedish economy’ (Proposition, 1993/94:134). Presumptions of femininity embedded in care focused public sector employment were transposed onto equivalent self-employment where they became a feminised advantage given associations between femininity and the emerging privatised care sector. For the benefit of the economy, women were encouraged to create businesses in such feminine gendered areas where specific womanly skills could generate commercial success. A distinct element of this policy also leveraged off the argument

that greater opportunities for self-employment in rural areas would help to dispel depopulation where young women in particular, were leaving for large urban centres: ‘In spite of different measures, young women leave [these areas] to a greater extent than young men’ (ibid, p 31). Femininity is consequently a staple in the arguments: feminine gendered jobs are privatised and repackaged as new opportunities for women’s self-employment, this will reinvigorate the service sector in rural areas, younger women will remain and eventually, more children will be born. However, rural depopulation in Sweden persists and the programme launched in 2007 abandoned the rural focus.

Undoubtedly, reductions in public sector employment have stimulated women’s self-employment with the greatest increase being in privatised child care which has developed as a highly competitive, low margin, feminised sector (Sköld & Tillmar, 2015). The other formerly publicly owned sectors, such as health care, have been transferred into corporate ownership; whilst this has created higher levels of women’s self-employment, this has taken the form of insecure, poorly rewarded sub-contracting (Sköld & Tillmar, 2015; Sundin & Tillmar, 2010). Consequently, in this context, there is a contradiction within the commodification argument as on one hand, feminine skills are lauded as informing new opportunities through entrepreneurship in terms of providing services previously delivered through employment. Yet, on the other hand, the devalued nature of such feminised skills generates low value, low margin entrepreneurship which exploits women rather than emancipates them particularly in the absence of the protective terms of public employment.

***Contemporary shifts and related outcomes.*** Regarding the outcomes of such programmes, women’s self-employment increased from a historic mean of around 25-30%, to 36% in 2014 (SCB, 2014). This increase has however, been largely driven by public sector austerity with related privatisation initiatives informing the expansion of low quality, poorly rewarded self-employment (Ahl & Tillmar, 2015). In 2015 however, when the social democratic government

returned to power, all women's enterprise programmes ceased. They were replaced by a new, national gender mainstreaming strategy, which summons the creative powers of women, but also those of other under-represented groups such as immigrants, people of colour, and the young for the benefit of the national economy: 'Gender equality and diversity contribute to creating better conditions for renewal, growth, employment and competitiveness...in more effective utilisation of human resources...a more innovative climate, which in turn creates the conditions for sustainable growth and development'. (SAERG, 2015: 44-45). Whilst the discussion on equality is now extended to other groups, the focus on their potential for contribution to economic growth remains centre stage. We characterise the prevailing discourse as postfeminist; there is little mention of female subordination or feminist activism rather, a level playing field is assumed. Postfeminist elements of individualism, choice and empowerment are present; references to changing discriminatory structures are notably absent. The postfeminist discourse conceals this issue through a rhetoric of entrepreneurial opportunity that remains unattainable given persistent, but concealed, gender subordination.

### **Government support for women's entrepreneurship in the UK.**

Within the UK however, unlike Sweden, there has never been any statement of intent to include feminist principles, or recognition of such, within policy initiatives (Pascall, 1997). The focus has been upon an equality and inclusion agenda with the emphasis but this relates more to 'fixing' women so they are better able to negotiate the barriers they encounter and so, release their potential for entrepreneurship (FSB, 2016; Marlow et al., 2008). Consequently, Conservative governments from 1980 – 1997 advocating for the expansion of self-employment did not recognise women as a specific support category given assumptions of a male dominated sector embodied by the oft referenced small business *man* (Marlow, 2002). This approach changed however with the election of successive Labour governments from 1997 - 2010 who adhered to a market-based ideology, but enacted regulation to establish a baseline of fairer employment

practices, embed equality and respect diversity (Smith & Morton, 2006). Entrepreneurship remained central to government policy as a pathway to value creation but reflecting the fairness agenda, specific initiatives were focused upon under-represented groups - for example, ethnic minorities and women (Huggins & Williams, 2009). Yet, the rationale for their inclusion was very much upon the lost potential for value creation by such groups as an unexploited resource. So for example, the 1997 Labour government funded advocacy organisation, Prowess was created to encourage and support women's entrepreneurial activity and generate evidence to feed back into policy; these twin aims were 'developed in response to the pressing productivity requirement to encourage more women to start and grow businesses' (Small Business Service, 2003:12).

Since the election of a coalition government in 2010 and successive Conservative governments in 2015/2017, entrepreneurship has remained a central tenet of policy to increase competitiveness and innovation within the UK economy in a post-recession context (Doern, Williams, & Vorley, 2016). Since 2010, successive governments have however, reverted to more generic based enterprise policy models shifting decisions regarding targeted support to Local Enterprise Partnerships (regional groups of private/public partnerships responsibility for local enterprise development). The discrete focus upon women's entrepreneurial activity has diminished becoming subsumed into a broader stance upon equality and opportunity (Fawcett Society, 2015). Any acknowledgement of structural barriers or discrimination remains rare. As such, postfeminist sensibilities, such as individualism and make-over inform the presumed solutions to such challenges. Thus, the onus has been, and remains, upon encouraging more women to enter entrepreneurship by providing bespoke support to assist them to develop individualised solutions and strategies to address structural constraints. As in the Swedish case, we can capture the themes here through prevailing postfeminist sensibilities.

**1. Individualism.** From the earliest examples of policy initiatives, there has been an emphasis upon encouraging women to enact 'personal potential' to realise their entrepreneurial capacity to

create new firms and so, boost national productivity. The first strategic initiative focused upon expanding women's enterprise opens debate with a quote from a role model women entrepreneur: 'I have always been a great believer in self-development ....'; such individual agency is then connected to self-fulfilment as women 'must have the opportunity to fulfil their potential' (Small Business Service, 2003:3). This in turn, engenders contributions to national wealth; in effect, personal potential is transposed into economic potential: 'More women-owned businesses mean increased productivity, more jobs and greater wealth' is claimed in "Business Support with the 'F' Factor" (Graham, 2005:4).

Supporting this rationale, the example of the US is celebrated as a site of possibility (Marlow et al., 2008). It has been alleged that if UK women were to match the start-up rates of their US peers there would be a substantial increase within the business stock and related expansion in employment thus, contributing to national wealth and employment creation<sup>1</sup>: 'the overall objective is to increase significantly the numbers of women starting and growing businesses in the UK, to proportionately match or exceed the level achieved in the USA' (Small Business Service, 2003:5). Such 'calls to enterprise' focus upon engaging the potential of the individual but also suggest a moral dimension whereby women are urged to become more productive to generate a range of benefits for themselves and the economy. It was recognised however, that realising the call to enterprise required the negotiation of gendered barriers, 'women who have the desire to set up their own business are often faced with a multitude of barriers' (Graham, 2005:17). The notion of barriers is reiterated in all policy documents analysed; from the earliest examples to those of the 2016 FSB document, these are broadly identified as: lack of access to business support, access to finance, moving from welfare benefits to self-employment, caring responsibilities, lack of role

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<sup>1</sup> As Marlow et al., (2008) note, this comparator between the UK and the US, frequently referenced as a fundamental justification for focusing upon the expansion of women's business ownership, is specious. The US tax system encourages incorporation so there is a different legal ownership model, firms with more than 50% female board membership are deemed women owned; this was advantageous when aspirational targets of 5% of federal contracts awarded to women and minority owned small firms were in place. This compares to 100% women owned in the UK. This is an 'oranges and apples' comparison; this fallacy persists however, with a recent report by Deloitte (2016) claiming there would be 1,000,000 (!) more self-employed/firm owners in the UK if British women created firm at the levels of those in North America.

models and low levels of confidence. Another common feature being that such barriers are not recognised as structurally embedded but rather challenges which individuals can overcome if offered appropriate training, guidance and advice which can fuel a ‘business development’ journey where ‘a woman is representing latent potential in terms of economic contribution through to that woman running a successful growing business’ (ibid:9). Such solutions rarely recognise the structural basis of how, for example, embedded gender discrimination constrains women’s access to finance or why women are axiomatically afforded caring responsibilities. Accordingly, individual solutions attempt to mitigate outcomes rather than address causes. The discourse remains anchored in a postfeminist analysis that the onus is upon individual women to change their attitudes and develop the skills to engage with entrepreneurship. In turn, the gendered challenges encountered can be addressed through incentives and initiatives focused upon the individual rather than recognition of the persistent structurally embedded gendered disadvantage.

**2. Sex differences.** Within UK policy, the emphasis upon sex difference has been captured in a brief comment upon the generic gender policy discourse pertaining to entrepreneurship in that the underpinning message pivots upon the notion of ‘Why can’t a woman be more like a man?’ (Marlow, 2013:10). There is an assumption that men inherently possess desirable entrepreneurial characteristics so, if only women could emulate them, this would enable them to be just as successful as their male counterparts. Within the broader policy discourse we see this articulated in examples such as comments upon the differences in business development by men and women where apparently, there is a ‘style and pace’ women prefer which can be associated with transformational support delivered through ‘communities on a localised outreach basis more attractive to women’ (Graham, 2005:14).

Such sex differences are again stated within an FSB report (2016:7) ‘since there are substantially fewer women entrepreneurs than men, it seems likely that the potential of women in

this area is not being harnessed as well as that of men and therefore, requires more support' (FSB; 2016:7). This suggests that the sex differential in the entrepreneurial population is an issue of latent potentials which policy support can address and in so doing, women will then be as successful as men. This particular theme emerges again in Deloitte (2016) to explore the under-representation of women in entrepreneurship: 'if we can increase the current levels of participation... to the same as those of men ...then women led SMEs could potentially contribute in excess of £180 bn to GVA [Gross Value Added] to the UK economy by 2025' (Deloitte, 2016:4). The emphasis here is upon the loss of value to the nation given women's reluctance or refusal to emulate their male peers.

Qualitative evidence of sex differences are described in a briefing paper upon women's entrepreneurship in Science, Engineering, Construction and Technology (SECT) where women's presence is, 'staggeringly small' (Kent, 2006:2). Incumbent women entrepreneurs described discriminatory behaviour: 'assumptions in the industry that women are not as technically competent as men'; 'concerns about my ability to be a mum and an entrepreneur' (p.5) were noted. Addressing such discrimination was related to showcasing more role models and challenging such attitudes; responses such as 'I felt a real sense of "I'll show you" by starting my own company', 'Be confident in your business and others will feel this confidence too' (p.3) were identified as solutions to structural discrimination. Although the ethos of this era of enterprise policy was to be more inclusive challenging the notion of the archetypal small (white) business *man*, the responsibility to rectify under representation was given to women – if they could be encouraged to change and take advantage of the opportunities offered, they would achieve in the same manner as men.

As noted above, a number of barriers have been identified constraining individual women's entrepreneurial activities; such barriers also map onto sex differences where for example, the problem of combining business ownership and caring and domestic responsibilities are specific



issues for women. This is illustrative of normative assumptions regarding gendered responsibilities: support was to be more readily available for *women* whilst networking and other initiatives should be scheduled to acknowledge *women's* caring responsibilities. Overall, this constitutes 'Women-friendly support' (Graham, 2005:16). The Deloitte report (2016:3-4) reiterates a familiar mantra regarding the problem of particularly feminine challenges: 'balancing work and family life, achieving credibility for the business and a lack of confidence. All of these are limiting women's ability to start, run and grow their businesses.' This is compounded by the other well-rehearsed claims of 'a self-perception by women that they lack ability in key business functions'. The underpinning assumption being that male peers are not constrained by caring responsibilities and possess 'key business functions'. This mantra is accompanied by the familiar suggestion that women require specific support to become more confident, need to emulate successful female role models, join networks and seek tailored advice. The prevailing gendered division of domestic labour is taken as a given whilst issues of confidence are not associated with gendered socialisation or subordination influences. Thus, sex differences within policy pronouncements are evident but again, the structural underpinnings of such are not recognised.

**3. A *makeover paradigm*.** How women's entrepreneurial potential is to be 'unleashed' informs a distinct theme within policy directives that women need to adopt self-reflective critiques which enable them to seek support and advice to address issues such as: 'low levels of self-esteem, risk aversity, lack of financial knowledge' (Small Business Service, 2003). A key element of remaking the self to fit entrepreneurial prototypes required the dedicated provision of advice enabling: 'access to appropriate mentoring/coaching; improving business advice on growth issues; increasing networking activity; training and awareness in financial issues; and improving marketing/awareness of investment options (Ibid:15). By engaging with this makeover approach, women would overcome deficits such as, risk aversity, financial incompetence, overly cautious

attitudes to growth and where relevant, a reluctance to move from benefits to enterprise. This ethos has remained constant with the Deloitte report (2016:3) still urging women to have greater self-belief and overcome crises of confidence. Rather than the bespoke advocacy and dedicated support informing policy initiatives of the early 2000s, the focus has changed to the need to develop a supportive 'eco-system' articulated through a government funded Women's Enterprise Academy, offering role models and mentoring, education, networking and corporate sponsorship. Consequently, the focus remains upon postfeminist assumptions regarding the need for self-surveillance and the self-discipline to enact personal change informed by role model templates. There is still a lack of acknowledgement of structural barriers or collective forms of subordination which produce the foundations of gender discrimination.

**4. Commodification of femininity.** With some similarities to the Swedish case, austerity related redundancies and recruitment moratoriums within the public sector since 2010 have been linked to an expansion in women's self-employment (McKay et al., 2013). Unlike Sweden however, there has been no overt 'commodification of femininity' through the identification of 'womanly skills' to address growing gaps in public service provision. Yet, a similar trend can be detected as for the first time since the 1980s, women's self-employment has increased in the UK since 2012 - but predominantly as a part-time activity (Office for National Statistics, 2018) particularly within feminised lower order service sector self-employment focused upon child and elder care services. A more subtle articulation of the commodification of femininity lies within the emergent notion of entrepreneurship as a vehicle to meld home based caring with home based entrepreneurial activity offering services and products of particular relevance to mothers and young children generating maternal entrepreneurial femininities (Lewis, 2014). Popularly described as 'mumpreneurship' (Richomme-Huet, Vial, & d'Andria, 2013, p.256) this involves 'the creation of a new business venture by a woman who identifies as both a mother and a business woman, is motivated primarily by achieving work-life balance, and picks an opportunity linked to the particular

experience of having children'. Given the contemporary nature of this phenomenon it was not recognised in earlier policy initiatives but within the FSB report (2016) and that by Deloitte (2016) there are numerous references to the feminised advantages to be gained for women who use entrepreneurship as a means to achieve work life balance.

As has been explored, there are specific policy initiatives encouraging women to adapt the self in order to reflect normative entrepreneurial characteristics; when analysing this notion of commodification in the context of combining domestic labour and enterprising activities, entrepreneurship is adapted to accommodate feminised priorities of home and care. Again however, the makeover of entrepreneurship into a women-friendly form to enable the accommodation of caring responsibilities is positioned as a beneficial aspect of the flexibility of home-based self-employment, rather than a response to the structural positioning of women as primary carers.

***Contemporary shifts and related outcomes.*** Reviewing policy trends since the 1980s, the assumption persists that women can change and adapt, if given appropriate support, in order to realise their entrepreneurial potential. There is a lack of feminist informed reflections regarding the impact of embedded discrimination, the continuing disparity in terms of domestic/economic labour divisions and generic structural challenges women experience as a category and how this may impact upon their entrepreneurial activity. Interestingly, the UK Office for National Statistics indicate that full-time female employees have a mean weekly income of £428, compared with £243 for self-employed women. In level terms, the employment premium is 76%; even allowing for under-reporting of self-employed income, this is a substantial disparity (Yuen, Sidhu, Vassilev, et al., 2018). Within the evolving policy discourse there has been no reflection that given prevailing gendered socio-economic constraints and evidence regarding lower incomes and poorer welfare benefits (Jayawarna, Rouse, & Kitching, 2013; Stumbitz et al., 2018) suggesting entrepreneurship may be a poor choice for many women when compared with the advantages of

secure, good quality employment where available. However, this is contradictory to the evangelical reverence afforded to entrepreneurship as a site for personal development and individual reward for those prepared to apply agency and persistence.

### **Comparisons and differences.**

Ostensibly, Sweden and the UK would appear to have differing approaches to addressing issues of women's equality. As Esping-Andersen (1990) noted in his analysis of welfare systems, Sweden is typically social democratic with collective norms and extensive state policies to promote equality whereas the UK is positioned upon the liberal, individualised axis. This would suggest differing stances to policy frameworks to support and encourage women's entrepreneurial activity however, with the exception of early policy initiatives within Sweden that acknowledged collective feminist concerns of equality, the focus across both economies has been upon individualised initiatives. Whilst in both cases, there is acknowledgement that women face specific feminised barriers to realising their entrepreneurial potential which in turn, constrains their contribution to economic prosperity. It is notable that in the case of Sweden, specific focus has been afforded to 'womanly' attributes which afford them advantage when converting public sector employment to self-employment. There is no comparator in UK policy but rather it is entrepreneurship that moulded to femininity to enable women to accommodate gendered responsibilities. Hence, whilst each economy has differing foundations and traditions, the confluence of neoliberalism, entrepreneurialism and postfeminism is detectable. These notions entwine to shape policy initiatives whereby collective subordination is translated into individual challenges which, with the appropriate encouragement, determination and guidance, women can address and in turn, reap personal benefits whilst contributing to national prosperity.

### **Discussion**

The construct of postfeminism has been critically evaluated within the context of cultural (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2017) and management studies (Lewis et al., 2018). Within this

article, we extend this analysis to the field of entrepreneurship using as an illustrative example, a critique of the ethos underpinning government policy initiatives within Sweden and the UK aimed at increasing women's entry into entrepreneurship and the creation of scalable ventures. We argue this policy is founded upon the thesis that if individual women are offered specific forms of support to overcome gendered deficiencies, they can become effective entrepreneurs reaping material rewards, enhancing their own self efficacy and by extension, enriching the national economy. Through critical analysis of such arguments, we suggest that claims regarding the enabling powers of neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism, percolated through postfeminist claims of emancipation, generate a policy discourse based upon questionable assumptions. First, women are reluctant entrepreneurs who just require guidance to develop more entrepreneurial attitudes. The base point here is that women *should* be entrepreneurial and indeed, *can* be if given appropriate help to overcome entrepreneurial deficits such as poor self-confidence. As such, it is assumed that entrepreneurship is a good option for women if they can just adopt appropriate attitudes and subjectivities.

This 'call to entrepreneurship' ignores the evidence that for many women, such as those with poor access to entrepreneurial resources, time constraints, caring responsibilities et cetera, entrepreneurship constitutes a precarious and poorly rewarded form of work (Klyver, Nielsen, & Evald, 2013; Marlow & Martinez Dy, 2018; Yuen et al., 2018). Thus, rather than focusing upon how to negotiate prevailing constraints, there should be more emphasis upon resistance to the call to entrepreneurship questioning why it is presented to women as a generically desirable career option. In effect, sensibilities of individualism, choice and the make-over paradigm are invoked as women are encouraged to reconstitute themselves as entrepreneurs using personal reservoirs of potential to complete the transformation.

This informs our second point that women are a reservoir of 'unexploited entrepreneurial potential' that they can choose to exploit and in so doing, facilitate their own self-development

whilst contributing to national prosperity. This is articulated as a form of moral pressure illustrated through the notion of yearning. So, *if only* women started businesses at the same rate as men in the UK they could add £85bn to the UK economy (Deloitte; 2016:4). Back in 2003 (Small Business Service, 2003:2) it was *if only* women in the UK started new ventures at the same rate as in the US, unemployment would disappear and productivity rise. Thus, policy directives incorporate a moral dimension reflective of a postfeminist sensibility that requires women to address their shortcomings to develop an entrepreneurial self and by doing, contribute to the greater good. This yearning discourse does not account for the fact the majority of small firms (regardless owner sex) are marginal performers with few prospects for innovation, productivity growth and employment creation (Aldrich & Ruef, 2018). This generates a naive discourse underpinning policy initiatives encouraging more women into entrepreneurship founded upon postfeminist ideals complicit in reproducing a discourse which subordinates rather than emancipates. Thus, contemporary policy initiatives are both enabling and detrimental. They enable advocacy by acknowledging gender bias within entrepreneurship but the manner in which this is addressed, through postfeminist sensibilities of individualism, choice, self-discipline and consumerism is detrimental. In this context, advocacy is subverted by muting challenges to the logic of policy ambitions.

It is acknowledged that in both the UK and Sweden policy agenda, women experience gendered barriers constraining their entrepreneurial potential and participation given structural subordination. This acknowledges collective feminist arguments but reflective of a postfeminist sensibility, women are called to identify with those who have individually navigated collective challenges. For instance, the necessity for positive female role models embodying successful entrepreneurs has been noted. Yet, as Byrne et al. (2019) argue, such role models celebrate white, middle class heterosexual women who epitomise the postfeminist subject given the celebration of individual determination enacted through recognisable forms of femininity. As such, there is a

bifurcation between these success stories and those of the majority of women entrepreneurs many of whose ventures reflect dominant performance profiles of long hours and low margins in a context of structural constraints (Yousafzi et al., 2018). Such role models and success stories are also utilised to present entrepreneurship as an option for those who struggle to access formal employment given poor human capital or limited employment experience such as the socio-economically marginalised, lone parents or benefit dependent (Jayawarna, Rouse, & Macpherson, 2014). Such arguments echo postfeminist sensibilities whereby entrepreneurship becomes an individualised solution to overcome the disadvantages of deprivation.

Acknowledgment of structural constraints upon entrepreneurial behaviour challenges the postfeminist privileging of market feminism relating feminist gains to market conditions and free competition between individuals. The playing field is level and to advance, or not, is a choice. Public policy agendas are mediated via private organisations according to the logic of the market that Kantola & Squires (2012:383) argue ‘not only change(s) the relationship between the agencies and the women’s movement, but also give primacy to those feminist claims that are complicit with a market agenda’. The uncritical call to entrepreneurship has eroded the ethos of feminist collective action and state-led redistribution of power and resources. This, we argue is an evocative illustration of Fraser’s (1995, 1997) argument that neoliberal politics imply a displacement of a politics of socio-economic distribution by a politics of recognition, or identity. Women become recognised as reservoirs of entrepreneurial potential, but this does not necessarily translate into improved socio-economic status (Berglund et al, 2018).

This analysis may be overly pessimistic and certainly, requires further evaluation over time; there are growing challenges to the postfeminist discourse and examples of its theoretical and empirical frailty are informing counter movements. Citing examples of women furthering feminist gains, such as the Swedish “sisters in business” or “girl geek.meetup” firms, Ahl, Berglund, Pettersson, & Tillmar, (2016) coin the term *femInc.ism*, to denote feminist action

through enterprise. We also see net-activism, theorised as a fourth feminist wave (Munro, 2013). Whilst it has been challenged for dividing old and young net-savvy women, and for its lack of real and political impact – ‘slacktivism’ instead of activism – active campaigning has generated legislative changes, legal cases and public debate. The reach and impact of such organising to, for example, lobby for improved welfare rights for self-employed women is fertile ground for future analyses with advocates in the UK already challenging prevailing policy in this area (Stumbitz et al., 2018).

Having explored policy directives within Sweden and the UK, we characterise both cases as postfeminist. They celebrate individual agency, empowerment and choice building upon on the notion that women can build their own bright future through new venture creation. Our critical evaluation of the promise of entrepreneurship suggests this is a very fragile promise which rests upon aspirational arguments. Entrepreneurship does not challenge existing gender inequalities; it just recreates them in a new form disguising them under the umbrella of choice, agency and possibility. As Rottenberg (2018:49) notes, paraphrasing Cameron (2018), ‘it is not enough to say that women should have choices. Rather, we need to ask why things are arranged in a way that obliges women to make certain choices and not others’. Such obligations can only be dismantled through challenging the power base of collective subordination.

### **Limitations.**

The illustrative evidence for our arguments is drawn from our interpretation of publicly available reports and policy initiatives; inevitably we will not have captured everything. Consequently, there is potential to extend the search. We have focused upon two developed economies; whilst they are contrasted in terms of their attitudes and approaches to socio-economic management and their recognition of feminist principles they share a foundation of wealth and privilege. Evaluating how postfeminist assumptions are applied to transitional or developing economies and the implications of such would be fruitful. We also acknowledge that we are partisan feminist critics



that may bias our interpretations of the material presented. Whilst this undoubtedly sways our interpretation and may favour our preferred arguments, such documents are openly available within the public domain so, can be subject to alternative analyses. We invite other interpretations to generate reflective debate.

Our critique could also be challenged by popular anecdote and the range of evidence presented through websites and social media devoted to stories of how women benefit from entrepreneurship in terms of choice, flexibility and for some, an escape from employment discrimination and stress. Clearly, some women will have very positive experiences of entrepreneurship in terms of income returns, autonomy and the opportunity to innovate. Our argument is not that *all* women should eschew entrepreneurship but rather, to question policy rhetoric packaging it as emancipatory and accessible for all if pursued through the auspices of postfeminist sensibilities. Thus, analyses of more detailed, longitudinal survey data is essential to provide evidence regarding income prospects, working hours, performance data, access to benefits, firm sustainability and levels of churn within the population of women owned firms. With such evidence, we could achieve a more detailed picture of the conditions and returns from women's entrepreneurship.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing upon the evidence presented within this article, we draw two main conclusions informed by a critical position reflective of the postfeminist conditions noted by Gill (2007). First, this might be a time of postfeminist discourse, but these are not postfeminist times. Instead, women's subordination appears to be recreated, the call to entrepreneurship facilitates a 'volte face' in the relationship between the individual and collective subordination. Rather than the latter being deemed a reflection of enduring complex but dynamic power hierarchies which must be dismantled through revealing and reordering gendered social relations, it becomes a problem for women to fix by changing their behaviour. The call to entrepreneurship exhorts women to use

their agency and effort to circumnavigate subordination by creating their own jobs, networks and opportunities. Such success generates idealised role models (Byrne et al., 2019) whilst also acting as a form of discipline to exhort greater efforts from other women as clearly, ‘she who dares wins’. The architecture of existing gender hierarchies remains in place but is reproduced in novel iterations suggesting that women who adopt postfeminist modes of disrupting this hierarchy stand to gain status and materiality. Power relations are not unpicked but rather, camouflaged as negotiable challenges; in effect, the foundations for subordination are not dismantled but rather, the responsibility to address such inequity is rather neatly passed back to the victim. Postfeminism emerges as an especially insidious governmentality (Dean, 1999), which makes women conduct themselves in such a way as to recreate their own subordination.

Our second conclusion is methodological related to the issue of analysing postfeminist assumptions, or sensibilities, as they articulated within entrepreneurship studies. To count as a feminist analysis (meaning an analysis of the gender/power order), the analysis should not stop at a description of a discourse as postfeminist; rather, we have to adopt approaches and generate evidence to demonstrate the shift in the collective gender/power order such sensibilities generate. Thus, in the specific case of entrepreneurship, we would encourage methodologies exploring how individualised enactments of postfeminist sensibilities within the context of entrepreneurship affect women as a category. At present however, such indicators are difficult to distil and beyond the scope of this paper; moreover detailed data to enable cross referencing of key indicators such as income, growth, productivity, flexibility is lacking. The fragmented evidence which is available regarding women, entrepreneurship and issues such as income disparities (Yuen et al. 2018), growth and productivity (Carter, Mwaura, Ram, Trehan, & Jones, 2015) sector shifts (Marlow & McAdam, 2015) and flexibility (Yousafzi, et al., 2018) do not suggest positive advances.

Hence, contemporary evidence questions the extent to which entrepreneurship can challenge gender/power relationships. Whilst there are feminist arguments that have been acknowledged

within policy directives, such as the structural gendered constraints that limit women's entrepreneurial behaviour (Marlow, 2002; Ahl, 2006; Ahl et al., 2016), such critiques have been percolated through a neoliberal and postfeminist filter to manufacture individual responses to collective challenges. As such, this represents a paradoxical reframing of the prevailing analytical critique. This could possibly be challenged by a feminist politics of entrepreneurship whereby existing evidence drawn from feminist critiques is acknowledged. This would identify the contradictions of applying individualised postfeminist sensibilities to address collective subordination illustrated by the fact that for many women, entrepreneurship does not offer the advantages (many of which have been achieved through the auspices of politically motivated collective feminist activism) inherent within collectively regulated employment.

Drawing from the critiques developed within this article, we question whether entrepreneurship is a positive option for women. Rather, policy initiatives which draw upon postfeminist sensibilities generate a false promise of individualised opportunity. This represents a fundamental denial of collective subordination which will inevitably constrain women's entrepreneurial propensity and achievements. In effect, individual victims of collective subordination are held responsible for their own lack of entrepreneurial attainment through the rhetoric of postfeminism.

#### **Acknowledgement.**

We gratefully acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the Associate Editor, Jackie Ford, and the referees in guiding us through the revision process.

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