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Entrepreneurship as Empowerment: How Women Are Redefining Work

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Entrepreneurship as Empowerment: How Women Are Redefining Work

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Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

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Biography

The author was born in Boise, Idaho, August 8, 1977. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Oglethorpe University in 2006, and a Master of Arts degree in Applied Psychology from New York University in 2012 and a Masters of Arts in Clinical Psychology from DePaul University in 2014.
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Abstract

The number of women who are entrepreneurs in the United States has steadily risen since the 1970s and today women found almost half of all new companies. For women, creating their own companies through entrepreneurship may be a way to reject existing work settings, where existing setting and gender dynamics may limit their advancement, creativity, or flexibility. Indeed, entrepreneurship may serve as a form of empowerment to enable women to pursue greater control over their lives. Yet research on the lived experience of this population is limited, with few studies examining the lived experience of this important group. Also, existing literature is criticized as being conducted through a distinctly masculine lens, rendering it an inadequate tool to examine the lived experiences of women who are entrepreneurs. As an initial step to contribute research on this topic, this study used a qualitative approach, consisting of 20 in-depth interviews of women who are entrepreneurs, to describe their experiences of starting and running their own companies. Overall, findings suggest that entrepreneurship may serve as a form of empowerment for women, despite the continued barriers due to sexism and gender bias. These findings are discussed in detail along with implications, limitations, and directions for future research.
INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurs are individuals who see opportunities and are willing to take risks to innovate and create businesses (Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009; Hanson, 2009). Since the 1970s there has been a steady rise in the presence of women who are entrepreneurs, with Nelton (1998) describing this growth as one of the most significant, yet quietest revolutions of our time. Indeed, women start almost half of all new companies in the United States every year and are key players in the economic success of society (Weiler & Bernasek, 2001). In the United States this growth cuts across race and SES, with women of color representing a substantial portion of women-entrepreneurs (Mattis, 1992; National Women’s Business Counsel, 2012). Clearly, women entrepreneurs are important contributors to the economic wellbeing of the United States and beyond.

Despite their presence, economists and researchers have largely overlooked the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs with a resultant dearth of qualitative research that examines this group. Feminist researchers further contend that the existing literature examines women entrepreneurs through a masculine-lens, obscuring the stories and experiences of women who have founded and run their own companies (Ahl, 2006; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Moreover, women may have unique experiences in the work world related to gender. From the chilly climate to the glass ceiling in corporate America (e.g., Mattis, 2004; Sadker & Sadker, 1992), gender may constrict a women’s ability to advance or to be taken seriously in her career. Entrepreneurship may offer an alternative path for women who seek greater autonomy and control over their
work, and indeed literature shows these as primary reasons for women pursuing entrepreneurship (Bliss & Garratt, 1999; Datta & Gailey, 2012; Gill & Ganesh, 2007). However, entrepreneurial women may face their own set of challenges due to gender, such as gender discrimination, lack of financing opportunities (Winn, 2005), and the pressure of gender norms which expect women to take primary responsibility for caregiving and domestic duties in their households (Gill & Ganesh, 2007). Focusing research on women who are entrepreneurs holds potential to shed light on the multiple and nuanced challenges and rewards for women pursing entrepreneurship.

This study is a first step to better understand the lived experiences of women who are entrepreneurs. In this research I interviewed 20 women entrepreneurs to better understand and give voice to their experiences. As described below, I was curious how entrepreneurship may serve as a vehicle to empowerment through increasing autonomy, access to resources, and control over one’s life. Overall, the crux of this study is to understand and describe the experiences of entrepreneurs who are women and their potential experiences of empowerment through this career path. It should be noted that the participants in this study were all successful entrepreneurs, in that they had employees and had been in business for at least two years. Therefore, the experiences of entrepreneurs whose businesses had not succeeded (an unfortunately high number for women) is not represented in this study. As a window into understanding successful women entrepreneurs, I examined three broad areas of experience as follows: personal story of entrepreneurship, impact of entrepreneurship on their
sense of identity and interpersonal relationships, and how they experience empowerment of self and others in multiple domains through entrepreneurship. Examining these aspects of experience contributes to the research on women in entrepreneurship and more broadly to understanding the intersection of gender, work, and empowerment.

To lay a foundation for this study, I first give a brief overview of entrepreneurship in the United States, including definitions of entrepreneurship, demographic trends, characteristics of entrepreneurs, and the reasons why people become entrepreneurs. Next, I present my theoretical foundations for the study grounded in feminism and empowerment theory. This section helps to define key terms (e.g., sexism) and to give a brief history of feminism and how it relates to the current economic, political, and cultural climate for women entrepreneurs in the United States. A second major thrust of this section is focused on empowerment theory, with a review of key empowerment theories with connections to how entrepreneurship may be a form of empowerment for women who reject the existing employment structures by creating empowering alternative work settings. With these theoretical foundations in place, I next describe women entrepreneurs within the United States, including “push” and “pull” factors that impel women to start their own businesses and the unique struggles women who are entrepreneurs may face. I also review literature on the barriers and growth disparities for women who are entrepreneurs and the feminist critique of prior research on women who are entrepreneurs. Finally, in order to understand the geographic context of study participants, I review a few factors that may relate to
the experience of women entrepreneurs in Chicago. This review culminates in my research questions focused on the lived experiences of women who are entrepreneurs and how entrepreneurship may serve as a form of empowerment for women.

**Entrepreneurship**

To lay the foundation for the current study on women who are entrepreneurs, I will first give a brief overview of entrepreneurship in the United States. I will define entrepreneurship, describe basic demographics of entrepreneurs in the United States, characteristics of entrepreneurs, motivations for pursuing entrepreneurship, and impact of entrepreneurship on family dynamics. This is not intended to be an exhaustive examination of entrepreneurship, but rather a brief overview to give context for the rationale, research questions, and participants in the current study. After this section I will then add to this foundation by exploring the theoretical foundations of feminism, sexism, and empowerment, which are also central to the current study.

**Definition of Entrepreneurship and Demographics in the United States**

Defining entrepreneurship can be problematic (Ahmetoglu, Leutner, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011; Busenitz et al., 2003). Though scholars agree it is the creation of a business, this definition fails to capture the full scope of the entrepreneurial experience (Ahmetoglu, Leutner, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011; McKenzie et al., 2007). Being an entrepreneur includes recognition and exploitation of opportunities, innovation, and value creation (Ahmetoglu, Leutner, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011; Kuratko, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2007). In other
words, entrepreneurs are individuals who are willing to take risks to innovate and create businesses (Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009; Hanson, 2009).

As of 2014, there were approximately 28 million entrepreneurs (Buchanan, 2016; SBA, 2014) and U.S. small businesses (defined by SBA as under 500 employees for most manufacturing and mining industries and $7.5 million in average annual receipts for many nonmanufacturing industries) employed about 56 million of the nation’s private workforce (SBA, 2014; SBA, 2016). In 2013, 11.4% of men and 7.2% of women were self-employed (ACS, 2013), though given the definition of entrepreneurship above, not all these people may be considered entrepreneurs, as some may have purchased or inherited pre-existing businesses or may not have innovated in their field. However, given the variability in defining entrepreneurship, it can be difficult to establish the exact number of entrepreneurs in the U.S., as distinct from those who could be defined as small business owners rather than entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurs can be divided into novice, serial, and portfolio entrepreneurs. The novice entrepreneur (i.e., entrepreneur starting their first business) may become a serial entrepreneur or may return to formal employment. The portfolio entrepreneur is one who owns part or all of two or more businesses (Westhead, Ucbasaran, Wright, & Binks, 2005). Serial entrepreneurs are characterized by repeated entrepreneurship ventures and account for approximately a quarter of transitions from formal employment into entrepreneurship (Hyytinen & Ilmakunnas, 2007). A person currently in formal work who was once an entrepreneur is more likely to aspire to entrepreneurship
and leave formal work than someone who was never an entrepreneur (Hyytinen & Ilmakunnas, 2007). Interestingly, serial entrepreneurs can also motivate their coworkers to consider entrepreneurship; this effect is strongest for those coworkers who have had less exposure to entrepreneurship through their own life experiences (Nanda & Sorensen, 2010). The decision to become an entrepreneur is influenced by personal, family, and contextual factors (Mueller & Conway Dato-On, 2007).

**Entrepreneur Characteristics and Predictors for Becoming an Entrepreneur**

**Personal characteristics.** Entrepreneurship research has found that entrepreneurs may share certain psychological characteristics (Frese & Gielnik, 2014). For example, when comparing entrepreneurs and managers on the five-factor model of personality, Zhao and Seibert (2006) found entrepreneurs scored higher on Conscientiousness (i.e., degree of organization, persistence, and hard work) and Openness to Experience (i.e., intellectual curiosity and seeking of novel experiences). They scored lower on Neuroticism (i.e., indicating higher levels of adjustment and emotional stability) and lower on Agreeableness (i.e., interpersonal orientation associated with trust, altruism, and gullibility), but showed no difference on Extraversion (interpersonal assertiveness, enthusiasm, and energy). In other words, they display traits of hard work and persistence, are more open to new experiences, tend to be emotionally stable, and are less trusting and less agreeable in interpersonal relationships. Entrepreneurs also display a greater risk propensity, stress tolerance, need for autonomy, and internal locus of control (Rauch & Frese, 2007).
Additionally, entrepreneurs may show preference for variety in their work and are less likely to specialize in one area than those employed by others, which is a benefit to them in hiring and managing employees in different roles in their company (Astebro & Thompson, 2011). The Jack-of-All-Trades (JAT) theory proposes that individuals who are innately well-versed in a variety of fields are more likely to become entrepreneurs (Lazear, 2005), though there is debate over whether a mixed skill set is a precursor to entrepreneurship or the result (Silva, 2007). Regardless, the willingness to take on a career that requires skill acquisition in a range of topics beyond one’s area of expertise is a valuable trait for entrepreneurs and may set them apart from other types of workers.

**Family and early life experiences.** The decision to become an entrepreneur is also impacted by early life experiences and family. A longitudinal study (Schoon & Duckworth, 2012) found becoming an entrepreneur was associated with social skills and entrepreneurial intentions expressed by the age of 16. For women, becoming an entrepreneur was impacted by the socioeconomic status of their families, which the authors of the study theorized was due to structural disadvantages in society that made it more difficult for women to secure start-up capital than men and necessitated family monetary assistance. For men, becoming an entrepreneur was predicted by having a self-employed father (Schoon & Duckworth, 2012). Additionally, a study looking at the adult children of self-employed parents, found genetics and parenting practices during childhood had strong effects on a person’s propensity towards entrepreneurship, and
reinforcement of work values and vocational interests during adolescence had moderate effects (Aldrich & Kim, 2007).

Family support, even when the family is not directly involved in the business, contributes to the decision to start a business and increases how prepared entrepreneurs are in advance of starting their company (Chang, Memili, Chrisman, Kellermanns, & Chua, 2009). Family support is particularly important in economically disadvantaged areas and family firms make up a significant proportion of new businesses in these geographic areas (Chua, Chrisman, & Chang, 2004). Additionally, exposure to family members who are entrepreneurs is associated with intent to become an entrepreneur (Carr & Sequeira, 2006).

**Motivations for becoming an entrepreneur.** Entrepreneurs start businesses for a variety of reasons. Some may start a business out the need to generate income in a slack labor market, as indicated by studies that have found that entrepreneurship increased during the “Great Recession” that began in 2007 in the U.S., with greater numbers of new businesses being created when labor markets were harder hit (Farley, 2013). Also, some may start businesses because of personal motivations for entrepreneurship such as need for autonomy, need for challenges and self-actualization, financial gain, and desire for control or growth (Bann, 2009; Carland et al., 1995; Cassar, 2007). The motivation for starting a company shapes the growth and trajectory of the business, with those who cite financial gain as a motivator tend to have greater growth in their companies and those who cite independence as the main motivator have lower rates of growth (Cassar, 2007). Some are also motivated by the desire to innovate or effect
change in their field. A few scholars postulate that individuals with higher innovation orientation may be more likely to become frustrated with work environments with unfavorable innovation climate or lack of excellence, which may motivate them to leave formal work and start their own company (Lee, Wong, Foo, & Leung, 2011).

**Entrepreneurship and Family Relationships**

Entrepreneurship offers unique challenges and rewards, such as increased time, economic benefits, and emotional investment in the business, all of which may impact family life. The degree to which the romantic partners of entrepreneurs are involved in their business varies, but a recent study by the Small Business Association (2013) found that an increasing number of spouses/partners are starting businesses together. Liang and Dunn (2013) found the majority of entrepreneurs, regardless of gender, were happier and financially better off and rated their marital satisfaction as either improved or unchanged by starting a new company (whether or not they started the company with their spouse or involved them in the business). However, other studies have found entrepreneurs report challenges in balancing family and business and that emotional stress, lack of quality time, and incompatible expectations create stress in the marriages of entrepreneurs (Liang, 2002).

The impact of entrepreneurship on family dynamics may be different for men and women, based on the role they fulfill in the family. Due to women often occupying the role of primary caregiver in the family (see gender role ideology section), they may be more likely to struggle with balancing work and family
responsibilities and may face greater conflict between work and family roles than male entrepreneurs (Noor, 2004; Welter, 2004). This conflict can have a negative effect on the well-being of the women and the growth of their companies (Hammer et al., 2004). Women with high growth ambitions for their business may benefit from strategies such as sharing domestic duties with family or hiring help (Shelton, 2006). The success of such strategies depends on the willingness and ability of their family and likely will change family dynamics if the woman has been the primary caregiver in the family.

Though not an exhaustive review of entrepreneurship literature, this brief review lays a foundation for the current study of entrepreneurship as a form of empowerment for women. However, before turning to the current study, it is important to add several more layers to this foundation to describe other important factors that inform the rationale for the study and the experiences of the participants. The participants exist within a larger cultural and historical context. The policies, rights, and cultural gender norms and expectations that impact participants all exist in one brief point in time along a historical continuum. Given that participants cite gendered experiences in their narratives, as well as incidents of sexism and their identification with feminist values, a brief historical overview is helpful in situating their experiences in a larger historical context. In addition to this historical overview, I will also briefly describe the theoretical underpinnings of sexism and gender role ideology, as well as define some terms related to the theories that arise in the study. I will then turn to an overview of
empowerment theory and to defining relevant concepts and terms that are central to this study.

**Theoretical Foundations: Feminism, Sexism, Policy, and Empowerment**

**Brief History of Feminism**

The feminist movement in the U.S. is often described as taking place in three “waves,” though the actual beginning and end of these waves is contested by historians and scholars (Byers & Crocker, 2012; Kinser, 2004). The ideals of feminism existed before the First Wave, but were organized into an identifiable movement in the mid-1800s (Kinser, 2004). African American women were fighting for women’s rights within the abolitionist movement prior to the First Wave and First Nation American women embodied many of the ideals of the feminist movement long before this time (Kinser, 2004). The Women’s Rights Movement in the United States began in the 1840’s with suffragettes fighting for equality for women, including the right to vote (Byers & Crocker, 2012; Lorber, 2010). After winning the right to vote, the movement took on other challenges, such as access to birth control and the establishment of the Women’s Bureau of Labor, which championed employment opportunities, and lobbied for safety from workplace abuse and unsafe conditions (Eisenberg & Ruthsdotter, 1998). World War II and the return of soldiers to civilian life ushered in an era of celebrating the domestic sphere and the housewife for middle class Americans. At that time the media proclaimed the death of the feminism and celebrated the suburban housewife (NOW.org, 2011).
The second wave of the feminist movement began in the 1960s and ended approximately in the 1990s (Kinser, 2004). As in the First Wave, feminism was intertwined with the greater civil rights movement in the United States at the time. During this wave, women identified their fight as being against patriarchy, the predominant social structure where families and society are controlled by men and where rights, name, wealth, and privilege are passed down through fathers, preventing equal opportunities for women (Byers & Crocker, 2012). In 1963, the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* challenged the post-World War II celebration of the suburban housewife and affirmed women’s sense of boredom and longing for more (Kinser, 2004).

Feminists in the 1970s and 1980s worked on increasing women’s legal and workplace rights, such as fighting for legislation to protect women from workplace sexual harassment (Lorber, 2010). In the 1990s, there was a rise in theoretical orientations (e.g., constructionist, postmodern, and queer theories) questioning the duality of gender and sexuality and seeking a better understanding of the experiences of women of color (Lorber, 2010). There is debate over when the Second Wave ended and the Third began, with leaders such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Cherrie Moraga grounded in the Second Wave but calling for a new subjectivity in the feminist voice (Kinser, 2004). Feminists in the Third Wave consisted of women who had been raised with the rights earlier generations of feminists had fought to achieve, such as the right to vote, own property, and have credit cards and bank accounts (Lorber, 2010). The feminists of the Second and Third Wave interact and, at times, conflict over the concept of gender, the
younger generation’s sense of entitlement over the rights the older generation fought to win, and how to continue to push the feminist movement forward to continue work towards gender equality (Friedlin, 2002; Kinser, 2004).

Much of the work of the Feminist Movement has been to fight for equality in political, professional, and domestic spheres. As discussed more below in the public policy section, policies that impact entrepreneurs and their businesses were often the result of feminists’ political advocacy. This interweaving of feminism’s focus on creating gender equality in the workplace prompted the question in this study as to how participants may (or may not) identify as a feminist or with the lager feminist movement. This is discussed more in terms of how entrepreneurship may impact identity. Now, I will define relevant terms related to feminism and sexism and describe some of the theoretical underpinnings of sexism, particularly how it relates to employment.

**Defining Key Terms Related to Feminism and Sexism**

**Sexism.** Bearman, Korobov, and Thorne define *sexism* as “the systematic inequitable treatment of girls and women by men and by the society as a whole” (2009, p. 11). Sexism ranges from violently hostile acts against women to subtler acts of condescension, dismissal, and intimidation (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Sexism is a form of oppression based on gender. This form of oppression is similar to other forms of oppression in that it constrains behavior and limits resources, but there is one major exception: most men rely on women for reproduction and intimacy. This creates a dynamic where
men need a level of buy-in from women to this system that could not be achieved with only open hostility.

Therefore, in order to explain the complicated nature of sexism, Glick and Fiske (1996) proposed a model of ambivalent sexism where sexism is divided into two positively correlated components: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism.

Hostile sexism includes overt and clearly antagonistic acts and attitudes towards women and is more likely to be endorsed by men than women. Benevolent sexism is the assertion that women are pure and helpless creatures in need of men for guidance, support, and protection (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Benevolent sexism is particularly insidious and is endorsed by both men and women. Benevolent sexism has many detrimental impacts on women, such as acceptance of sexual harassment (Fiske & Glick, 1995) and the acceptance of gender-based behavior restrictions or double standards based on gender (Viki, Abrams, & Hutchison, 2003). Benevolently sexist comments may impact women’s performance in academia and the workplace and has been shown to increase self-doubt and feelings of incompetence (Darenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007; Dumont, Sarlet, & Dardenne, 2010). Sexism can also be internalized by women (i.e., internalized sexism) who then enact sexist attitudes and behaviors upon themselves or other women (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Bearman et al., 2009; Becker & Wagner, 2009). This internalized sexism may limit a woman’s sense of what she is capable of pursuing or achieving and may limit her activities to those prescribed as women’s tasks (Bearman et al., 2009). This internalization of sexist beliefs
may create hostility between women in work environments or otherwise negatively impact the working relationships between women.

**Gender role ideology and norms.** Gender role ideology is one’s understanding of what gender prescribes in the way of roles, characteristics, and place in society. Stereotypes about gender are rarely teased apart from sex, and these two terms are often confused, but there is a distinction between sex (biology, anatomy, hormones, and physiology) and gender (constructed through social, cultural, and psychological processes) (Ahl, 2006; Gupta, Turban, Wasti, & Sikdar, 2009). “Traditional” and “egalitarian,” sometimes referred to conservative and liberal, describe the two opposing viewpoints on gender roles that can be conceptualized as being on opposite ends of a continuum. Traditional gender role ideology can be described as a complementarian view (also called “complementary”) where men are the earners because they are naturally competent, assertive, independent, and ambitious, but cold. Women are the caregivers because they are naturally warm, sociable, interdependent, and relational, yet incompetent and weak (Colaner & Giles, 2007; Jost & Kay, 2005). In this view, men and women also complement one another in the roles they fulfill; domestic duties and childcare are women’s work and the role of financial provider, leader, and protector are men’s duties (Livingston & Judge, 2008). In contrast, egalitarian gender role ideology describes a viewpoint that places men and women in equal roles regarding household labor division, childrearing, and work outside the home, and neither gender is seen as possessing a prescribed set of gender-related characteristics (Livingston & Judge, 2008). Gender role
ideology, therefore, can impact expectations of how a woman prioritizes her work and domestic life. For example, if the complementarian view is espoused, a woman is best suited for domestic duties and childcare and may be discouraged from investing significant time into building a career or asking a partner to assume a greater share of childcare responsibilities.

Exposure to sexism and internalizing of sexist beliefs can impact a woman’s career choices both by decreasing her sense of competence in male-dominated fields or entrepreneurship. For example, Exposito, Herrera, Moya, and Glick (2010) found that endorsing benevolent sexism positively correlated with a woman’s belief that a husband would be threatened by his wife’s success at work. Also, nontraditional women may suffer from a “backlash effect,” which Rudman (1998) described as the negative evaluation and treatment of women who violate the prescribed gender roles (Rudman & Glick, 2001), including showing ambition, competitiveness, or other “masculine” characteristics in the workplace. This negative reaction to stepping outside of prescribed gender roles may be one way that women are subtly directed away from traditionally masculine career fields.

Gender role ideology also has different implications for men and women. For example, Judge and Livingston (2008) found that traditional gender role ideology in men was positively related to high earnings, but in women was negatively related to high earnings; they suggested traditional women may not see themselves as a breadwinner and choose fields that pay less, therefore creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of low earnings. Even in similar positions, women face a
pay gap and make less than men with similar education and experience levels (Weiler & Bernasek, 2001). The emphasis on women as caregiver has economic implications and, compared to White men, White women make 77 cents to the dollar made by men; African American women make 61.9%, and Latina/Hispanic make 52.9% (Drago & Williams, 2010). Also, 70% of single older women in the U.S. will experience asset insecurity and outlive their economic assets and run out of means to support themselves as seniors (Brandwein, 2012). Therefore, gender role ideology has an impact on multiple domains of life and implications on career choice, role expectations, and earnings. Gender role ideology also has implications for workplace culture, as I will next describe.

**Sexism and the gendered nature of the workplace.** The workplace is a gendered environment where traditional gender role ideology and sexism intersect with women’s career options, advancement potential, and the general work environment may be colored by sexist attitudes and stereotypes related to gender. The division of men and women into different spheres of work (i.e., domestic for women and outside the home for men) was not always present and, prior to the Industrial Revolution, work and family both took place primarily in the home and the division between the two was undefined (Reskin & Padavic, 1994). Once work moved into factories and was wage paid, a sharp division developed, with women assigned the unpaid or low-paid, and often undervalued, domestic duties and men conducting the paid labor (Acker, 2006; Bourne & Calás, 2013). Though women have steadily increased their participation in wage labor outside the home (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010), they still face sexist attitudes
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(Rudman & Glick, 2001), expectations that they be the primary caregiver in the home (Gill & Ganesh, 2007), limitations on advancement to high level managerial positions (Colaner & Giles, 2007), and segregation into lower paying fields (England, Allison, & Wu, 2007).

For example, women and men tend to be segregated into different fields, with women pooled in service industries, social sciences, and other traditionally feminine (lower-paying) fields and men crowded into the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) (higher-paying), traditionally masculine fields (American Association of University Women, 2010; England, Allison, & Wu, 2007). When women try to break into traditionally masculine fields, they are often met with a “chilly climate” where they are subtly or not-so-subtlety discouraged (Sadker & Sadker, 1992). Moreover, women who are successful in fields dominated by men may be penalized by other women who describe these successful women as “hostile” or “pushy” (Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearns, 2008). With all these obstacles it is not surprising that women account for only 16% of partners in law firms and only 8 companies in the Fortune 500 have women C.E.O.s (Colaner & Giles, 2007).

However, there is a constant evolution in the way society views work and the role each gender plays in the earner-caregiver arrangement that couples with children navigate, so there is potential for these roles and norms to shift. Traditionally in the United States, women were considered the primary caregivers and men were the earners, or breadwinners. Since the 1960s women have increasingly entered formal work settings and now make up almost half of the
labor force (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). Unfortunately, men have not
tended to take on a proportionate share of caregiving and domestic duties, leaving
women working outside the home during the day and handling domestic
responsibilities on evenings and weekends, dubbed the “second shift” (Hochschild
& Machung, 1989). This disproportionate burden on the shoulders of women has
impacted women’s ability to compete and succeed in the workforce and may
impact a woman entrepreneur’s business growth. Women are often expected to
make work compromises for children and husband’s career in a way that men are
not (Maume, 2006). This arrangement is not optimal for many men, who also
suffer from gender stereotypes defining them as ill-suited to be caregivers, placing
the bulk of financial responsibility on them, and undervaluing men whom choose
to take paternity leave or stay at home with their children (Rudman & Mescher,
2013). In fact, 95% of men in the U.S. wish they had more time with their
children (Gornick & Meyers, 2008).

**Barriers, disparities, and discrimination in the workplace.** Though
women now make up half of the workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010),
they are still underrepresented in upper management positions (Colaner & Giles,
2007) which is, in part, the result of systemic barriers and discrimination faced by
women in the workplace; all of which can serve as impetus for a woman to leave
a company to start her own company. The former FCC commissioner, Susan
Ness stated “With a few exceptions, we have not moved beyond tokenism in the
number of women in top leadership positions” (Mediaweek, 2002). Women cite
lack of mentoring, lack of managerial experience, exclusion from informal
networks and gender stereotypes as barriers to advancement to top management positions (Morris, et al., 2006). Women list personal and family responsibilities as the top reasons for not pursuing top management (Morris, et al., 2006). Women may not be rejecting managerial positions per se, but rather rejecting the current way that these positions are represented and constructed. Women who had left senior management positions cited masculine work culture as a reason for finding another position (Liff & Ward, 2001). If women do choose to enter a male dominated field and are successful in that field, Parks-Stamm, Heilman, and Hearns (2008) found that other women penalize them by describing them as “hostile” or “pushy.” They posited that successful women elicit social comparison processes that can threaten other women’s self-perceived competence and drive competition between women in and out of the workplace.

The lack of flexibility in formal work, deficits in childcare support, and gendered expectations of women as caregivers, places working mothers in difficult circumstances where they are pulled in multiple directions with little support. Entrepreneurship is seen by many women as an alternative option to inflexible work settings that demand sacrifices of either position or family time (Alstete, 2003; Maume, 2006). However, the decision to become an entrepreneur and one’s success in entrepreneurship are not free from the impact of gender role ideology.

**Gender role ideology and entrepreneurship.** Recently, researchers have moved beyond simple differences between men and women to instead focus on other aspects of gender, such as gender role ideology and masculinity/femininity,
to better understand how multiple factors may shape outcomes related to entrepreneurship. For example, gender role ideology and stereotypes about gender have been shown to impact the choice to become an entrepreneur (Gupta, Turban, Wasti, & Sikdar, 2009). Identification with stereotypical male characteristics (e.g., agentic qualities of independence, aggressiveness, autonomy, and courage), by either males or females, is correlated with higher entrepreneurial intentions, which is likely due to perceptions that entrepreneurs have characteristics similar to that of masculine gender-role stereotypes (Gupta, Turban, Wasti, & Sikdar, 2009). In other words, both genders identified entrepreneurs as having characteristics stereotypically associated with men and, based on their appraisal of their personal characteristics they were able to see themselves in that role or not. A study across 17 countries found women tended to perceive themselves and the entrepreneurial environment less favorably than men regardless of their motivation to become an entrepreneur (Langowitz & Minniti, 2007).

Additionally, research has found that the degree to which a person associates with traditional gender stereotypes mediates where they find satisfaction in their business, specifically masculinity mediates the relationship between sex and preferences for status-based satisfaction and femininity mediates relationships between sex and preferences for career satisfaction through employee relationship and contribution to society (Eddleston & Powell, 2006). In other words, those of either gender who possess more stereotypically masculine traits are more likely to find satisfaction through financial success, attaining
status, and higher growth of their business, while those who report more feminine characteristics are more likely to seek work satisfaction through relationships and contribution. This has implications for the size and growth of companies because those individuals with more feminine characteristics, most likely women, may be less likely to be high-growth-oriented entrepreneurs (i.e., having the intention of creating a company with sales growth that exceeds the average growth rate for the industry) (Gundry & Welsch, 2001; Shelton, 2006).

Gender role ideology also impacts the sense of self-efficacy one feels when considering a career as an entrepreneur. Self-efficacy is a psychological state of possessing self-confidence in performing a task and has been cited as one possible difference between those who become entrepreneurs and those that do not (Mueller & Conway Dato-On, 2007). Studies have found that Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE) was equal between genders, when accounting for gender role ideology; however, ESE for creating a new business was higher among those who had a stereotypical masculine orientation versus feminine orientation, which is more likely to be held by men than women; therefore, gender itself was not found to impact self-efficacy, but gender role orientation was (Mueller & Conway Dato-On, 2007; Sequeira et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2005). This highlights the importance of teasing apart gender role ideology from biological sex, when considering gender differences in entrepreneurship. As we have seen, gender role ideology has implications on a wide range of domains and impacts the expectations for roles men and women should fulfill. Another contextual factor influencing women who are entrepreneurs is public policy. As gender role
ideology in the U.S. has evolved and women have flooded into the workforce, policy has also evolved to reflect changing gender norms in U.S. culture. Also, participants noted policies aimed at women and at small business owners, therefore I will next give a brief historical overview of some of the relevant policies in the U.S.

**Women in Context of Public Policy: Brief History of Relevant Public Policy in the U.S.**

As I noted above, one foci of the Women’s Movement has been to fight for changes in public policy aimed at workplace discrimination and harassment. As women’s numbers have increased in the workforce, policies have evolved. Participants noted various policies and their impact on them as entrepreneurs, and even those who did not explicitly name policies are likely impacted in some way, even indirectly. Therefore, I will give a brief overview of policy shifts in the United States related to entrepreneurs and women in the workforce. Please note that because many of the policies do not delineate between women-owned businesses (which may include inherited or purchased businesses) and women who are specifically entrepreneurs (which as I mentioned above, can have different definitions), I will primarily use the term women-owned businesses. Women who are entrepreneurs can benefit from policies that are aimed at entrepreneurs and small businesses in general as well as specific policies aimed at fostering growth of minority or women-owned businesses or entrepreneurs.

In recognition of the economic importance of small businesses to the U.S. economy, the Small Business Administration was formed in 1953 with the
mission to foster growth of small businesses through programs and policies (Small Business Administration, 2015a). As described below, in the decades that followed lawmakers enacted a range of policies aimed at growing small businesses, with an increasing focus on women and minority owned businesses (The National Women’s Business Council, 2004).

With the increase in educational opportunities, the feminist movement, and shifts away from gender norms that dictated women stay in the home, there was an increase in public policies targeting economic equality. In 1961, President Kennedy established the Commission on the Status of Women and later Executive Order 10925, which did not specifically mention women but impacted them by setting non-discrimination standards for federal contracting. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act, particularly Title VII, barred employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. In 1965, in Executive Order 11246, women and veterans were added to Equal Employment Opportunity within the context of Affirmative Action (EEOC.gov, 2015a). In 1968, the Consumer Credit Protection Act prohibited discrimination based on sex or marital status in the extending of credit, and included provisions of the Truth in Lending Act that required disclosure of key terms and all costs of loans (FDIC.gov, 2014).

The 1970s ushered in an era of policy-making directed specifically at women. In 1972, Title IX of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act mandated equal treatment of women by educational institutions receiving federal funds (EEOC.gov, 2015b). In 1974, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act was passed and guaranteed married women the right to credit in their own names, which greatly
improved women business owners’ access to credit. In 1972, only 4.6 percent of small businesses were owned by women. In 1975, a growing group of women business owners from the Washington DC area, who had begun informally meeting to discuss issues impacting them, formally organized as the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO), an organization that became a driver behind some of the most important policies of the next two decades benefiting women-owned businesses (The National Women’s Business Council, 2004). In 1977, gender was added to the Business Census and the government began officially tracking the growth of women-owned businesses. In 1978, P.L. 95-507 made major revisions to the Small Business Act by establishing Preferential Procurement Goals (affirmative action) for participation by small businesses, small disadvantaged firms, and small women-owned businesses in Federal contracting programs (Small Business Administration, 2006). In 1978, President Carter’s established the Interagency Task Force on Women’s Business Ownership and signed Executive Order 12138, creating the National Women’s Business Enterprise Policy, the Interagency Committee on Women’s Business Enterprise, and the Office of Women’s Business Ownership (OWBO) at the Small Business Administration (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). The Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA) of 1978 was an amendment to the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and constitutes discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions as unlawful sex discrimination under Title VII (EEOC, 2016). The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, was signed by President Obama on January 29, 2009, to restore some of protection against pay
discrimination that had been lost through the Supreme Court decision in 2007 that limited the amount of time that an employee had to challenge ongoing pay discrimination (NWLC, 2013).

Despite the efforts made by policy makers in prior decades, by the 1980s, women-owned businesses were still not given the national attention their growing numbers might warrant. Partly, this may have been because their numbers were underestimated because the U.S. Census only counted sole proprietorships and not majority-owned businesses as women-owned. NAWBO was still a small organization, with only 2,500 members in 1986, but they championed many policies supporting women business owners (National Association of Women Business Owners, 2014). In 1988, the Women’s Business Ownership Act (HR 5050) was passed, which had been crafted in part by NAWBO in an effort to bring national attention to the importance of women-owned businesses to the economy (Library of Congress, 2015). The bill amended the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974 to include business loans and made it unlawful to ask about an applicant’s marital status. It expanded the census criteria for a woman-owned business from only sole ownership to include businesses owned over 51% by a woman, which improved data on the actual number of businesses. It also established the National Women’s Business Council (NWBC) as a bi-partisan Federal advisory council to make independent policy recommendations to the President, Congress and the U.S. Small Business Administration on economic issues related to women business owners (Library of Congress, 2015).
In 1992, a research study published by the National Foundation for Women Business Owners (now the Center for Women’s Business, an affiliate with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce) showed that women-owned businesses employed more people than the Fortune 500 companies, which helped women-owned businesses gain recognition as an important part of the U.S. economy (The National Women’s Business Council, 2004). However, even at this time, women cited lack of access to funding as their number one concern (Center for Women’s Business Research, 1996).

In 1994, The Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act, established a goal of 5% for contracts to women-owned small businesses (WOSBs) for each federal agency. The federal government defines a women-owned small businesses as a company that is at least 51 percent owned by one or more women, or if publicly owned, at least 51 percent of the stock is owned by one or more women, and whose management is controlled by one or more women (Small Business Administration, 2015b). Since the federal government enacted this goal, state and local governments as well as many private sector corporations have also adopted similar plans. These “set aside” programs are aimed at leveling the playing field for women and minority owned businesses, particularly in fields that are traditionally male dominated and have a legacy of formal and informal networks which exclude women (Zwahlen, 2010).

There are different types of certification that a woman can seek. In the private sector, the National Women Business Owners Corporation (NWBOC) and the Women’s Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) both offer a
Women’s Business Enterprise (WBE) certification in addition to the WOSB certification. The WBE designation is accepted by most private companies and some municipalities and the WOSB certification is required to participate in federal programs (Accion, 2014). The process of becoming certified is time-consuming and challenging, in part due to a stringent application process to weed out male-owned businesses fraudulently attempting to pass as women-owned using the names of wives or other women to get benefits of being a WBE or WOSB (OIG, 2016). The benefit of receiving such certification is that one is then eligible for these set aside types of contracts from government agencies and corporations.

In summary, sexism is a form of gender-based oppression that impacts women in multiple domains of life and impacts women within the workplace, whether it be formal work or entrepreneurship. The Women’s Movement (also including the Feminist Movement) has been working to change public policy and societal norms related to gender to increase equality between genders and increase opportunities for women. Gender role ideology is a set of beliefs which prescribes roles and duties for individuals based on their gender or sex. Entrepreneurship is often seen as being more in line with a masculine identity and individuals who identify with the more masculine-prescribed traits are more likely to pursue it, regardless of their sex. Public policy has been enacted to support small business owners and women in the workplace. The current study’s participants exist within this larger context and may be influenced by these different factors.
In this study, I examine entrepreneurship as a way women can create empowering settings for themselves and others by stepping outside of the formal work world to create their own businesses, which may serve as potentially empowering settings for the owner and employees (i.e., increased opportunity, access to financial resources, control over personal and employment options, increased sense of personal power and directing these benefits to other women). Within this study, the broad understanding of empowerment incorporates a focus on psychological empowerment, actual control over resources, and generativity in promoting empowerment in other women. Therefore, I will now give an overview of empowerment theory to orient the reader to the terms and concepts which arise in this study, including aspects of empowerment, feminist critiques of the dominant empowerment theories, and how entrepreneurship has the potential to serve as an empowering alternative setting for women within the work world.

**Empowerment as a Framework to Understand Women’s Entrepreneurship in the Context of Sexism and Discrimination**

The term *empowerment* has been used in a variety of contexts with different meanings (Swift & Levin, 1987). Generally, empowerment has been defined as the process by which people gain control over valued events and resources of importance to an individual or group (Fawcett et al., 1994; Rappaport, 1981). As discussed in more depth below, a key distinction in the empowerment literature is whether the focus is on one’s psychological sense of empowerment (i.e., psychological empowerment) or on the concrete and tangible resources that are obtained. In the current study, I examine both one’s
psychological sense of empowerment and actual increase in resources to better understand how both components operate for women who are entrepreneurs. Specifically, in the current study I define empowerment as access to financial resources, control over personal and employment options, increased sense of personal power, and directing these benefits to other women. However, taking into account the feminist critiques of the dominant definitions of empowerment noted below, I did not define empowerment for participants, but rather asked broad questions, leaving the interpretation to the participant. In order to build my rationale for this understanding of empowerment, I now review some key theories and critiques from the empowerment and feminist literatures.

**Key empowerment theories.** Empowerment is widely used in a variety of social science disciplines, such as management, political theory, social work, education, women’s studies, sociology, and community psychology (Hur, 2006; Lincoln, Travers, Ackers, & Wilkenson, 2002). One origin of empowerment theory is the work of Brazilian humanitarian Freire (1973) who advocated for liberating oppressed people through education (Hur, 2006). *Oppression* is domination whereby the oppressed suffer deprivation, exclusion, discrimination, exploitation, or violence (Prilleltensky, 2008). Oppression entails a state of asymmetric power relations where the dominating persons or groups exercise their power by the process of restricting access to material resources and imparting to the subordinated persons or groups self-deprecating views about themselves (Prilleltensky, 2008). Based on this definition, women have suffered oppression in various forms, including economic oppression, which can be used
to limit their power in society. In the last century, circumstances have changed for the better (e.g., women can now own property, have credit cards, and vote) but women are still paid less than men (Weiler & Bernasek, 2001), are given less access to business financing (Winn, 2005), and are severely underrepresented in high level management positions (Colaner & Giles, 2007).

For oppressed groups, empowerment entails both freedom from oppressive external forces, such as gender discrimination in the workforce, and freedom to pursue goals and resources (Fromm, 1965; Prilleltensky, 2008) and ultimately involves dismantling oppressive structures through collective action (Moane, 2003). However, when oppression such as sexism is internalized, individuals may not see the external factors such as discrimination and instead attribute a lack of success to their own personal deficits (Prilleltensky, 2008). For women who are entrepreneurs this internalized oppression may take the form of blaming oneself for limited business growth rather than seeing the larger systemic forces of discrimination at work. Living in unjust and oppressive circumstances can lead to psychological processes, such as feelings of helplessness, upward comparisons, and self-blame that negatively impact personal wellness (Prilleltensky, 2012). For example, working women who are subjected to benevolent sexist comments have decreased work performance and increased self-doubt and feelings of incompetence (Dardenne, Dumont, & Bollier, 2007; Dumont, Sarlet, & Dardenne, 2010).

Another important empowerment theorist, community psychologist Julian Rappaport (1981), describes empowerment as the possibility for people to control
their own lives. This concept of empowerment implies that competencies already exist or can be developed within individuals and groups. Empowerment views people as whole human beings with capabilities either existing or awaiting development whereby people can meet their own needs and wants. Rappaport encourages community psychologists to look to individuals who are handling their own problems and seek ways to extend this to others, rather than imposing artificial programs of change. By examining how women are using entrepreneurship as a means to create alternate work settings where they can flourish and have control over their lives, perhaps we can do as Rappaport suggests and extend these solutions to a broader community of women.

Aspects of empowerment: Psychological, obtaining resources, and contextual. As noted earlier, empowerment theorists often focus on the psychological aspects of empowerment rather than if desired resources are actually obtained (Riger, 1993). For example, individual empowerment (i.e. psychological empowerment) has been defined as intrapersonal, interpersonal, and behavioral components related to the person’s beliefs about their competence and ability to alter and exert control over circumstances (Zimmerman, 2000). Personality and cognitive factors relate to psychological empowerment such as locus of control (Rotter, 1966), self-confidence (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989). Self-determination is often reported in the literature as the most crucial individual component to empowerment (Hur, 2006; Sprague & Hayes, 2000). Self-determination can be viewed in four dimensions as follows: constancy and perseverance, the courage to take risks, being proactive,
Entrepreneurship as empowerment and voicing one’s opinion (Boehm & Staples, 2004). It also is one’s sense of autonomy and control over how one does their work (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The goal of individual empowerment is to achieve a state of liberation where one has the power to impact life, community, and society (Hur, 2006). As a feminist researcher, Riger (1993) criticizes this focus on the sense of personal control, neglecting actual control, influence, or power. For many groups, including women, the sense of control can be an illusion that may keep them from seeking actual control and power in their lives.

Another consequence of only focusing on psychological empowerment is that context and the larger environment may be overlooked. For example, women may be seeking to achieve empowerment within a sexist society that erects multiple barriers to their success. Thus, it is helpful to understand women within their family, community, and cultural context in order to understand their process of empowerment. Along these lines, scholars have proposed a contextual-behavioral model of empowerment that considers the dimensions of the person or group, the environment, and the level of empowerment (Fawcett, 1994). This model is transactional (Horowitz, 1987; Sameroff, 1983) where environmental features affect individual actions and, in turn, the environment is influenced by the actions of the individuals and groups.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that empowerment is not static and may differ across domains. A woman may be empowered in one context such as in the family, but have little control over her workplace environment. In addition, empowerment may fluctuate across the life span (Fawcett et al., 1994;
Foster-Fishman et al., 1998). The average age when women in the U.S. start businesses is between 30-45 (Brush, 1992). Women in their 20s may not yet be experienced enough in their careers to have faced barriers such as discriminatory promotion practices or gender norms that negatively impact working mothers and therefore may not have the same impetus to create an alternative work setting for themselves. This process of empowerment may evolve for women through their lifespan as their family responsibilities and work aspirations evolve. Thus, it is important to understand the context and environment that surround women in their process of empowerment.

Focusing on psychological empowerment while neglecting greater systemic external barriers to empowerment can lead to the victim blaming that is often seen in the research conducted to understand lack of growth in women’s businesses (Carter, 2000). Also, neglecting systemic factors that impact empowerment downplays the influence of cultural attitudes on a woman’s personal beliefs and sense of identity. Systemic sexism and discrimination may impact women’s psychological empowerment through internalized oppression, causing some women to feel inferior and helpless to alter their circumstances, assuming personal blame rather than seeing structural oppressive factors (Moane, 2003). Friere (1973) says that an individual must develop critical awareness about the causes of undesirable social conditions, the possibilities of change, and the importance of acting to transform the world (Kieffer, 1984). Therefore, empowerment is not just the outcome of achieving more control over one’s life.
Entrepreneurship as empowerment (Rappaport, 1981), but is also an ongoing transactional process between the individual and systemic factors in the environment.

**Feminist critiques of empowerment.** Feminist scholars have critiqued dominant empowerment theories. As mentioned earlier, Riger (1993) argued that empowerment theorists focus too much on the *sense* of personal control, neglecting *actual* control influence, which can lead to blaming of women when they struggle in business and neglecting other factors that may impact their success. Additionally, Riger took issue with what she describes as a “zero-sum” definition of empowerment, where one group can gain power only at the expense of another group’s power. She argues this is a patriarchal approach of dominance and control rather than collaboration (Riger, 1993). She contends that empowerment is often viewed through an individualistic lens that can lead to competition amongst groups for resources and that empowerment values are often skewed to a more traditionally masculine value system of mastery, power, and control rather than traditionally feminine values of communion and cooperation. Indeed, studies have shown that women are less likely to use a “zero sum” approach in the workplace and, instead, frequently use collaborative managerial styles, which seeks to benefit individual employees as much as themselves or the corporation as a whole (Moore, Moore, & Moore, 2011). This mutually respectful attitude can be a source of empowerment to employees as well as the women who own the company.

bell hooks (2000) also criticizes the empowerment ideal of feminism that seeks to make women equal to men. She says this is a false goal because not all
men are equal, due to racial, economic, and class disparities. She believes the goal of feminism should be to eradicate the domination and elitism between all groups, not just between the genders. She contends that many middle-class White feminists reinforce the existing capitalistic, materialistic values of a patriarchal society by joining the existing structures without questioning them. She echoes Riger’s critiques of the focus on domination and control as a source of power and points out that women have been able to progress through the ranks of patriarchal structures if they are willing to support the status quo. hooks argues that power can be viewed not as domination but rather as strength, energy, and effective interaction that is collaborative rather than competitive. She states that women must reject the idea that they can obtain power through existing social structures and must seek new ways to achieve power and resources. This is consistent with entrepreneurship that is used by women to reject existing employment power structures to create new and empowering settings for the business owners and employees.

Taking this literature and feminist critique into account, in this study I broadly understand empowerment as increased opportunity, access to financial resources, control over personal and employment options, increased sense of personal power, and directing these benefits to other women. This broad understanding incorporates a focus on psychological empowerment, actual control over resources, and generativity in promoting empowerment in other women. Also, as discussed in the next section, I conceptualize women’s entrepreneurship as a way for women to create empowering settings (i.e., increased opportunity,
Entrepreneurship as empowerment can provide access to financial resources, control over personal and employment options, and increased sense of personal power for themselves and others by stepping outside of the male-dominated work world to create their own business, which serves as a potentially empowering setting for the owner and employees alike. This is now discussed to further compliment how entrepreneurship for women may be part of an empowering process.

**Entrepreneurship as creating empowering alternative settings.** Foster-Fishman (1998) states that empowering community settings consist of a group with strength-based goals, promotion of peer social support systems, and leaders that articulate vision, serve as role models, and socialize new leaders within the group. Maton (2008) describes empowering settings as having a belief system that inspires change, is strengths based, and focuses members beyond themselves. These settings have core activities that accomplish the mission of the setting and a relational environment that fosters social support, caring relationships, and a sense of community (Maton, 2008). These empowering settings may empower individuals, have a radiating influence in the community around them, and are involved in external organizational activities (Maton, 2008).

Traditional patriarchal business settings may not be based on peer support, democratic processes, and cooperative working environments, but rather take a more hierarchal, top-down managerial style, which can be disempowering, particularly for women whom are often concentrated in lower authority positions within companies (Winn, 2005). Women-owned businesses have potential to serve as empowering settings, particularly since scholars suggest women may be
more likely than men to be democratic in their businesses, value cooperation, and show respect to individuals in their organizations (Baughn, Chua, & Neupert, 2006; Eagly & Wood, 1991).

The need for the creation of alternative work settings may arise from a sense of a lack of empowering options in formal work structures. When society dichotomizes earner and caregiver roles it may force women to choose between being the caregiver, struggling to find legitimacy as the earner, or attempting to balance both domestic and employment responsibilities with limited institutional supports. With these difficult options, creating an alternative social arrangement for themselves and their families can be a promising possibility. Whether intentionally trying to alter the social norms of work for women or merely trying to find a means of survival, entrepreneurship is one way in which women may be able to work outside the existing gender norms in society.

In his book *The Creation of Settings and the Future Societies* (1972), Sarason asserted that alternative settings can be an effective means to create social change. As a community psychologist, he became frustrated with efforts to change existing organizations and proposed it was effective to just create new institutions. These alternative settings can meet needs not currently met in society, provide greater diversity of options, and be empowering for the people who are involved in them (Sarason, 1972). Additionally, alternative settings demonstrate a new social form that people can choose outside the established options (Reinharz, 1984). In community psychology literature, alternative settings are described as “radically different ways of perceiving, enacting, and
experiencing work, religion, leisure, therapy, and other basic relationships and life activities” (Kanter & Zuckner, 1973, p.173). Women who are entrepreneurs who have chosen to reject established employment structures and create new forms of employment may be creating alternative settings.

However, Sarason (1972) cautions that alternative settings face difficulties due to not having established structure and norms. Also, existing organizations often feel threatened by these new settings and undermine their growth efforts. Women who are entrepreneurs often struggle to gain legitimacy in the eyes of established businesses, particularly in male-dominate fields. Those creating alternative settings must also be aware of the political implications of challenging existing norms and structures. Rather than deny the impact of the surrounding cultural climate and backlash against them, those creating alternative settings need to be savvy in navigating these issues. Women who are entrepreneurs are not immune to discrimination and can suffer from lack of access to formal and informal networks and venture capital (Green et al., 1999). Some women seek to overcome resistance from “good old boy” networks by strengthening their women-based networks (Mattis, 2004) or working around opposition by starting their business with a partner who is a man (Godwin, Stevens, & Brenner, 2006).

There is a risk to creating alternative settings for social change because they can divert attention away from changing existing broken-structures. If alternative settings do not grow large enough to impact society on a larger scale, they may serve merely as a small solution that can be pointed to as a fix rather than taking on the larger systemic problems (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). In other
words, if a woman can easily leave a corporation to start her own business, women who are frustrated may choose to leave rather than fight for change. If women-owned companies do not grow large enough to challenge existing patriarchal companies, they may not affect as much systemic change. Another concern is that alternative settings often lose their uniqueness as they grow and operate within the greater social context (Sarason, 1972). As they grow larger, they often become more bureaucratic and adopt the norms of existing organizations in order to survive and thrive. Therefore, as with women in corporations, there can be pressure to “act like a man” and adapt to existing patriarchal norms. If, however, women-owned companies are able to maintain their founding values and still grow, they stand as a catalyst for society to change. They present an option to the status quo and they can serve as a source of empowerment, not just to the women who work in them, but also to society as a whole.

Women who are entrepreneurs may be creating alternative settings, which have the potential to create social change and to be empowering community settings. However, like other alternative settings, these companies may be met with resistance from existing social structures. If these women-owned ventures can grow large enough to create sustainable alternative forms of employment for women, they have the potential to prompt change within society as whole. Therefore, it is important to understand more about the experiences of women who are entrepreneurs, the challenges they face, and resources they need to succeed. Women may be influenced by the surrounding culture and the
availability of fulfilling formal work. Therefore, to situate the women in the current study within the larger geographic context, I will next overview the research on women who are entrepreneurs in the United States, some of the challenges and disparities they face, push and pull factors that motivate their choice to pursue entrepreneurship, and the feminist critique of prevailing research on entrepreneurship. Lastly, I will describe factors that may impact women who are entrepreneurs in Chicago, where the study participants were located.

**Women Who Are Entrepreneurs in the United States**

Before describing current entrepreneurs, I will first give a brief historical overview of the evolution of women in entrepreneurship in the U.S. This history is interwoven with that of the feminist movement outlined above due to many of the advancements of women in entrepreneurship related to general advancements of their rights in society. The National Women’s Business Council’s (2004) report on women-owned enterprises, cites three major eras of progress for entrepreneurs who are women: 1830-1880, The Industrial Revolution; the turn of the 20th Century with the growth of corporate America; and 1963 to the present, which they term “The Age of Entrepreneurial Women.” During the Industrial Revolution, every state enacted property rights bills, which allowed women to inherit property and maintain it after marriage, giving women more independence and capital for starting businesses. However, they remained limited by societal gender norms, which dictated they remain in the domestic sphere and limited their access to bank loans and business partnerships (The National Women’s Business Council, 2004).
The second era of progress was the turn of the 20th century until mid-century, when as women gained more access to higher education, property rights, and the right to vote, they began to fight for economic equality. The labor shortages during the World Wars also gave more women access to jobs that they were formerly excluded from, such as factory work and transportation, if at least for a brief time until the men returned from war. The Small Business Administration was also founded in 1953, as small businesses were recognized as a force for economic growth in the U.S. (The National Women’s Business Council, 2004).

The third era of progress is the early 1960s until the present, the so-called “Age of Entrepreneurial Women.” In 1972 women-owned businesses made up less than 5% of businesses in the U.S. By 1997, one out of every four U.S. workers was employed by a woman-owned business (Center for Women’s Business Research, 2001). The number of women who are entrepreneurs has steadily been rising since the 1970s and women now launch almost half of all businesses in the U.S.

The demographics of women who are entrepreneurs are similar to that of men: married, ages 30-45, and first born (Brush, 1992). In fact, entrepreneurs tend to be first born almost 70% of the time, which may be due to the fact that achievement motivation is higher among first born (Mancuso, 2004). Between 2002 and 2012, the number of women-owned businesses increased by 52 percent, with 928 new businesses every started every day and in 2012, women-owned businesses made up 40% of private owned companies (Messina, Gray, Lentz &
Bowles, 2016). New York has the highest number of women-owned businesses with more than double the second-place city, Los Angeles. Chicago has the third highest number with 123,632 in 2012 (Messina, Gray, Lentz & Bowles, 2016). Women owned businesses in the U.S. are also employing a larger percentage of workers than before; between 2002 and 2012, women-owned companies added more than 1.2 million jobs and $90 billion in payroll to the U.S. economy (Messina, Gray, Lentz & Bowles, 2016). In the U.S., women-owned businesses cut across race and SES, with women of color representing a substantial portion of women-entrepreneurs (National Women’s Business Counsel, 2012). In fact, Black women business owners make up a bigger proportion of businesses owned by Black individuals than White women’s proportion of White-owned business (National Women’s Business Counsel, 2012).

Few of the largest or most profitable companies in the U.S. are run or were started by a woman entrepreneur. In 2004, women owned 30% of all privately owned companies in the U.S. and has 50% share in another 18% of companies, but only received 5% of venture capital (Winn, 2005). Studies in the U.S. have found that avoiding the glass ceiling in corporate America may be a major contributing factor to women’s decisions to start their own businesses (Mattis, 2004). A study of women scientists found that avoiding the glass ceiling of large corporations and academia was the main motivator to launching their own business (Science, 1998). African American women may be one of the fastest growing segments of new small business owners because they often face both sexism and racism in the corporate world (Mattis, 2004).
Women in the U.S. start their own businesses for a variety of reasons, either due to dissatisfaction with aspects of the formal work environment, positive expectations for what entrepreneurship can offer them, or a combination of both. I will now describe some of the motivating factors that encourage women to pursue entrepreneurship.

**Why Women Become Entrepreneurs: Push and Pull Factors**

Women choose to start companies for a range of reasons, often categorized as “push” and “pull” factors. “Pull” factors entice women to start companies, like seeking challenges, more independence, and a desire to innovate (Buttner & Moore, 1997). “Push” factors drive women away from formal work and into starting their own business, like gender discrimination or lack of access to upper management positions (Moore, Moore, & Moore, 2011). For example, Mattis (2004) found that 28 percent of women said that a “glass ceiling” and dissatisfaction with the corporate world was the main reason for starting their own business. In this section, I will first describe some of the push factors, such as discrimination, sexism, and gender role ideology. Then, I will describe the pull factors such as personal growth potential and lifestyle choice.

**Push factors.** Push factors are negative factors that impel a woman to start her own business, such as unemployment, frustration with previous employment, need to earn more money, to have a more flexible work schedule (Alstete, 2002; Fairlie, 2013; Hewlett, 2002), or as noted above factors such as the glass ceiling. Some studies have found these push factors to be the main driving force for certain populations of entrepreneurs, particularly women, ethnic
minories, and younger age groups (Deakins & Whittman, 2000) and that entrepreneurship might not be the first option but is seen as a last resort to make a satisfactory work environment. Others studies have found women to be more influenced by pull factors, but these differences may be due to the economic and cultural climate of the countries in which these women live (McClelland et al., 2005). In countries like Canada with less traditionally gendered divisions of labor, women were less likely to mention flexible work schedule or work/family balance as motivation for starting a business (McClelland et al, 2005).

**Pull Factors.** Yet women do not pursue their own businesses merely as a means of escaping difficult formal work settings, they are also drawn to the promise of satisfying work, freedom, autonomy, and doing business on their own terms. There are factors that pull them towards entrepreneurship. Among the pull factors, need for independence and challenge of business ownership were the most frequently cited pull factors for women (Carter & Cannon, 1992). They may be seeking autonomy, personal growth, or a challenge (Winn, 2004).

Additionally, women appear to be more motivated than men by the opportunity to make a social contribution through their business, such as being more client-focused, ethical, and contributing to society as a whole (Brush, 1992; Still & Timms, 2000). Women who are entrepreneurs cite social motivations, such as interest in women’s issues and desire to use business to help other women, building a strong community spirit, desire to help address economic gender inequalities through her business, provide work to stay-at-home mothers, and
encourage women to participate in the technology sector (McClelland et al., 2005).

One study that examined White women in the U.S. (Gill & Ganesh, 2007) found that women felt empowered by the mental stimulation and creativity afforded by running their own company, and by the personal determination and support systems they used to overcome discrimination. It is possible that individuals who choose entrepreneurship to seek higher satisfaction levels in their employment have a higher growth need, such that they seek personal growth and development through their work environment (Hackman & Oldman, 1976). They also found that the four most common reasons for becoming entrepreneurs were seeking expanded opportunities, confidence in their ability to start their own venture, and desire for self-expression and autonomy. Research has shown a positive relationship between a company having “a strong women’s identity” (empowerment motivation) and the success of that company (Morris et al., 2006), suggesting that being aware of empowerment has a positive effect upon a woman entrepreneur’s success.

Research often has ignored older women who are entrepreneurs, but McKay (2001) found that these women were not motivated by work-family balance in the same way that younger women were and instead chose to start companies based on a longstanding desire to start their own company, which had been thwarted when they were younger due to domestic responsibilities or gender norms. Additionally, some women began their own business after divorce or the death of their husband allowed them to explore a more independent side of
themselves. Both push and pull factors play a part in women’s motivation to pursue their own businesses and they often work in tandem. Whether deciding to start a business in order to leave oppressive circumstances or to pursue autonomy and personal challenges, the decision may be the beginning of an empowering process because it entails both psychological empowerment and the promise of securing more control over one’s resources.

**Discrimination and Growth Disparities for Women Who Are Entrepreneurs**

Despite the large percentage of businesses started by women, the businesses tend to be smaller, less profitable, and slower growing than male-owned ventures (Davis & Shaver, 2012; Fasci & Valdez, 1998; Kalleberg & Leicht, 1991), with a large majority never employing more than ten people (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). Additionally, a large percentage of women-owned companies close after only a few years, with only 38% still open after six years (Headd, 2003). Moreover, as of 2012, 90% of women-owned businesses in the U.S. have no paid employees, again showing the small nature of these businesses (Messina, Gray, Lentz & Bowles, 2016). This may be due to a range of barriers and challenges that women business-owners face, perhaps even additional barriers that women face that male entrepreneurs do not. However, there is still debate over the extent and the root causes of these barriers and reasons for disparities in size and profit.

Some scholars note that, due to balancing of family expectations, women are more likely to intentionally choose to start lower growth companies (i.e., “lifestyle companies”), which are intentionally small ventures that may require
less time and financial investment and allow more flexibility (Morris, Miyasaki, Watters, & Coombes, 2006). Women may be expected to balance the bulk of parenting duties with their business and tend to place more focus on family concerns than male entrepreneurs, at the expense of profit or growth (DeMartino & Barbato, 2003). Women who start businesses may struggle with what Still and Timms (2000) referred to as the “domestic division of labor and time poverty” which results from gendered expectations for women’s roles within the home. Gill and Ganesh (2007) found that women who are entrepreneurs cited balancing work and family as the number one constraint to their business growth. Research has shown that time spent caring for children is negatively related to business success for women business-owners (Baughn, Chau, & Neupert, 2006). However, women who are the primary breadwinner in their family, list profit and financial growth of their business as important to them as it is to their male counterparts (Still & Timms, 2000). Despite the belief that starting a business would enable better work-life balance, women who are entrepreneurs often find that owning a business may not be as compatible with raising children as they initially believed (Winn, 2004). Small businesses can require around the clock availability and higher stress levels related to uncertainty and responsibility. Therefore, stating that women “choose” to start smaller growth companies without understanding constraints that may impact that choice, is to ignore systemic and cultural issues altogether.

In addition to the pressure to fulfill societal expectations of primary caregiver, women who are entrepreneurs also may face gender discrimination and
other systemic barriers when building their businesses. Like women in the formal work world, women who are entrepreneurs are segregated into more “feminine fields,” with half of women-owned businesses in the retail or service industries (Godwin, Stevens, & Brenner, 2006). Many important industries, such as construction, agriculture, transportation, information technology, and finance are male-dominated, with only 10-20% of these businesses owned by women (Godwin, Stevens, & Brenner, 2006).

In the current economic climate, understanding lack of access to funding goes beyond just understanding discrimination in gaining bank loans and encompasses understanding what barriers exist for women to accessing venture funding and angel investors seeking to fund start-ups. In New York City, where women-owned businesses fare much better than other cities in terms of venture capital, only 9% of venture capital funds go to women-owned businesses (Associated Press, 2016). The venture capitalist industry itself tends to be male-dominated, with only 9% of management-track venture capitalists being women in 2000, which may decrease the number of first-degree network connections between women starting companies and venture firms that offer funding (Brush, Carter, Gatewood, Greene, & Hart, 2004; Carter, Brush, Greene, Gatewood, & Hart, 2003). Venture capital firms with women partners are more than twice as likely to invest in companies with a woman on the executive team (34 percent of firms with a woman partner compared to 13 percent of firms without a woman partner) and more than three times as likely to invest in companies with women CEOs (58 percent of firms with women partners versus 15 percent of firms
Women entrepreneurs may not know the right people or have the right credentials to gain the same access to funding as male entrepreneurs, particularly private equity funding (Brophy, 1992; Carter, et al, 2003; Carter & Allen, 1997; Fiet, 1996). Women are more likely to have a high proportion of family and homogeneity of people in their business network, which can be a detriment no matter what the gender of the entrepreneur (Renzulli, Aldrich, & Moody, 2000). Additionally, women entrepreneurs may suffer financially from discrimination by customers, lenders, suppliers. (Weiler & Bernasek, 2001). Women are also socialized to judge their performance more harshly than men and this can undercut their confidence in business, causing them to be less optimistic about success than their male peers (Langowitz & Minniti, 2007).

Martin and Wright (2005) found that women who are entrepreneurs used the Internet and technology to compete with larger firms and keep costs down. Technology also enabled them to be “invisible” despite the high profile of their company and downplay their gender, as one woman put it “people don’t realize you’re women and take you more seriously – they judge you as a business not as an individual” (Martin & Wright, 2005). Thus, technological advancements may aid women in combating discrimination based on gender.

Some scholars contend that lack of exposure in media and academic journals may imply that women’s entrepreneurship is given less value and may hinder women as they start their companies (Achtenhagen & Welter, 2007; Ahl, 2006; Langowitz & Morgan, 2003). Baker, Aldrich, and Nina (1997) point to the
“paradox” that exists in society where, as women’s business ownership has risen sharply six fold in recent decades (they described women’s influx into entrepreneurship “the quiet revolution”), yet they note media and academic interest in women who are entrepreneurs has actually decreased. However, due to repeated calls in academic journals for more research on women in entrepreneurship, there has been an increase in research in the last decade (Jennings, & Brush, 2013).

Responding to barriers or discrimination in the formal work world by creating an empowering alternative work setting, can serve as a form of social change (Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009). For women who have struggled with barriers or discrimination in the formal work world, entrepreneurship may be an act of empowerment and liberation, a way to assert her capabilities and talents, unfettered by gender norms and bias. Using qualitative inquiry to understand their perspectives may help to mitigate the limitations of using pre-existing measures that may be influenced by a history of a male-dominated lens in entrepreneurship research, which feminist scholars have critiqued as inadequate to understand women’s experiences (Ahl, 2006; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Below I will explore the critiques of scholars working with entrepreneurship research and their call for different lines of inquiry and research methods to better capture the nuances of experiences of women who are entrepreneurs.

**Critique of Current Entrepreneurship Research**

Women who are entrepreneurs are not immune to societal gender discrimination and sexism, which may serve as a barrier to business growth;
however, rather than looking at possible systemic factors that may be challenging the growth of women-owned companies, feminist scholars contend that researchers have tended to “blame the victim” and attribute this lack of growth to the women themselves (Ahl, 2006; DeBruin, Brush, & Welter, 2006; Greene et al., 2003). There is a particular lack of research on established women-owned companies with much of the focus limited to new ventures (Carter, 2000), revealing a lacuna in understanding the experiences of women who are experienced entrepreneurs. There has been a deficit model used in much research, focusing on what women who are entrepreneurs are lacking or how their businesses are not measuring up to those of male entrepreneurs (Martin & Wright, 2005).

The factors that negatively impact the growth of women-owned businesses cited in the literature include the following: women being naturally less entrepreneurial than men (Fagenson, 1993; Sexton & Bowman-Upton, 1990), women being less growth motivated (Buttner & Moore, 1997; Fischer et al., 1993), not having enough education or experience (Boden & Nucci, 2000), being risk-averse (Masters & Meier, 1988), and the management style of women being less conducive to growth (Carter, Williams, & Reynolds, 1997; Olson & Currie, 1992; Van Auken et al., 1994). The view that women are somehow not suited for the role of entrepreneur may be due in part to the way researchers have envisioned the ideal entrepreneur (Brush, de Bruin, & Welter, 2009). Entrepreneurs have been primarily viewed as men in research literature and women have been invisible for the most part or measured against the male standard (Bird & Brush,
A review of entrepreneurship research shows predominant use of masculine words (according to Bem’s research on gender), such as self-reliant, forceful, and ambitious (Ahl, 2006). If the features of an ideal entrepreneur are synonymous with being a man, and the measures created to rate how well entrepreneurs fit this ideal, then women will be at a distinct disadvantage when measured on these scales. Gender and sex are rarely separated out in the literature, but when gender role identity is studied as separate from biological sex, it has a much greater impact on outcomes than whether one is biologically male or female (Gupta, Turban, Wasti, & Sikdar, 2009).

Marlow and McAdam (2013) challenge the existing literature as taking a deficit approach to describing women who are entrepreneurs, research exaggerating gender differences, and the over-labeling of women-owned businesses as underperforming. They contend that male-normativity and gender bias permeate entrepreneurship literature. If women are measured against male-normativity then the solution offered to women to reach the male standard of success is to think and behave more like men in their businesses (Calás et al., 2009). Yet, this argument is similar to the one made in the corporate world, where women are encouraged to conform to patriarchal systems rather than question them. Scholars argue that, though a few women may find success in the patriarchal system, their success does not challenge but rather reinforces the system (hooks, 2000).

Marlow and McAdams (2013) argue that by perpetuating the under-performance label myth, women are blamed for their deficits rather than
questioning flaws in the system and measurements of success. Therefore, rather than blame women themselves for not measuring up to male-normed standards, we need to look at both the systemic factors that impede growth and question the standard itself. Storey (2011) points out that many enterprises, man or women owned, are in industries with growth restraints and reflect a lifestyle choice of the owner, who does not wish to grow their business larger. These lifestyle choices are rarely questioned if the owner is a man, but if the owner is a woman it is seen as a deficit on her part that inhibits growth. Some scholars blame a lack of ambition amongst women who are entrepreneurs for a choice to remain small, but several factors make women more likely to enter slow growth industries (Fagenson, 1993; Sexton & Bowman-Upton, 1990). There is a difference between the concept of under-performance which implies that women are not reaching their potential and in need of encouragement and advice and constrained performance which implies that women are successful within the limited scope that gender discrimination, cultural norms, and gendered market segregation allow (Marlow & McAdams, 2013).

Several factors contribute to constrained performance of women-owned businesses. First, women tend to be segregated into the service and retail industries. This segregation reflects general trends among the working population (Hersch, 2006) and can be traced back to gender norms, major choice in college, and the chilly climate many women face when attempting to enter male-dominated fields (Sadker & Sadker, 1992). Additionally, the service industry requires less up front capital than many other ventures, which makes it more
attractive to women who may have more difficulty securing financing from external sources and rely on personal assets to start their companies. Women also are still seen as the primary caregiver of children and caretaker of domestic duties which creates a “second shift” of work to be completed at home and takes time away from business efforts (Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010). Many entrepreneurs, men and women, have children, but the impact on work productivity disproportionately impacts women. In fact, women without children outperform men in terms of earnings (Hundley, 2000). Thus, as Hundley puts it, “the presence of small children and greater hours of housework have a negative effect on female earnings” (Hundley, 2001, p. 825). These gender-specific barriers are largely ignored when researchers examine women who are entrepreneurs with the same lens as male entrepreneurs.

Marlow and McAdam (2013) contend that by singling out women for underperforming as entrepreneurs is discriminatory. They contend that women’s absence from higher growth sectors does not reflect a lack of ambition but rather that patriarchal masculinized cultural systems have created a leaky pipeline effect, which gradually excludes women from acquiring the skills, networks, capital, and access to such industries (Kelan, 2009). This is the same pipeline effect that limits the number of women in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields in formal work (Jacobs & Simpkins, 2005). If women are segregated in lower growth industries which yield lower profit margins, this impacts their growth potential, a factor largely ignored by researchers.
Denying the larger systemic barriers faced by women limits the understanding of how women are actually performing in the market. For example, taking into account the systemic barriers women face and the segregation of women into lower paying fields, gender differences disappear (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Scholars that blame women as being overly cautious, excessively risk averse, or more focused on family than business, are transposing culturally-based gender stereotypes onto entrepreneurial activity and ignoring larger cultural barriers women face (Greene et al., 2011). By focusing on supposed innate gender differences between entrepreneurs, researchers are reinforcing existing stereotypes that these internal gender differences underlie struggles women who are entrepreneurs may face and seek solutions aimed at overcoming supposed personal deficiencies rather than addressing systemic gender discrimination (Ahl, 2006). This focus on exaggerated gender differences limits the questions we ask as researchers, which in turn bias the answers we receive (Sarasvathy, 2004).

Though innate gender differences are exaggerated and blamed for slow growth of some women-owned businesses by scholars (Martin & Wright, 2005), socialized gender differences may actually be beneficial to women who are entrepreneurs. For example, women are more likely than men to use a more relational management approach to behave more democratically in business, value cooperation, and show respect to individuals in their organizations (Baughn, Chau, & Neupert, 2006; Eagly & Wood, 1991). These traits, which in part have developed as a reaction to having to overcome gender discrimination and
corporate tokenism, have been shown to benefit corporate organizations and, as numbers of women increase, benefit workplace effectiveness and employee satisfaction (Knouse & Dansby, 1999; Westermann et al., 2005). Given the positive impact that this more relational management style has on corporations, it is likely to yield benefits for women-run start-ups as well. These women who are entrepreneurs may be engaging in a form of collaborative empowerment, but male-oriented measures likely fail to capture these positive characteristics because they do not fit the model of an ideal entrepreneur. Therefore, a qualitative analysis of women who are entrepreneurs, such as the one proposed in the current study, is needed to explore their experiences without this biased lens that pervades most research on women entrepreneurs.

In summary, there are many critiques of the current literature that justify the examination of women’s experiences. In addition, scholars note the importance of understanding context as a way to situate the experience of participants. As noted above, participants in this study occupy a specific place and time, which impacts their experiences on multiple levels. By understanding the factors related to geographic location that impacts experience, we will have a better foundation for understanding how being located within the Midwest, in the major U.S. city of Chicago, impacts their experiences.

**Women Who Are Entrepreneurs in Chicago: The Importance of Place**

Depending on the location where a women entrepreneur starts her business, she may face different challenges and may have varied levels of systemic and cultural support. Factors such as economic climate, local
government policy, business-owner organizations, and cultural gender norms converge to create a distinctive regional climate of both push and pull factors motivating women to start their own businesses and supporting (or limiting) the growth of those businesses. The current study focuses on women residing within the Chicagoland area (metro area and surrounding suburbs). Chicago has its own unique combination of cultural, economic, and political factors that may create a climate of both barriers and facilitators for women who are entrepreneurs.

Although not an exhaustive examination of how the Chicago context may shape women’s experiences, I now outline a few broad areas that were important to consider when conducting and interpreting the interviews.

**Economic climate.** Chicago is the third largest U.S. city not just in size, but also GDP (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015). Chicago has the third highest number of women-owned businesses (after New York City and Los Angeles) with 123,632 in 2012 (Messina, Gray, Lentz & Bowles, 2016). Chicago ranks number 10 on a top ten list of best metropolitan cities for Black women to start a business (Brown, 2016). The headquarters of 57 Fortune 100 companies are located in the Chicago area, including Boeing, McDonald’s, and Walgreens. The Chicago Mercantile Exchange is also located in the city, which makes the city an important center for finance. Chicago is also home to business incubator programs, such as 1871, Catapult, TechNexus, Matter, EnterpriseWorks, and LightBank, offering support through mentorship, shared office space, workshops, training, access to funding, and networking with universities and corporations (Illinois Incubators, 2015).
The fastest growing areas for women-owned businesses are the Midwest and Southwest regions of the U.S., but the West and East Coasts have the highest concentrations of venture funded women-owned businesses (CWBR Fact Sheet, 2004). Research shows that the venture capital industry in the United States is highly concentrated with several large firms controlling the bulk of capital and that these firms are geographically concentrated and male dominated (BenDaniel et al. 2000; Carter, Brush, Greene, Gatewood, & Hart, 2003). One survey found that 36% of venture firms were located in California, and 80% were on the East and West coasts (Smart et al. 2000). Additionally, this survey showed that, of the venture capitalists in these firms, 63% had MBA degrees from one of three schools (Stanford, Harvard, and Wharton), none of which are located in the Midwest. The concentration of venture firms on the coasts may negatively impact the growth of women-owned ventures outside these regions (Morris, Miyasaki, Watters, & Coombes, 2006). This is one way in which geographic location may influence the growth of women-owned businesses in Chicago and beyond.

However, in a recent study of global startup ecosystems, Chicago was home to 30% of technology start-ups with women founders, which was the greatest percentage of women entrepreneurs out of the top 20 startup ecosystems in the U.S. (Compass, 2015). The study authors noted that this number is still far from gender equality, but it is better than the global average of 18% of technology start-ups being founded by women (which is up from 10% in 2012). Organizations like Ms. Tech, 1871, Built in Chicago, and JumpStart Capital are all organizations in Chicago that focus their efforts on growing local
women-owned business, particularly technology start-ups (Dough, 2014). Media attention has also been given to a backlash against the male-dominated tech industry culture, such as the boycotting of a Techweek event in Chicago after they displayed sexualized images of women on their invitations. Due to criticism on social media sites and withdrawal of sponsors, Techweek apologized and used the revenues that would have been risen by the event and donated them to create a women’s tech fellowship program (Chicago Tonight, 2014). Women still face negative consequences of so-called “brogrammer culture” in the tech industry (Gross, 2012), but the organizations and networks supporting women in the tech field aid women in advocating against sexist business culture and finding funding and mentoring to grow their tech start-ups.

Federal policies, such as certification as a women-owned business (e.g., WOSB, WBE) may be experienced differently based on regional location within the U.S. For example, there may be more corporate or federal contracts available to a woman in Chicago than a woman in a smaller town. Even though the policies discussed above are at the national level, being located in Chicago may still impact how they are experienced, based on culture and economic factors for the region. Also, many of the participants noted they sought advice and support from the Women’s Business Development Center in Chicago while seeking their certification. The education and resources offered through this center may increase the likelihood of women completing the certification process. Women who are entrepreneurs based in different areas of the country without this resource may lack the knowledge or support to participate in these federal programs.
Gender roles. Gender norms and expectations tend to vary geographically (Powers et al., 2003) and such norms may alter the way that people live their lives and interact with one another in that context. Feminist geographer Susan Hanson studied the impact of place and context on entrepreneurs that are women and noted that entrepreneurship has potential to unsettle existing gender dynamics within a context, but entrepreneurship is also deeply influenced and, at times, constrained by those existing gender dynamics (Hanson, 2009). She cites Andrea Nightingale’s (2006, p. 171) definition of gender as “the process through which differences based on presumed biological sex are defined, imagined, and become significant in specific contexts” and Judith Butler’s (1996) assertion of gender as performance that is context specific and malleable, when making the case for the importance of that place and context for women who are entrepreneurs. Given the importance of place, I made an effort to listen for how participants experience gender roles within the space they occupy in Chicago and the Midwest, in general, but also recognize women in different geographic contexts may have different lived experiences regarding gender roles.

Networks and organizations in Chicago. The networks entrepreneurs have access to may impact the growth and success of their business. Networks serve several purposes: first, they increase access to both material and non-material (e.g. information) resources; second, they are a mechanism through which individuals become connected within a social field; and third, they offer emotional support and friendship with other entrepreneurs (Hanson & Blake, 2009; Schirato & Webb, 2003). These networks are an aspect of geographic
context because they are often grounded in a specific place (Hanson, 2009).

Networks are also impacted by the place they occupy and are embedded in social, economic, cultural, and political structures, which shape them and alter how women who are entrepreneurs may engage in these networks (Hanson & Blake, 2009).

Chicago is the third largest city in the United States, a national hub for commerce, and the location of many universities and colleges. Due to Chicago’s size and commercial activity, women who are entrepreneurs in the city may have access to networks, professional organizations, educational opportunities, and large corporations with mentoring programs that women in smaller cities may not. However, with the growth of the internet and online networks, even women in smaller cities can connect with other entrepreneurs around the world. Due to the large number of networks and organizations in Chicago, it would not be feasible to describe each organization that participants may be a part of. Therefore, I will describe two that were mentioned repeatedly by participants as being of particular relevance to them.

**Women’s Business Development Center (WBDC).** The WBDC, founded in 1986, describes itself as one of the largest and oldest non-profits focused on accelerating the growth of women’s business ownership, increasing the economic impact of women-owned businesses, increasing the awareness of business ownership as a viable means of economic self-sufficiency, and advocating for public policy reform that supports women-owned businesses (WBDC.org, 2015). They advocate for policy changes at the local and national level, offer courses to
women at different stages of business development from start-ups to larger, established businesses, give information and support to women seeking WBE or WOSB certification, host conferences on a range of topics, and foster a network of women who are entrepreneurs. WBDC is headquartered in Chicago, therefore many of their events and workshops are located there, offering a resource for women in the region.

**CRAVE Chicago.** CRAVE is a national organization for entrepreneurs who are women with locations in multiple large cities, including Chicago. They maintain a directory of business, host monthly events, annual national retreats, and development programs to aid members in building their businesses. Participants mentioned them as a place to network with other entrepreneurs who were women to find vendors, gather information, make friends, and network among like-minded women. Participants in the current study inhabit a specific geographic and historical location that impacts their lived experiences. The participants in the study are impacted by their location in Chicago. This is evident in their interviews through their frequent references to networks and the culture of the Midwest, and Chicago, specifically. The experiences of a woman starting her company in San Francisco or rural Pennsylvania likely differ from Chicagoan entrepreneurs in ways that they may not even be aware. Though it is impossible to cover all the contextual factors that impact how they experience entrepreneurship, this overview of the historical, geographical, political, and theoretical factors has built a foundation upon which to better understand the experiences shared by the participants. Keeping in mind the factors listed above
will aid in clarifying the impact of place on the narratives of the participants and ground the discussion in awareness of these factors. I now turn to the current study and describe the rationale and research questions motivating this inquiry.

**Rationale for Current Study**

There is a disconnect between the lived experiences of women who are entrepreneurs, who are an ever-increasing percentage of the marketplace, and the research methods that have been used to explore their experiences. Entrepreneurship may serve as a form of empowerment for women through allowing them the opportunity to create an empowering alternate setting where they can enact their values and gain power and control over their resources, such as time, money, and creative potential. More research is needed to understand the factors that motivate women to start companies, their experiences of entrepreneurship, and the impact it has upon their sense of identity and the way they interact with those around them.

The current study aims to set aside pre-existing and biased lenses of inquiry which may not take into consideration the differing experiences women may have from men or account for the nuances of gendered experiences; therefore, qualitative inquiry was used to gather descriptions from women about their experience of being an entrepreneur. Through qualitative inquiry, I sought to heed the call of feminist scholars to lay aside biased measures and theories and build upon fresh research ground, using the experiences of the women as the foundation to describe the experience of being an entrepreneur when one is also a woman (Ahl, 2006; De Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2006; Gatewood, Carter, Brush,
Greene & Hart, 2003; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). An attempt was made to let the participants use their own definitions for terms such as empowerment and feminism, rather than assume their understanding of these terms or impose a definition.

Through in-depth interviews, women were asked about their experiences as an entrepreneur, the impact being an entrepreneur has had upon their identities and relationship, and if they experienced entrepreneurship as empowering. An overarching goal of the study was to examine how participants may experience entrepreneurship as empowering. Given feminist critiques of empowerment theory as based on masculine ideals of power and privilege, the current study was also informed by more feminist empowerment frameworks, which emphasized cooperation and community (Riger, 1993). Therefore, the purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of entrepreneurs who are women and their experience of empowerment through entrepreneurship.

**Research Questions**

Interviews were conducted using a script with three broad questions covering the following topics: personal story (their experience as an entrepreneur), identity and relationships (impact of entrepreneurship on their sense of identity and interpersonal relationships), and empowerment (of self and others in multiple domains) (see Appendix A). The specific research questions guiding the current study include the following. Research Question I: What are experiences of participants in entrepreneurship, including prior work experience, motivating factors, and challenges and barriers faced in entrepreneurship and
prior careers? Research Question II: How has entrepreneurship impacted the participant’s sense of identity? Research Question III: How has being an entrepreneur impacted their relationships? How have supportive and unsupportive relationships impacted the participant and their experiences as an entrepreneur? Research Question IV: What has been their experience of entrepreneurship as an entrepreneur? Has there been an impact on their sense of power and control over their life (work and home)? Research Question V: Does the participant identify as a feminist or with feminist ideas and has this identification changed as a result of entrepreneurship?

METHOD

Philosophical Framework

Phenomenological qualitative methods were used to gather descriptions from women about their experience of being an entrepreneur. Phenomenology seeks to set aside pre-existing and biased lenses of inquiry to describe the essence of a phenomenon and the meaning it has to participants (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Phenomenology is rooted in existential philosophy, which champions the ideal of living life authentically and of both the freedom and responsibility individuals carry in shaping their lives (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Existentialism was founded by Soren Kierkegaard in nineteenth century Denmark, and then later developed by Sartre and Camus (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Phenomenological inquiry was created by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl and further developed by Martin Heidegger as a scientific method to scientifically investigate daily occurrences often taken for granted (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Existential
philosophy and phenomenological inquiry were heavily influenced by World War II and the resulting general feeling of disillusionment with institutions, values, beliefs, and norms. This crumbling of faith in preexisting institutions and beliefs created the desire to set aside assumptions in inquiry and to search for meaning in the experiences of individuals (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Therefore, closed-ended survey measures were eschewed in favor of more open-ended qualitative methods.

Phenomenological inquiry method consists of using open-ended questions, while interviewing a set of individuals who have experience with a particular phenomenon, such as entrepreneurship. Then the researcher uses this data to develop a composite description of the essence and meaning of the experience to these individuals. The purpose is to construct a description of the phenomena that is shared by those experiencing it that describes both what and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). In this study we explore this meaning through the development of categories and subcategories of experience to describe and synthesize what and how women experience being entrepreneurs.

A key element of phenomenological inquiry is that the researcher temporarily sets aside past knowledge of the topic being studied to enter fully into the experiences of the participants and seeks to understand the meaning participants make of the phenomena (Merleau-Ponty, 1956). In this method, researchers bracket their personal knowledge and biases by answering all interview questions based on their personal experience before interviewing the participants. This interview is not coded, but is done to aid in setting aside
researchers’ experiences, so as to focus on those of the participants (Creswell, 2013). My reflection on this process is presented below under “Researcher.” Overall, since this study aimed to look afresh on the experiences of women who are entrepreneurs, I remained mindful of my own experiences, assumptions, and biases to allow a fresh inquiry into the phenomena of entrepreneurship.

**Participants and Procedure**

I interviewed 20 women who were currently entrepreneurs in the U.S., specifically in Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. This sample size is in line with recommended sample sizes for phenomenological research, such as those that suggest between 3-10 (Dukes, 1984) or 5-25 (Polkinghorne, 1989). More specific demographic information is presented below. With this number I hoped to gather a range of women’s experiences of entrepreneurship. Inclusion criteria were being in the age range of 25 to 65, having founded and run a company for at least two years, owning at least 51% or more of the company, and employing at least one full-time or two part-time employees (in addition to themselves), year round. My intention was to sample a diverse group of women who are entrepreneurs that meet these inclusion criteria, preferably from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, and stages of life.

Men were excluded from the study sample. The exclusion criteria for the sample included women working for multi-tier companies with pre-existing sales structures, materials, and processes, such as Mary Kay or Pampered Chef, as these organizations give a level of support as well as constraint to the women who work for them and are different in many aspects from other entrepreneurial start-ups.
Additionally, I excluded women who purchased a pre-existing company or inherited a family business. Though the experiences of the women who own these companies are valuable and worth exploring, they were outside the scope of this study.

In an effort to obtain a diverse sample, I recruited through various women-focused entrepreneurship groups, such as CRAVE Chicago, that exist to help women who are entrepreneurs network, share resources, and support one another. I reached women who were entrepreneurs through recruitment materials and referrals through participants who recommended other entrepreneurs to the study. Recruitment emails were used to notify women of the study, the inclusion/exclusion criteria, and contact information for the researcher. Women who were interested in participating emailed the researcher, who responded with an email script, reiterating the purpose of the study and inclusion/exclusion criteria. If the participant still wished to participate, the researcher and participant scheduled a time and place for the interview. Interviews were conducted based on convenience of the participants, in locations such as libraries, coffee shops, or quiet public spaces. If participants could not meet in person, the interviews were conducted via phone. Before interviewing the participants, I first bracketed my own experiences and biases, by answering the research questions and writing a memo regarding my answers to determine and articulate my biases. Phenomenological researchers recommend this as a way to become more aware of and set aside personal expectations of the researcher.
Participant demographics. This recruitment strategy resulted in a sample of 20 women. The mean age was 41.75 ($SD = 10.47$; $Range = 26-66$), and mean number of years of business ownership was 9.55 ($SD = 5.04$; $Range = 3-23$). Fourteen participants identified as White, 5 as Hispanic/Latina, 1 as Biracial, and 1 as East Asian. Five participants were born outside the United States (2 from Mexico, 1 from Romania, 1 from Greece, and 1 from Argentina). The mean number of employees in one’s company was 11.1 ($SD = 9.97$; $Range = 1-35$). Thirteen participants identified as married or partnered, 3 identified as single, and 4 identified as divorced. Thirteen had children, with a mean number of 1.5 ($SD = 1.60$; $Range = 1-5$), and 7 did not have children. Prior fields included three participants in a science or engineering field (e.g., engineer), three in financial/insurance fields (e.g., stock broker), five in media/marketing/advertising (e.g., television producer), one science teacher, one nanny, one political campaign organizer, one architect, two in the corporate service industry (e.g., corporate meeting planner), and three who started their companies after graduating college. The fields in which participants currently owned their business included: four in media/marketing/advertising/public relations (e.g., digital marketing), four in art/design (e.g., photography studio), two in financial/insurance fields (e.g., insurance), two in education (e.g., language school), two in construction/housing (e.g., eco-friendly construction materials supplier), one in medial field (e.g., physical therapy company), one with nanny agency, two in service industry (e.g., catering), one in retail, and one in the corporate service industry (e.g., corporate
meeting planner). In order to minimize the possibility of identifying study participants, I do not provide a more specific table of participant characteristics.

**Researcher.** Following a phenomenological approach to being aware of and bracketing one’s biases, before completing the first interview, I completed a self-reflective journal about my own expectations and potential biases for this project. This also included a reflection on how my own social identities may shape my perspective and analysis. For example, I identify as a straight, White, cisgender female, mother, and feminist. I reflected on how my research on women’s empowerment, clinical work focusing on treating women, and my personal friendships with women who are entrepreneurs may come up or have shaped my desire to see entrepreneurship in a positive light. My previous experience as a business owner also may have shaped my understanding of participant’s descriptions of entrepreneurship experiences. Throughout the process of conducting this research and analysis I continued to remain mindful of these biases in an effort to fully enter into the perspective and experience of the participants.

**Procedure for interview.** Prior to conducting the study, I obtained IRB approval through DePaul University. Directly before the interview I explained the purpose, benefits, risks, confidentiality, use of material, and the intent to audio record and store secure copies of recordings/transcripts. After obtaining participant consent, I conducted an in-depth interview with the participant. I conducted all interviews following a script consisting of three broad questions covering the topics of: personal story (their experience as an entrepreneur),
identity and relationships (impact of entrepreneurship on their sense of identity and interpersonal relationships), and empowerment (of self and others in multiple domains) (see Appendix A). Follow-up questions were guided by the answer that the participant gave to those questions and were designed to draw out the participant to describe her experience, feelings, stories, and meaning around being an entrepreneur (see Appendix A for follow-up questions). Background information and demographics were obtained during the interview. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 100 minutes, with a mean length of 50.53 minutes (SD =18.91). Seven of the interviews were conducted in person and 13 were conducted by phone. All interviews were audio recorded and recordings were kept on a password-protected computer. Transcriptions were typed and de-identified by the researcher. Transcriptions were kept securely with password access.

Analytic Strategy and Process

Coding process. As described below and shown in Appendix B, I followed the general steps as outlined by Pollio, Henley, and Thompson, (1997) and Creswell (2013) in conducting the study and coding. First, each de-identified transcript was coded for significant phrases pertaining to the experience of being an entrepreneur. These phrases were listed out and given equal worth. Then these key phrases were analyzed for meaning and clustered into themes within an evolving codebook. As each subsequent transcript was analyzed, the themes were modified and changed and new themes were added. For example, early in the coding the theme of “Push Factors” was developed in the codebook. As more
interviews were conducted this theme was split into the two themes of “Gendered” and “Non-Gendered.” After one transcript was coded, the codebook and coded transcript were reviewed by Nathan Todd, the co-chairperson. This process was repeated after the coding of four, ten, and twenty transcripts (fulfilling the “report structure to research team” step in the outline in Appendix B). In regards to saturation, I found that after approximately half of the transcripts were coded, fewer major codes were added and instead smaller changes were made to existing codes. Thus, although complete saturation is an aspiration, it appeared that saturation was achieved after the 20 interviews to justify not conducting additional interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2009).

Throughout this process, I noted quotes from participants that illustrated the emerging themes and subthemes. Thus, after all twenty transcripts had been analyzed, the codebook went through a final edit for organization and clarity and formed the backbone for the results. Using the themes and subthemes that arose through analysis and the quotes of participants, I wrote up a description of the phenomenon of entrepreneurship that captured the essence of what and how I interpreted these women experienced it (Creswell, 2013). Overall, the purpose of these analytic steps was to describe the experience and the meaning ascribed to entrepreneurship for women.

**Trustworthiness and credibility.** Various strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. I transcribed and reviewed all transcriptions to check that they were true to the interviews. Interviews were of adequate length (with a mean length of about 50 minutes) for participants to
describe their experiences. Additionally, the co-chairperson of this committee served to debrief throughout the process, to audit the coding, and to provide more in-depth interpretation checks (mentioned above) throughout the coding process. Furthermore, in an effort to bracket my own biases, I remained aware of how my personal identities and expectations may have been shaping my coding. For example, at one point I realized that my coding of some statements about lack of flexibility or negative work culture in the formal work environment as a “Gendered” push factor may have been shaped by my own bias as a woman and a mother, so this was updated to “non-gendered” unless the participant identified the factor as related to gender. Finally, I incorporated feedback from the dissertation committee, a group from diverse disciplines, to further inform the interpretation of these findings.

RESULTS

The themes that emerged from the interviews were organized into broad categories of why participants became an entrepreneur, experiences as an entrepreneur, and impacts on identity and relationships. Though the participants were diverse in age, ethnicity, race, years in business, prior occupation, and field of business, there were common themes that arose from their experiences. In an effort to avoid quantifying results from a qualitative analysis, I avoid specifically enumerating how many participants noted a theme. However, unless specifically reported as an outlier, the themes below where noted by multiple participants, with a quote presented from one or two participants that exemplified the theme. Table 1 provides a summary and outline of the themes. Figure 1, described at the
end of the results, provides a visual synthesis and summary of the themes. Given
the constructivist nature of this project and analysis, tentative interpretations of
participant meanings and experiences are gently offered throughout the
presentation of the results.
Table 1 Summary of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why did participant become an entrepreneur?</td>
<td>Motivation to become an entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Push factors</td>
<td>Negatives that impel to leave formal work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-gendered</td>
<td>Not related to gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered</td>
<td>Related to gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chilly climate</td>
<td>Feeling unwelcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overt hostility</td>
<td>Harassment or openly hostile words or actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double standards</td>
<td>Different expectations based on gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penalized for motherhood</td>
<td>Issues specifically related to motherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women were “our toughest foes” at work</td>
<td>Poor relationships with women in formal work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pull factors</td>
<td>Expectations of entrepreneurship that drew them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom and control</td>
<td>Power over decisions, time, money, creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological empowerment</td>
<td>Feeling empowered in multiple domains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I make my own future”</td>
<td>Control over their employment destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Live authentically in your business”</td>
<td>Ability to live/work in congruence with their values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Meaning through helping others”</td>
<td>Ability to empower others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry choice</td>
<td>Chose field of entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom and control</td>
<td>Power over decisions, time, money, creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creativity</td>
<td>Ability to live/work in congruence with their values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value congruence</td>
<td>Of self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Sexism experienced and strategies to mitigate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The continuing impact of sexism</td>
<td>From clients, partners, and employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within business</td>
<td>From friends and acquaintances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within their community</td>
<td>From family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the home</td>
<td>Approaches used to deal with sexism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td>Importance of Community and “The New Girls’ Network”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on identity relationships</td>
<td>Community of women entrepreneurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Who am I to be doing this?”</td>
<td>Changes in way they perceive themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Being a business owner is not for punks”</td>
<td>Growth in confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on identifying as feminist</td>
<td>Pride and confidence in self as overcomer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification with feminist label or values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Not a feminist

Identified as feminist

Impact on Relationships

How entrepreneurship changed relationships

Support at home from domestic partners

Those who did not identify as feminist

Those who did identify as feminist

Family, domestic partners, friends, and acquaintances

Factors that impact and what changes occurred

Importance of supportive home

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**Why did Participant Become an Entrepreneur?**

Prior to becoming entrepreneurs, participants worked in a variety of settings (see demographic section of methods for list of prior occupations). The majority worked in corporate settings. Others were teachers or were employed by smaller companies. A few pursued entrepreneurship after graduating college and did not have a lengthy work history prior to starting their businesses. When asked why they started their own companies, they gave a variety of reasons that can be organized into different push and pull factors. As noted in the introduction, “pull” factors entice women to start companies, like seeking challenges, more independence, and a desire to innovate (Buttner & Moore, 1997). “Push” factors drive women away from formal work and into starting their own business, like gender discrimination or lack of access to upper management positions (Moore, Moore, & Moore, 2011). Many factors described by participants reflect previous research literature on push and pull factors. In general, in this sample women described many “push” factors such as gender discrimination or lack of upward mobility within their company (Moore, Moore, & Moore, 2011). They also described “pull” factors such as seeking challenges, more independence, innovation, and freedom (Buttner & Moore, 1997).

**Push Factors**
Non-gendered push factors. Push factors are not necessarily gendered in nature. Regardless of gender, entrepreneurs cite factors in the formal work world that may motivate them to leave and start their own company. In this study, participants noted motivating factors, such as job instability, feeling value incongruence with their job (e.g., being asked to perform tasks they felt were not consistent with their personal values), long and inflexible work hours, bureaucratic inflexibility, greed by executives, and lack of upward mobility or advancement opportunities due to corporate structure. For example, some participants left corporate jobs because they were frustrated with the culture and lack of flexibility:

“It was too regimented and had a lot of regulations, a lot of politics. Not family-friendly. In accounting it's so much still a man's world out there. And it's still very cut and dry. I wanted something that was more friendly”

(D18).

Several chose to leave after specific incidences of mistreatment or injustice:

“They held a meeting and they basically told all of us... ‘This is your thank you lunch and we're just letting you know that it's really rough out there and you should be grateful to have a job. We will not be giving anyone any raises or any increases in benefits. We just want to make that clear.' And we were all sitting around the conference room just stunned that this had actually come out of their mouths. They actually called the meeting just to say exactly that. And literally a week later...the two [owners], they go out and spend like $2 million between the two of them. I
was just like ‘wow.’ And then they rubbed it in our faces. It was kind of like, so here's the disconnect” (D10).

Like the participant above, the narratives of participants indicated a sense of frustration and anger with their former employers, due a sense of being undervalued, controlled, expendable, and underappreciated. This left many feeling discouraged and looking for a more fulfilling and empowering employment option.

**Gendered push factors.** Though some of the push factors were not specific to gender, many factors noted by participants were ones that may impact women more than men. Based on the description of sexism as a form of oppression based on gender that ranges from violently hostile acts against women to subtler acts of condescension, dismissal, and intimidation (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001), the following examples could be described as how sexism within the work world served as a push factor.

For example, one gendered push factor was the underrepresentation of women in positions of leadership and power. Even in fields where women employees are more numerous than men, most of the companies were owned by men or had mostly male executives. When asked for the gender makeup of her field, one participant (D7) said: “Most marketing agencies are run by men, with some exceptions. But anybody below the leadership is female.” When the women started their companies, this continued to be the trend and many of them were the exception in a male-owner dominated field (e.g., technology, construction, insurance). This mirrored the description of many of them in male-dominated
corporate fields, because as they climbed the ranks, women peers became rarer. This appeared to be an issue across a range of industries in which the participants worked and seemed to represent a pattern of women being concentrated in the lower ranks and men occupying the positions of power. For a woman who wants a chance to be part of the leadership and decision-making in a company, this may make entrepreneurship an appealing option to have more control over the direction and culture of a company. Other more specific forms of gendered push factors are now explored.

**Chilly climate.** Those participants who worked in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as engineering, architecture, insurance, and finance described their work environments as unwelcoming to them and other women, either through overt hostility and harassment or through more subtle forms of exclusion. A subtle non-welcoming environment is sometimes termed in the literature a “chilly climate” (Sadker & Sadker, 1992). Examples of subtle unwelcomeness included exclusion from socializing with male employees and fear of provoking disrespect by being friendly to male coworkers. One participant who was a former engineer (D1) reported she would downplay her gender by wearing her hair back, only wearing polo shirts, slacks, and no make-up. She said being overtly feminine or socializing with her coworkers (all men) might lead people to think she was a “slut.” It was noteworthy she stated this matter-of-factly and as a given in that environment and did not feel mistreated by her male employees. Rather she described them as nice guys and expressed gratitude that they had never sexually harassed her. Thus, she changed her gendered appearance.
and mannerisms to better fit in as a way to respond to this chilly climate. Other participants found it offensive to be excluded and noted they missed out on the benefits of networking with peers and lost work opportunities through this exclusion. Overall, whether the participant perceived exclusionary treatment within the work setting as being intentional or not, they did perceive it as limiting their access to opportunities that networking with coworkers would offer and as having a negative impact on their satisfaction with their employment.

*Overt hostility.* Some of the participants experienced more overt hostilities in their former professions. One woman in the finance industry described a culture of sexual harassment, quid pro quo, and entitled, aggressive men. She described it as a culture where men thought money could buy anything, including women. Another in the insurance industry (D10) left because she was being underpaid compared to male colleagues: “I started [a company], honestly, out of anger. You know when you work really hard and you just don’t feel like you’re a being paid what you are worth and being treated well.” Hostility was especially pernicious for women of color who noted they faced both racial and gender discrimination. A former science teacher who managed other teachers described an ongoing struggle: “I had high school science teachers in this class and I walked in the room and you had 30 white men. It was out of a stereotype cartoon. 30 white men balding with pocket protectors and pens and glasses and white shirts.... And one of the guys says, ‘you’re in the wrong room. The social studies class is down the hall.’... Just super resistant. And what I realized was
that first and foremost they didn't like being schooled by woman. And because I'm a woman of color” (D11).

These more openly hostile actions described by participants were much more common in environments where women were the minority, either in leadership or in the field as a whole.

**Double standards.** Many participants noted they were held to a different standard than male colleagues and reported feeling they had to work harder for fewer opportunities. Participants expressed a sense of frustration and futility at what they felt were double standards for them as women: “I don't know if it's just the architecture field or if it's just the corporate world, in general, but it's almost like [women] have to work doubly as hard as a man” (D14). The participants rarely expressed a sense of anger about working hard, frequently displaying pride in their work ethic, but they balked at their hard work being overlooked or futile: “[Female partner] and I definitely felt like there were so many opportunities that passed us over because we were women in insurance. Because insurance is a very male-driven industry” (D10). This sense of unfairness created a feeling of frustration that became a catalyst for starting a company where their work ethic would be rewarded and they had more control over the outcome of their labor.

Along with feeling they had to work harder than male colleagues, but had fewer opportunities, participants also felt they were being held to a different standard for behavior because they were women. This included appearance, socialness with coworkers, being nice as well as competent, and not being too ambitious, outspoken, or assertive. One participant (D14) stated that for women
in the field of architecture, where they were greatly outnumbered by men, there was a “constant struggle for women to be perfect at work.” The participants also noted that the very qualities that made them successful entrepreneurs were the characteristics they were criticized for in formal work. They described being criticized as “aggressive” (D7), “too masculine” (D2), “a bad communicator” (D20), and “too opinionated” (D17). They also noted they never saw a male colleague being criticized for the same traits: “I do think that women... you hear people say, things like ‘if you're a strong woman then you're a bitch’ or they chalk it up to an emotional thing. And then you look at a man that is behaving the exact same and they’ll say ‘being tough’ instead. There's definitely a double standard, for sure” (D1).

Being immersed in this work environment was described by one woman as “a big hit to your self-esteem. It's like constantly being dismissed. You're not valued for what you really have to contribute. It changes people” (D7). Some women started to feel depressed, anxious, and discouraged at being unable to fulfill the expectations for behavior. This sense of disempowerment stands in stark contrast to the sense of empowerment, confidence, and improved self-esteem they describe as a result of being entrepreneurs (detailed below). They noted the irony that, had they changed themselves to fit the demands of their employers, they would have changed the traits that later made them successful as entrepreneurs:

“I was told that I was too aggressive, that I wasn't a good communicator. All the time. Women hear that all the time. There have been New York
Times articles about it. I was a manager so I got to see this 360 review process that was going on to review people. And I would hear that every time a woman was challenging the status quo. Or pushing for more or ‘leaning in,’ as we like to say it now. She’d be told that she was too aggressive or not communicating appropriately. But you never heard that about men. As a man you’re supposed to be aggressive and you’re supposed to be a shitty communicator. So that was the biggest challenge.

I turned into a blabbing idiot because I was so obsessed with being told I was a bad communicator that I over-communicated too much and couldn’t communicate at all. I was obsessed with everything that would come out of my mouth. And I didn’t realize how bad it had gotten until I started my own business where I had to be aggressive. And nobody worried about me being a poor communicator because I immediately suffer the consequences when I wasn’t a good communicator. And, in fact, I wasn’t communicating frequently enough because it had been pounded in my head that I was either talking too much or not leaving enough room for other people or wasn’t playing fairly in terms of leaving room for other people. So, in the corporate world, I started getting quieter whereas, as a business owner, I’m an expert in my field. I’m expected to be the talkative one. People come to me so I give them advice, they don’t come to me so I stand back and be quiet. There’s a point where I have to listen to them and listen to their points but after that they want me to tell them what to
do. And I was too delicate and shy at first because I was overthinking everything I said because of this review legacy from corporate” (D7).

These experiences of being criticized for speaking up, being ambitious, or being assertive appeared to disempower the women and undermine their self-confidence. They were being criticized for factors beyond work performance that were instead very personally undermining, such as appearance, personality, and social ability. These expectations were near impossible to meet and the women were aware the men were not held to the same standard. The participant (D7) quoted above had immigrated to the U.S. as an adult and said she thought women here suffer from a “culture of nice,” where women were expected to be perfect, nice, and accommodating. When these cultural expectations permeate the work culture, it appeared that women in this sample felt held to a different standard than male coworkers. Many of the participants found this tiring and unfair, which motivated them to consider entrepreneurship.

**Penalized for motherhood.** The participants who were mothers described feeling penalized for parenthood in a way that male colleagues were not. Several theorized this was due, in part, to a work structure where there was an expectation that a man would have a wife at home to handle all childcare duties, thereby freeing him to work long, uninterrupted hours. Though, interestingly, many pointed out this structure was not working well for the men in the company who wanted more time with their children and shared in more childcare duties than the typical man of prior generations. However, as women, they were not even given the option to prioritize work over family had they wanted to: “Sometimes when
there was a project, and they knew that you're a mom, and you had children at home, they didn't give you the best projects because of that. And, therefore, you did not go as high up as you could have gone if you could have taken a more challenging project or task” (D18). Whether out of a sense of paternalism or fear a mom could not handle the responsibility, such actions limited women’s chances to showcase their ability and to advance.

Additionally, a lack of paid maternity leave, adequate space for pumping, expensive childcare, required travel, and lack of flexibility in scheduling made corporate work challenging for the mothers and entrepreneurship an appealing option. Some participants did not realize until they had a child within the corporate structure, that a conflict would arise between their family and work goals. Other participants became entrepreneurs before becoming mothers because they saw friends and family struggling to balance work and motherhood and wanted to invest themselves into a career that would be flexible for them once they started a family. When asked about being a mother in her corporate field, one mother (D19) said: “I'm just not going to put up with any of that bullshit and I'm also not going to change how corporate structures are built. Some things I can't change. It's really hard but it works to be an entrepreneur.” This participant echoed a theme noted by many of the participants, namely that they felt unable to change the corporate structures of their former employers. This inability to adapt the structure of formal work in a way that would support their family goals motivated these women to choose instead to build a company from the ground up.
Women were “our toughest foes” at work. One of the most distinct contrasts between the participants’ descriptions of former work experiences and their current entrepreneurship experiences was the relationships they had with other women. All but one of the participants described in great detail the sense of comradery and strong networks they had with other women entrepreneurs. Many were members or leaders of women’s organizations and volunteered their time to mentor other women and girls. Perhaps this is why many expressed a sense of bewilderment at their negative experiences with women colleagues in their former employment settings. A few even asked the interviewer to confirm confidentiality of their identity before discussing their relationships with women in the corporate world because they were known in their entrepreneurship community as a champion of women and they did not want to be thought of as speaking ill of other women in any way. However, even some of the most ardent supporters of women noted difficulty in their relationships with other women in the corporate environment. For example, participants noted female bosses to be more difficult than male bosses:

“In the corporate world a lot of my bosses and superiors were women and it was difficult to work with them. And getting out of the corporate world I have had super-uber successful relationships working with women...I started an entrepreneurial group for women. So, in the corporate world I’m not sure what it was. It was like that edge to get ahead or it wasn’t a great relationship in promoting and helping each other. But, I would say
pretty much consistently there was not a great relationship between myself and my female bosses” (D12).

Like this participant, some had theories for why women were more competitive and less supportive of one another in the corporate world than in entrepreneurship. Often they noted it was worse in companies or fields with fewer women:

“Because there were just two women and myself and a lot of men, and the women actually interestingly enough were not supportive of me at all. One of them actually, I remember it was a silly mistake that I made, and she said it was almost like she wanted me to make this mistake. And her answer was, ‘Well, I had to learn the hard way so do you.’ …I think to myself maybe it’s the profession. That women architects, they have to fight the men and whoever makes it…They’re not going to reach out to lend you a hand. They don’t want to help you” (D14).

Similar to what this participant pointed out, some cited the more seasoned women in the company were hardest on other women and expressed an expectation that because they had to struggle and “learn the hard way,” so should younger women in the company.

Most of the women blamed systemic factors (e.g., a lack of advancement opportunities for women in their field) rather than individual women in the companies. In other words, the lack of women in leadership positions, or in general, created a sense of competition among the women. Some cited this conflict as a motivator for their current work to support other women
entrepreneurs and create a company culture based on cooperation rather than competition. In fact, the majority of entrepreneurs expressed a value of assisting other women entrepreneurs and in building a supportive community that would benefit even those women who may be their business competitors. Many of the participants articulated this dichotomy between their experience of unsupportive relationships among women in their former careers and the high level of support and comradery in their experiences with other women entrepreneurs.

A common denominator among push factors was a feeling that they, as workers and as individuals, were not valued by their employers. There was a sense of being a “cog in the wheel” (D2) of the corporate machine, expendable, and undervalued. Several noted, given the current culture of lay-offs and downsizing, entrepreneurship was less risky than formal work because they had more control over their own destiny and more power over their financial future by being able to control the number of clients they took on.

Overall, participants described formal work settings that sounded disempowering in multiple ways: lack of control over resources (time and money), lack of choices in position and tasks, lack of ownership over intellectual property, limits on creative control, and feeling undervalued as an individual. They expressed a desire to start their own companies to escape this sense of disempowerment and create new empowering environments. This desire to create a better work setting shifts the focus to discussing pull factors, which can be described as hopes they had for themselves and their employees that enticed them to become an entrepreneur.
Pull Factors

Push factors were those that motivated participants to leave their formal employment due to some sort of dissatisfaction or discomfort with their work setting. Pull factors were what drew them to entrepreneurship and encompassed their hopes for what it might offer them in different domains (e.g., financial, psychological). The overarching themes among the pull factors were power and control over resources, psychological empowerment, and empowerment of others. All participants were able to express their hopes for what entrepreneurship would bring. Not all these hopes came to fruition in the way they expected and many described entrepreneurships as difficult work. However, even when describing the hard work, they often pointed out that their freedom as entrepreneurs made the hard work worth it. Or as one participant (D17) stated: “Entrepreneurs are the only people who will work 80 hours so they don’t have to work 40.” Below, I explore the themes around hopes being realized through entrepreneurship versus hopes that did not come to being as the participants expected. However, I will first describe aspects of entrepreneurship that were appealing to women.

Freedom and control. These two words came up repeatedly when participants described their motivation for starting their own company. The word freedom was used to describe having power over their work schedules, income, creativity, and growth of their company. The desire to innovate and be creative was cited by many as a pull to entrepreneurship. They expressed a desire to have control over the direction of their work and to make improvements in the field in which they worked:
“So I've always had... a strong desire to change practices. So, seeing it from the corporate angle, I didn't like how marketing was being done. And I didn't like how the agencies functioned... And I wasn't seeing that evolution in what people were doing in the agency and as well as what we were doing at the corporate level. So I wanted to build an agency that functions...the way I saw marketing worked very well” (D7).

Several women observed it was less risky to own your own company than to risk being laid off when working for someone else. There was a sense that, in today’s employment culture, there was a constant sense of fear when working for a large company because there was so little loyalty to employees and one could be fired at any time.

“It's not my mom's generation anymore, where individuals have loyalty to their employers and vice versa. Employers don't have loyalty to their employees the way that they used to. I mean, my mom's been working at the same company for 30 plus years and that's rare now. So when you work for a big corporation like [big insurance company] you can't just assume that that is going happen...But there's no loyalty. It is what it is. We're in a place in society where it is each man for himself” (D10).

As this participant noted, the shift in corporate culture away from lifelong employment at one company that would be loyal to employees, de-incentivized putting in long hours and making sacrifices for employers because there was not a sense that this work would be rewarded with job security. This makes owning your own company more appealing because there may be more control over long-
term employment and reaping the rewards of one’s hard work. Entrepreneurship was a particularly appealing proposition for women who felt they had been working extremely hard in a corporation but felt unrewarded due to being a woman. This control over resources (time and money) was often interwoven with a desire for psychological empowerment.

**Psychological empowerment and control over resources.** A common theme among the participants was wanting the ability to be authentic to themselves and their values and have a sense of fulfillment and meaning in their work. They described a desire to be able to achieve their goals, have their opinions and contributions matter more, and feel control over where they invested their work hours. This desire to feel they had control over their circumstances and the ability to achieve their goals and have their work embody their values is a form of psychological empowerment. This empowerment came through different domains, such as a desire for autonomy, freedom to prioritize their values, creative control, and freedom to empower others.

*“I make my own future” (D4).* Participants described the freedom to determine their own destiny in their employment as a motivating factor to becoming an entrepreneur. In entrepreneurship, they sought a sense of control over their own advancement. In formal work, they described having to navigate a bureaucratic system that was, at times, stacked against them as women or as women of color. They were looking for the freedom to be creative, make mistakes, take risks, and follow their own instincts in work:
“[Before becoming an entrepreneur] I always felt like I could do what I wanted but it is hard when you have other people to answer to and a job you are either worried about losing or have to make decisions.” (D4).

This quote demonstrates the desire to be one’s own boss and to have greater security as a reason to pursue entrepreneurship. Similar to this participant, others noted a desire to innovate and have more ownership over their decision-making at work, but felt either limited by having to answer to others, or limited creative control, or fear of taking risks that could jeopardize their job. Some described their former work cultures as imposing conformity, which stifled creative potential of employees. Therefore, the ability to be creative and take risks was an appealing aspect of entrepreneurship.

Some participants were very specific in wanting to innovate in their field when they started their company and others sought a more general sense of control and autonomy. Participants also wanted more creative control in their company and to innovate in their industries in a way that was not possible in larger companies: “there is never enough freedom to build your own service or product when you don’t own it” (D9). Some entrepreneurs started their companies based on an idea for an innovation or product that they could not bring to fruition within their former work structure and others wanted the power to make a difference through their work in a way they felt they could not while working for others. Overall, participants viewed entrepreneurship as a way to further pursue their goals and advance their careers.
“Live authentically in your business” (D17). Participants also spoke of the desire to live authentically to their values and use their talents in a meaningful way. In contrast to feeling like a “string puppet” (D7) in their corporate work, they sought to use their individuality as an asset in their career rather than liability. Women who had been branded as a “troublemaker” (D12) for characteristics of assertiveness, leadership, and creativity longed for a career where they did not have to stifle their personalities or monitor and edit themselves constantly.

There was also a desire for value congruence in their work, where they could feel they lived out their personal values (e.g., eco-consciousness, empowering clients and employees, working with underserved communities) in their work. At times, this desire for value congruence also related to their work and home-life balance:

“And I shortly quit because at that point I said, ‘okay, where is my priority here?’ Again, you can do it all but maybe not all at the same time. So, I can go back to TV maybe another time and find something else. And along the way I ended up finding PR. It works better with my lifestyle. But if I wanted to go back into TV I could’ve pushed for it. But that would’ve been working seven days a week again and that’s not what I wanted. I wanted to do something that also let me be a mom” (D3).

As will be noted later, this ability to work in a way that was value-congruent and personally meaningful was experienced as personally empowering, altered their
self-perception, and built their confidence. Here we see this value congruence as a reason women wanted to pursue entrepreneurship.

“Meaning through helping others” (D1). Every participant noted the importance of empowering others with their business and cited this as part of the motivation for starting their company. One participant had been a teacher and told her story of having an epiphany about how she could start a company that could have a greater impact on the Chicago South Side neighborhood community she worked in:

[He was] probably one of the most profoundly bright students that I ever worked with...He came to see me and I was all excited and really looking forward to this all week long....I said ‘what are you doing?’ He said, ‘I'm working cleaning services at one of the hotels downtown.’... And I felt my heart sink because he was absolutely brilliant and he is telling me the story of being exploited. He's not even making minimum wage because of his documentation status... So, I'm going back to my office and I'm thinking [of starting her business]and the walls are going wha, wha, wha, it's like that defining moment in every inch of my being...I love technology because it's creative it doesn't matter what you look like. It's a meritocracy. And there was something so profoundly social justice delicious and that teaching people to program meant they got to write the rules. And that you could really be a maker...It's exactly the same formula as community leadership or organizing... We're not taking the best talent out of the community to move to the suburbs and never return. We're
saying this is an investment I'm making. I'm going to teach in the community. I'm going to change the bad policies that hurt our people. And stop waiting for other people to come in and do it for us” (D11).

This participant described her passion for empowering students through teaching. This description of meeting with a former student who had not realized his full potential was an epiphany moment where she recognized she would need to work outside her current employment structure to be able to fully empower and equip young people in her neighborhood community the way she envisioned. This was similar to other instances recounted by participants where they saw opportunities to better serve and empower others through starting their own companies than through their formal work positions.

Participants listed their children, their employees, their clients, and the community (e.g., neighborhood, network of women entrepreneurs, or Chicago) in general, as those whom they wanted to empower through their business. One participant worked in corporate accounting for thirty years and was motivated to start her own accounting firm to help the companies she felt were being overlooked by corporate accounting firms:

“I got tired of corporate America...I saw a lot of small businesses, during the time that I worked with in corporate America, that I felt bad for because they were so small. They could not pay enough to compete with the big companies. And they were just overshadowed. And I just think mostly they were overshadowed because of cash flow. The banks do not
loan the money because they were small. So I wanted to help small
businesses to grow” (D18).

Although this participant does not specifically use the term empowerment, her
desire to give small businesses tools to grow is a form of helping to empower
these small businesses through increased resources.

Overall, it was notable how many participants expressly noted
empowerment, meaning, and values as a major pull factor for starting their own
company. Beyond just a desire for their own freedom and empowerment, they
sought to provide this to others around them. The limited ability to do this within
the formal work world was a powerful motivating factor. Many expressed a
desire to create a work environment that empowered employees, women, or just
other people in general. There was also a desire to create businesses based on a
cooperative model, rather than competitive. This value was expressed both in
how they interacted with employees and companies that may be considered rivals
in their field. Thus, many were guided by these values and sought to intentionally
create business that reflected their values.

In summary, the juxtaposition between what participants wanted for their
work experience and what they actually were experiencing in their formal work
created a discrepancy that motivated them to leave the formal work world and
build their own companies. These factors likely also impacted the field they
chose for entrepreneurship. As I address below, many of the participants changed
fields when they started their company and others chose to work solely with
women clients in order to avoid the discrimination they had experienced in formal
work. Together, the push factors of overt or subtle unwelcomeness and inequality was described as discouraging and disempowering. The hope and expectation for a career where they could empower themselves and others, find flexibility and control over their time and resources, and live congruently with their values of helping others and innovating, were the pull factors that drew them into entrepreneurship.

**Experiences of Entrepreneurship**

As described above both in escaping some of the push factors and the desire to pursue the pull factors, participants expressed hopes and expectations for what entrepreneurship would be for them. Many of these hopes were realized and all of the participants interviewed expressed satisfaction with their choice to become entrepreneurs as well as intent to remain entrepreneurs, either with their current company or by starting additional companies. A few expectations were not fully met, however, and some of the push factors that prompted them to become entrepreneurs were not fully left behind, most notably discrimination based on sexism and racism. Below, I describe the experiences participants recount and at times contrast expectations that were or were not met. Additionally, we see how community with other women entrepreneurs was an important part of their experiences of entrepreneurship.

**Industry Choice**

As women made the transition from the formal work world to becoming an entrepreneur, there was an interesting pattern in the fields they came from versus those they decided to start business in. First, over half of the participants
came from male-dominated fields such as financial industry, engineering, insurance, science, architecture, and computer programming. Also, many of these women in male-dominated corporate fields chose to start a business in a woman-dominated field. In fact, of the 20 participants, only one moved from a woman-dominated field to male-dominated (from luxury beauty retail to candy retail, yet even though candy is male-dominated, retail is female dominated). Although this may be a function of the current sample, it was interesting that women tended to come from male-dominated fields and to then select into women-dominated fields. This shift may have been prompted by experiences of sexism or other factors we did not discuss. However, such an industry choice should be kept in mind when understanding the previously described experiences in the formal work world and the new experiences participants articulated as women who were entrepreneurs.

**Freedom and Control**

One of the pull factors noted by participants was the desire for more control over their time, income, and creativity. The participants noted how this expectation came to fruition. Despite the risk that may be inherent in starting a company, some participants described entrepreneurship as less risky than working for an employer: “And when you're self-employed you can kind of determine your own future a little bit. You have more control over it than when you're employed. So, I think it's less risky than being employed” (D5). This was frequently cited by participants as an appealing part of entrepreneurship, with some saying that, after being an entrepreneur, they would not want to return to formal work because they
had grown accustomed to the control they had over their employment. One participant noted that power over her financial means gave her the freedom to pursue other business opportunities:

“For me, money isn't your bank account; it is the freedom it gives you. When you're in control of how much you earn every year or you can scale back your company or grow it or do all that. That's in my control. I like the freedom that it brings you and it brings new opportunities. If you want to set up a new company or get into real estate, you can” (D5).

As with this participant, power over financial means appeared to be an empowering experience. This freedom and flexibility to have more control over their income and company growth allowed them to pursue additional opportunities and businesses in a way that a set paycheck might not have allowed.

Participants also noted they enjoyed having control over the growth and direction of their schedules and companies. Unlike their experiences in the corporate world, they had more freedom to vary their workload based on life circumstances. They gave examples of circumstances (e.g., illness, childbirth, death in the family, or desire to pursue other business opportunities) that would have been incompatible with their former work environments, but were possible as an entrepreneur.

“When I look back, I think I was a good role model for my children. That you could have it all, but I told them just not all in the same day. Sometimes as a woman you need to just
say, ‘Okay. I can do this thing this year and then this next time, a year from now’...and kind of make a plan” (D3).

This desire for control over their schedule was not limited to participants who were mothers, but was also expressed by women who wanted the freedom to pursue different opportunities, such as starting another business, travel, or education. Participants expressed a sense of power and empowerment gained through the ability to tailor their work schedule to adapt to the needs of their lives in a particular season. They discussed the sense of control they had by being able to rely more on employees or empower them to take on greater roles in the company in order to free up their time to create new businesses or seek other opportunities. One participant (D17) had just completed the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Program, traveled to South America, and was planning to make two of her employees partners in her current business in order to free up more time to start a second business:

“Yeah, I have complete control over my life. I'm in the office Monday through Thursday this week in the mornings... I just came back from Argentina and Buenos Aires and Uruguay and all that. I took the Goldman Sachs program and I was there 20 hours a week, at least, per week for the entire first quarter. So, I was like, ‘Hey [employees], I'm doing this. I'll be here, too, but also understand [work] was my only commitment and now there is this other commitment which makes [the company] better. So, need y'all to hold down the fort while I do this other thing.’ I have a lot of flexibility in learning and traveling and doing other stuff” (D17).
As this participant noted, control over her time and resources was described as a very appealing part of entrepreneurship. Not one participant expressed regret in their choice to become entrepreneurs and most expressed they could never return to working for another person because they valued this independence and control so much that it made up for any of the risk or extra work that being their own boss might entail. They seemed to find this control and independence very empowering.

**Value Congruence**

When starting their businesses many expressed a desire to be able to run their businesses in a way that was congruent with their own values. This expectation for value congruence between their internal values (e.g., eco-consciousness, empowerment of employees or underserved people in their neighborhood community, or value for family time) and their business lives as entrepreneurs was overwhelmingly met. This included the type of culture they created for themselves and employees, customers they served, and employment policies they created. They also were able to balance work with home life in a way that enabled them to adapt their work and home responsibilities to fit different life stages (e.g., less work with a young child or sick parent versus more work when children became more independent or they needed more income). This congruence between work and other responsibilities appeared to be an energizing and satisfying part of entrepreneurship for participants:

“There's nothing I would take back for the time that I was able to be there for my kids. I’ll never get that again. And then life throws you things such
as a mother with Alzheimer's and a father with dementia. I was able to have the flexibility because I chose that path to have more flexibility in my time. So there were times in my career that I had to work less and I was able to control that. And when I think about life, and at the end of the day, I look back and I say that I'm at the end, let's look at the journey I had. And I'll say thank God for my choice and that I did what mattered to me” (D3).

In addition to having the ability to live their own lives in a way that matched their personal values, many participants specifically started businesses that enabled them to work in a way or serve certain customers in a way that matched their values (e.g., eco-consciousness or empowering clients and employees).

**Empowerment**

Many participants cited empowerment as motivation for becoming an entrepreneur. During the interview, I did not define the term empowerment for participants and none of them asked for a definition. However, they all seemed to be very cognizant of the concept and many explicitly listed empowerment among their goals for their business and included it on their marketing materials and websites. And even if not an explicit goal of their company, all participants said they felt they empowered themselves and others through their work and found this to be a satisfying and meaningful part of entrepreneurship:

“What gives the biggest meaning to my life, now that I am a business owner, is helping people. Because I don’t have kids, and I won’t have kids, this is what gives my life meaning. But definitely I want to always
keep the business as the source, the place where women can come and improve their lives. And always keep it like that and be known for that” (D1).

Their desire to empower others through their work influenced choices participants made in growth (staying mid-size to maintain power over wages and corporate culture), employees (hiring single mothers, training employees in English, mentoring interns), clients (not accepting clients whose businesses are value incongruent with theirs), and business model (training key employees to autonomously run company to give them more skills and experience in order free themselves up to be more flexible):

“I want each person to have their own personal freedom. [I tell employees] ‘here's the parameters of what we need to get done. How do you see your role in that?’ It's like you're taking your own values and living authentically in your business in that way” (D17). 

As this participant mentioned, there was often a desire to extend empowerment beyond themselves and create work environments that empowered others. This may be, in part, a reaction to having worked in disempowering work environments themselves or just a value they had for empowering others.

Participants with children noted that they felt being an entrepreneur empowered their children to follow their own dreams. The women who had children also wanted to be a role model for their kids by being a business owner, pursuing their passion, and living authentically to their values:
“I am proud that [the children] saw me start my own business and that people work for me. I want them to know that...you can do whatever you want as long as you try hard enough and put in enough work. And it is important for me that they see that” (D6).

Many participants hired their children as employees to help with their business and were proud of being able to give them work experience that manifested in success later in their lives. They felt they were able to benefit both their business and their children by encouraging their kids to use their creativity and foster a strong work ethic. Several mothers also noted their kids were proud of them and the kids were inspired to start their own companies and pursue their own dreams.

The Continuing Impact of Sexism

In general, the participants expressed that most of the expectations they had when starting as entrepreneurs had been met. However, some also expressed they still had to negotiate some of the push factors that had impelled them away from formal work, in particular, sexism. The participants, who had left corporate or academic jobs because they felt unfairly treated for their gender, still had to navigate unequal treatment as entrepreneurs. The participants described their ways of navigating this sexism and noted how their approach was different due to having more control over their work life as entrepreneurs. Below I describe their experiences of sexism, as well as their strategies for managing it as entrepreneurs.

Within business. Even when running their own company, some were not able to escape the sexism that had motivated many of the participants to leave formal work. However, the experience of sexism varied quite a bit by industry.
One participant in the technology field stated: “[Am I discriminated against?] Absolutely. Every day. As a woman entrepreneur and as a CEO and then a woman in technology. As a woman of color, too…. I once was in a sales meeting and I came into the meeting before everyone else had gotten there. And someone asked me to get them coffee” (D11). The participants in woman-dominated fields or who primarily served women clients noted they felt protected in their industry, but were aware of sexism in other fields and would recount stories that entrepreneur friends told them (e.g., an entrepreneur friend in the steel industry dealing with sexism on a daily basis). Women with male business partners also noted a sense of protection because they could strategically utilize the male partner with clients who may discriminate against them as women (D10):

Well, [client company] have the president of the company call us and basically tell us that they like to remove us from our contract because we are condescending and hard to work with. What do you mean we're hard to work with? We're asking you to take care of something. By the way, we're working for free this far because you guys haven't paid us. If this was a man calling you demanding payment for his services as well as demanding services for his client you guys would not dare to call him condescending...And so three or four days later we still haven't heard anything and in these emails everyone was copied including [her male business partner]. He wrote them an email saying, we need payment and he was available at certain times. They paid immediately.”
Many of the descriptions of experiences matched those described in their former work. For example, women still struggled to break into male dominated networks: “Yeah, I think [the construction industry] is a network and close knit. Not that they’re not nice to women or that they don’t respect women or anything. I just think that it's like a boy’s club. I don’t know how to exactly describe it other than it's just that their friendships go deeper” (D16). Being excluded from these “Old Boy’s Club” networks cost the women contracts and impacted them financially, just as being excluded in the formal work world had cost them the benefits of informal network connections. However, as I will describe below, the participants often noted ways in which they could, as entrepreneurs, work around these barriers more effectively than when in corporate life.

Women with male business partners saw instances where the men were treated with more respect than them, even if the woman were the senior partner:

“Well, [client company] had the president of the company call us and basically tell us that they would like to remove us from our contract because we are ‘condescending and hard to work with.’ What do you mean we’re hard to work with? We’re asking you to take care of something. By the way, we’re working for free thus far because you guys haven’t paid us. If this was a man calling you, demanding payment for his services as well as demanding services for his clients, you guys would not dare to call him ‘condescending.’ How is that condescending? We're getting shit done. It's that old adage where if a woman gets shit done she's a bitch and if the guy does it, he's a guy. So it is that whole thing. So
here's where we know where we were right and we were not overly sensitive. About a week into it, the president of the company calls and was like, ‘I'm getting you a point person. We're going to work this out.’ They realized we are about to get lawyers involved and they kind of backed down. And they were like, ‘We're going to get you guys paid. We just need some time to crunch the numbers. We're totally overwhelmed and understaffed.’ Blah-blah-blah. And so three or four days later, we still haven't heard anything and in these emails everyone was copied including [male partner]. He wrote them an email saying, ‘we need payment’ and he that he was available at certain times. They paid immediately.” (D10).

This participant described herself as starting her company out of “anger” due to being underpaid compared to male coworkers and passed over for projects due to being a woman. She started her business in the same male-dominated industry of insurance and focused first on women-owned businesses in an attempt to avoid the sexist experiences she had in the corporate firms. However, as her company grew in success, it was sought out by large companies, such as the one above. She expressed frustration that, even though the company mentioned above had courted her company to be involved with them, they treated her and her female business partner poorly until her male business partner became involved.

Another form of sexism was “from below” by employees. One participant who owned a catering company that employed male cooks noted: “There is lots of strong male egos in [catering] kitchens in general…it is mostly from below so it isn’t so much discriminating because…I’m their boss versus the other way
around. You know, but definitely some push back” (D4). This “push back” (e.g., questioning or not complying to rules or requests) was particularly prevalent in male-dominated industries, but was also an issue whenever the women needed to hire male contractors or laborers. They expressed feeling the need to assert their authority or take a firmer approach than they did with women employees. Those with male business partners noted that the men were given more respect from male employees. Though participants often cited this inequality with a tone of annoyance or disgust, they also described using their male business partners strategically with clients or employees. The participants noted their male business partners were aware of this disparity, frustrated with it, and were supportive of them. Only one participant described an unsupportive male business partner:

“And when I got pregnant he said, ‘I think it will be difficult for you to work once you have this baby.’ So, I think that was only time I was discriminated against was with another graphic designer...a male homosexual graphic designer told me that he thought I wouldn’t be able to work very hard on the business. Which really struck me as silly and odd, but it was great because then we were no longer partners” (D12).

This assumption that motherhood would have a negative impact on a woman’s ability to do her job sounded similar to participants’ descriptions of being passed over for projects or promotions in their prior formal work settings. However, the tone of the description was very different in that this woman dismissed this partner and carried on in the work she wanted to do. Her reaction to him was one of mild annoyance and dismissal. But, in formal work, this was rarely an option
to choose business partners and participants had a tone of frustration and powerlessness when describing subtle, or not so subtle, acts of demission due to motherhood.

Freedom to choose work partners and to control how they handled sexist situations appeared to give the participants a greater sense of control and bolstered their sense of empowerment to handle such instances. They acknowledged sexism existed and impacted them, but they also felt empowered to combat it or remove themselves from these or other unbeneﬁcial relationships:

“So, if there's ever been anyone who has ever seemed remotely unsupportive or that it wouldn't be a beneﬁcial relationship to know them, personally and career-wise, then I just don't deal with that. It's just like, ‘goodbye, have a nice life. We aren’t going to beneﬁt each other at all, so bye’” (D15).

This ability to walk away from unbeneﬁcial relationships seemed to give the participants a sense of empowerment and energy that con trasted their descriptions of how they felt in navigating unsupportive environments in their former careers. As entrepreneurs, they had more freedom to choose whom they would work with and more ﬂexibility in their strategies for handling sexist or unsupportive work relationships.

Additionally, there were instances of gender-based discrimination from clients: “I had a man working for me and he left abruptly so I was left to treat the rest of his patients. This woman walked in and was like ‘well, what makes you qualiﬁed to treat me?’ I said, ‘Well, I have a doctorate in physical therapy, I
taught him pretty much everything he knows, and I own the place. If you don't want to see me, though, that's fine you can leave” (D17). As in this instance, women clients could be as discriminating as the men. The participant noted this client stayed and became a good repeat client. However, the initial resistance to seeing her as competent as her male employee was annoying to her.

In contrast, another participant noted how sexism limited the number of female clients she is referred. She (D11) owns a technology training program for underserved kids and noticed the mothers in her Chicago South Side neighborhood community would encourage their sons to participate in the program because it led to career success, but were resistant to support their daughters: “And then she refers her son. No one is referring their daughters. In fact, with daughters it's the opposite. ‘My daughter can’t do that. She's got to watch the kids or she's got to do this or that.’ Even if she doesn't have her own kid, she's taking care of somebody else's kids.” This same participant (D11) attributed this to: “Yeah internalized biases are so insidious because we don't even know that they're there.” This participant expressed frustration at not having more women participants in her training program due to this resistance by some families in her neighborhood community to support their daughters’ educations. However, her position as a woman of color who was a CEO of a technology company gave her added credibility when she encouraged and inspired other women in her community to pursue their employment dreams. She would use instances of discrimination as opportunities for education. Her prior career as a high school science teacher had left her frustrated in her lack of power to help her
community and she had started her company to empower her neighborhood community. Although she expressed frustration at still dealing with people who undermined her due to being a woman of color in a male-dominated field (e.g., science and technology), she appeared empowered in her current role and hopeful about making changes in her underserved neighborhood community.

Within the community. Sexism also impacted the participants more broadly within their community of friends and acquaintances. Participants described micro-invalidations regarding them as business owners within various settings. One woman (D8) who owned a company with 5-million-dollar in yearly revenue noted: “I have a lot of people saying ‘that seems fun’ or ‘I would like to do that.’ Like it's easy. And I'm like if anybody thinks running a company would be easy then they are wrong because then everybody would be doing it. It's more of, not belittling, but kind of like they think you're just a housewife who decided to do a little job.” This was a common experience among entrepreneurs. Several others described social situations where friends and acquaintances would minimize their work, either by assuming she was working for her husband’s company, had made decisions to move based on his business rather than hers, or would only ask her about domestic issues with little respect given to her professional life (D17): “It's always like ‘when are you having kids?’ or ‘When are you getting married?’ How about like, ‘Is your business at a place where you can do that?’ I’m not just going to drop everything I worked hard for.”

These experiences were common among the participants and many noted they felt
their accomplishments as a business owner were overlooked, undermined, undervalued, or completely ignored by people in their lives.

Those who were mothers faced additional invalidating assumptions because they were mothers. Often people assume their business is a hobby or just something to bring in extra cash while they stay at home with their children. While some women certainly have this type of business, the participants in this study all had employees and some had large multi-million dollar companies. Many were the main breadwinner in their family and several had their husbands working in the company they started. Therefore, it was interesting, with all this business success, that many described experiences of people assuming their companies were hobbies. This was true even of women who were single and did not have children. These invalidating comments came from parents, neighbors, friends, parents of their children’s friends, acquaintances at get-togethers, and even their dentists and doctors. Participants whose husbands or boyfriends were entrepreneurs contrasted the attitudes people had towards the men’s businesses to their own:

I would go to places my ex and I would meet people and they would say “Oh, you work at his company?” Another thing that bothered me was very early on I started doing speaking engagements because I had experience teaching marketing within the corporate world….so I would do these speaking engagements and then people would come to me to be so excited and then they would be like, “oh you are [boyfriend]’s girlfriend (D7).
Several women helped their husbands start companies or supported their businesses by using them as a vendor, but family and friends still made assumptions that the man’s business was bigger, more successful, and more important than hers.

Another commonly noted experience was the assumption that they were not the boss or worked for their male employee: “I once had a male employee and we went to event together and we would meet people and they would say, ‘Oh, you’re the owner of the company’ and he would say, ‘No. She is. I just work there’” (D7). This was especially true in male-dominated fields:

“In the building sector, it definitely is [male dominated]. I did a lunch and learn with architects on Friday and they were all men. It was a total sausage-fest. Most of the architects and the contractors are men…I have had people who’ve asked me dumbass questions like, ‘Does your husband work in the business, too?’ or ‘Does your husband own the business?’ Like, especially when I was younger, people would come in and they would see me and ask, ‘Is the owner in?’…What would happen if they’d seen a man behind the desk? There’s always an assumption that a man owns my business” (D19).

When describing these situations, the participants expressed a sense of annoyance at being underestimated or misunderstood as businesswomen. All of the participants described working very hard to build their businesses. Though not enough to deter them from their work, these invalidating comments seemed to be annoying and tiring. As with the participant above, who described the comments
and questions as “dumbass,” the women were frustrated with the questioning and belittling assumptions people made about them and their businesses. As I describe more below, many of the women rely on strong networks of women entrepreneurs for support, validation, and encouragement as a way to counteract these invalidating experiences.

**Within the home.** In addition to sexism within their companies, professional fields, and communities, some women also experienced sexism within their own families, which negatively impacted their careers. It was notable that almost every participant noted the importance of a supportive family. The participants with romantic partners who picked up slack in the home or with children when the participant was working at their business, noted how important this support was to their business. However, when there was a family expectation that the woman is the primary caregiver, these domestic responsibilities interfered with business demands:

> “Barriers? Working when I have so many kids. **My two kids are pretty much my sole responsibility for drop off and pick up so there are lots of time constraints. Just the whole domestic duty aspect of being married and having kids. It just takes a lot of time**” (D12).

The assumption that women will take the primary role of caregiver is not unique to entrepreneurs and was also mentioned when participants described their formal work settings. However, with the added flexibility of business ownership, there may be an increased expectation that the women prioritize family over work, even if their spouse works from home or owns a company. Experiences varied based on
the values of each family, but the overarching pressure on women from society to fulfill the role of primary caregiver added an extra layer of pressure. Whereas, in formal work they may choose to forgo certain promotions or positions due to family responsibilities, as entrepreneurs they may choose to limit the growth of their company or forego business opportunities. This is not necessarily a negative thing, but when they express frustration or disappointment at having to make these hard choices, and notice their male partners do not, it is a barrier to achieving their business goals and limits their companies’ size and scope. That said, I will discuss the impact of unsupportive spouses and partners below, but even when partners were thought to be supportive, the more general cultural expectation of women as primary caregivers was a barrier noted by participants.

**Strategies to deal with sexism.** As mentioned previously, participants used creative methods to deal with sexism, such as using a male business partner to their advantage by making him the face of the company with male clients. The women were unhappy with doing this, but had a pragmatic attitude that it needed to be done to succeed. One participant (D7) recounted that a fellow entrepreneur had gone so far as to name her company after a man to gain this advantage:

“*I have a friend who runs a PR firm in Chicago and she named her PR firm [man’s name]. Her last name is [same last name as company name] but there’s no [male first name of company]. [She decided to do this because] she went to a meeting and she sat down with these guys, these men, and they said, ‘When is your husband arriving?’ And she said, ‘My husband?’ They said, ‘Yeah, your business partner.’ And she said, ‘I don't
have a business partner.’ But she used this as a lesson and she named her company after a man's name to lead people to believe that there's a man involved.”

This was another example of the creative ways that women entrepreneurs deal with sexism. There was pragmatism in this approach that was expressed by some as doing what they needed to in order to succeed, while still trying to make changes where they could. Though the women were still frustrated with dealing with inequality and double standards, they expressed a sense of empowerment around having more choices as an entrepreneur. Many took the attitude that they refused to work with people who were blatantly sexist, a luxury they did not have in formal work. They also expressed a mixed sense of hope in some changes being brought about in their industry: “On the other hand, I'm surprised by how many male entrepreneurs come to us and say, ‘I want to work with women. Because in my experience with women, I've always gotten the best work and the best experiences working with women and female-run companies or women-dominated companies.’ So, it's been interesting to me. My reality doesn't allow me to generalize because of seen it both ways. Both positive and negative” (D7).

Having creative control, freedom to walk away from unpleasant clients, and the ability to work to change attitudes gave participants a greater sense of empowerment in the midst of challenging circumstances. Likely, they still suffer in growth, funding, and resources from systemic sexism, but their sense of psychological empowerment and their efficacy to respond was improved. And this improved sense of empowerment may give them the fortitude and energy to
continue working for change. For example, there was a marked difference in the tone participants used while discussing sexist experiences in entrepreneurship versus when they described sexist experiences in formal work. When discussing sexism within corporate work, they sounded tired and resigned to a system that was broken beyond their ability to fix. Some explicitly stated this, saying that there were just some things they could not fix, so they chose to leave. However, when describing sexism that they faced as entrepreneurs, their tone was lighter and more of a sense of annoyance and dismissal of people who would enact sexism behaviors towards them. The power and control they had to work around these people, systems, and situations seemed to energize them and provide them options to respond in a way that aligned with their values and did not overly hold back their company.

**Importance of Community and “The New Girl’s Network”**

An integral part of the entrepreneurship experience was community with fellow women entrepreneurs. These networks included formal and informal groups that provided access to information, social capital, and other resources. Most of the participants belonged to at least one such group. They also accessed resources such as the Women’s Business Development Center and Small Business Association for assistance with business needs.

Participants noted a sharp contrast in relationships between women in the corporate world and women in the world of entrepreneurship. They described a lot of competition and undermining among women in corporations that appeared to be a manifestation of internalized sexism (e.g., enacting sexist attitudes or
behaviors upon themselves or other women). Women often said that, in their former careers, other women were less supportive than men. These same women then go on to say that the opposite is true with women entrepreneurs and they feel extremely supported and communal, even with women in rival companies:

“When I first started out, if I had a question or something, most of the women [entrepreneurs] were pretty open and they understood that they were in the same shoes...Because I feel like we understand why we're doing what we're doing. We wanted to escape either the corporate, for me it wasn’t the corporate, but it was the boredom of the type of work I was doing at the time. But it was just to escape from that. If I can do what I do and have the freedom that I have, then why not? There’s no room for competition there. I feel like the world needs every one of us” (D14).

Participants felt these groups helped them to be more competitive in male-dominated industries where “old boys’ clubs” make it difficult for women to compete. They also benefited from certification as a WBE (Woman Business Enterprise), which increased their chances of landing government and corporate contracts:

“I understand the game. And the game is a total old boys network. It's all about who you know and who you want to spend your money with. What buddy you want to spend your money or your company’s money with. And I get that. And I'm totally not benefiting from that kind of money. It's totally out of my league. But I have a WBE [Woman Business Enterprise] certification. And I don’t like set-aside programs but as long as they exist
I’m going to participate in them. And when a project has a WBE minimum it is the only time I’m only going be able to compete on a big job” (D19).

This participant was ambivalent about set aside programs, but was willing to use them to be able to compete with male owned companies. This pragmatic tone was common among women entrepreneurs when describing ways they dealt with unequal opportunities within business. As one participant (D10) put it: “do you want to eat the fish or not? Do you want to kill the whale or not? If you do, then you got to do what you got to do. It sucks but it's the reality.” In other words, the participants were willing to do things like participate in programs they felt ambivalent towards because they wanted to be successful and they needed help to compete with male-owned companies that had access to advantages they did not.

Women’s networking groups were another resource that helped their businesses by giving them access to information and partnerships. Participants noted these groups had grown in popularity in recent years and with the increase of social media. Those who started companies over ten years ago pointed out it was easier now to gather resources and connect with other businesses because of the growth of these network groups, both in person and online. They said their companies would have grown more quickly had they had those resources when starting out.

A couple of participants had reservations about the flourishing network of women entrepreneurs. One (D14) felt it was harder to find women entrepreneurs with larger companies: “I’m learning to find more women entrepreneurs. They're a rare breed. We are the vast majority of business owners in the U.S. However,
when you get to businesses with over $1 million in revenue that shrinks to like less than 10%. And then if you are in a leadership position it's so few of us. It's a really small fish in a really huge ponds.” Though, the other participants with companies with over $1 million did not mention this as a hurdle. Another entrepreneur (D16) felt women may be limiting themselves by networking too exclusively within women’s organizations, especially if they were in male dominated industries:

Even though I am pro-woman but I try not to commit myself to women-only groups. I think it's wrong. I think that women should be right up there in organizations with men. I think it's one of our biggest problems probably is that we are in these little women’s groups and we shouldn't be. I don't consider myself not equal to a man. So I don't put myself in a women only-thing. I put myself in a group that has commonality... I think that the biggest mistake that we make is we are in these women-only groups. I definitely support women but I think that that's part of the problem is when we separate ourselves, they separate us too.”

This participant was very active in entrepreneurial groups and networking groups within her field, but she had concerns about entrepreneurs who only engaged in women-only groups because she expressed concern that some women may be withdrawing from more general groups which would hurt women in the long-run. She described this type of limited group involvement as a type of self-segregation that would hurt women in business by perpetuating segregation of the genders in business. Though she was the only participant to make this point, it was
interesting because it highlights a potential downside to the growth in women-only networking groups. Though they are described as being empowering and beneficial to business, they may also be limiting if women entrepreneurs do not become involved in other types of groups as well. As this participant noted, self-segregation perpetuates segregation in general and may limit the scope of impact these women in entrepreneurship can have in their industries.

Aside from the two concerns noted by participants above, most participants had glowing reviews of the community of women entrepreneurs they worked within. Ironically, they had a greater sense of community and comradery working for themselves than they did working within a company surrounded by colleagues. Several pointed to the frustration and loneliness they had felt in their corporate careers as a catalyst for creating such a close-knit and supportive community. All but two of the participants described being part of a supportive community of other entrepreneurs, which indicated they had been able to obtain their goal of a close-knit community.

Impact on Identity and Relationships

The experience of entrepreneurship impacted the participants in different life domains. Below I discuss the changes participants noted in their sense of self and identity, including their identification with feminism. Then I will explore the changes in their relationships and the impact of supportive and unsupportive relationships.

Impact on Identity
Participants noted a range of changes in their sense of self and often expressed that they enjoyed answering this question because they felt they had many positive changes they wanted to share. Only a couple of participants identified what they considered negative changes and did so in a light-hearted manner. These negative changes were related to a growth in their impatience because they had become accustomed to have control over so many aspects of their business lives that they were less patient with things they could not control. Otherwise, they expressed positivity about their evolving sense of self as entrepreneurs.

“Who am I to be doing this?” (D1). Many participants cited a sense of unworthiness or lack of confidence early in their business, which was overcome through taking risks, investing in their businesses, and valuing their services appropriately. They gained a sense of psychological empowerment over time, which manifested in a sense of self-efficacy, confidence, and greater self-esteem.

“It has been an extremely positive experience for me. I just went from thinking, in the corporate world, that I was always causing trouble. Like I said before, I was always talking and doing this and always getting in trouble. Then turning that around to being a successful business owner. Where I even had previous bosses that I would run into and they would be like ‘huh, I’m just so impressed by you and never thought.’ And I would be like, ‘yeah, I know you never paid any attention to me unless you're writing me up for something.’ It definitely impacted me in a positive way because I’ve learned more about my capabilities and it made me feel
good. And then just also knowing that I can think outside the box and try to figure out solutions to problems. And just things that I never realized were...that other people didn’t have that. That it was unique to me but definitely helpful. Yeah, I would say it has just been such a great experience for me personally and my self-image” (D8).

This confidence was gained through a greater sense of control and autonomy, as well as a sense of ownership over their accomplishments because the success of their business could be clearly linked to the work they put into it the business. They also gained opportunities to overcome difficulties and keep their businesses thriving.

“Being a business owner is not for punks” (D10). A common theme was a sense of pride in their ability to overcome obstacles, be resourceful, and take charge of their circumstances to gain the outcome they desired. Participants had overcome obstacles such as cancer, divorce, family illness and death, and economic recessions. They labeled themselves with terms like “overcomer” and “go-getter.” There was a sense of control over their businesses that spread to other areas of life, such as their personal lives:

“It’s given me a lot of confidence. You have no idea how much confidence about who I am it has given me. It is scary. Sometimes I think I end up being cocky. It is so powerful. It is probably the most powerful thing any human being can have. Confidence that you control your life and that you control whatever your life turns out to be. And you really can do whatever you set your mind to. And that knowledge, that’s the kind of knowledge
that I want to pass on when I start teaching...it makes you confident in every other aspect of your life, your health, your relationships, your spirituality, everything that you do, your dating life, your sexual life, your sensuality, everything. You are more in control because, in a business, when you have a business, nobody can define how much you make or how much you work. It's up to you. You are really free. Yes, you don't have a secure salary. But if you look at it from the point of view that when you have a job somebody is dictating your salary, you have a cap. You must keep working and maybe you get a 2% raise every year. Maybe 2 or 3%. They define how much time off you have. They define your daily schedule. They define your benefits. Whether you have a job or not because they can fire you. When you work for yourself the only thing you have to worry about is getting a client. You don't have to worry about getting fired. You don't have to worry about how much you're going to make. And you dictate how much money you're going to make. The more you work, the more you make. You dictate your free time, your vacation, your schedule, even your benefits. If you don't want to pay an expensive insurance, then you don't pay an expensive insurance. If you don't want a retirement account, you don't have a retirement account. You're in total control. So, that really helps you control everything else in your life. It really transforms your life. It's really amazing. I kind of knew it was going to be like that because you hear it from so many women. And everybody tells you the same thing, 'It's scary at the beginning. It's hard but you never
regret it, you never look back.’ And it’s true. Once you make a decision
you never look back and you never regret it (D1).

This participant eloquently described a theme that many entrepreneurs had in their
descriptions of a changing sense of self. The empowerment, freedom, and control
they felt within their business life generalized to other areas. The growth of
confidence they gained positively impacted their personal lives as well as
professional lives and changed their sense of self at a deep level.

The participants pointed out that this newfound sense of control and
confidence included an awareness of their weaknesses. But, in contrast to the fear
of making mistakes that had been described as a downside of their corporate
work, they approached mistakes and weaknesses as inevitable, areas for growth,
and places where they could hire others to compensate.

“You get to know yourself a lot because, especially if you are by yourself,
you need to get to know your weaknesses because you are your most
valuable asset. If you get sick or whatever. Like for example I changed
my diet...if I get stressed I have to see a therapist and take care of myself.
One time I got sick for three weeks and that was no fun. So, I have to see
myself and recognize what is my weaknesses. I overstress myself. What
am I good at? What are my limitations? You have to know all the time
about yourself because no one is going to do that for you. Definitely, you
have to learn yourself as much as you can. Especially, if you want a
partner, you need to find what you are good at and what you are not good
at and find the opposite to compliment that” (D9).
This view of oneself as an investment and asset contributed to better self-care and activities of personal growth. In contrast to their descriptions of feeling like a “cog in the wheel” in their former formal work settings, they now felt invaluable in their professional lives, which generalized to the overall value they placed on themselves.

Older participants noticed a difference between themselves and their friends who chose not to work:

“I look at friends of mine, now that the kids are gone. And I'm at the perfect age where the kids are gone. They don't live at home anymore. These women, and these are MBAs and very bright women, are saying, ‘I have no self-worth.’ And I'm like, ‘What happened to those skills? I mean you've been using them but not getting paid for that.’ It doesn't matter what you say though. They say, ‘You're so lucky.’ ...I can't say enough about what I'm seeing in my generation. About how working boosts your self-confidence, self-esteem, your respect in the community from your peers, friends, and family. Without realizing that, I went down that path. I'm now able to see the friends that didn't and they're looking at me with such envy and I'm thinking, yeah, but I go to sleep at night thinking ‘Oh my God, I have to write this press release. I have to launch this new campaign.’ But the grass is always greener, perhaps. But I think when I look back on it I made the right decision for me” (D3).

As with the participant above noted, entrepreneurship seemed to give mothers options to work in a way that was still meaningful and gave them a sense of
identity in addition to motherhood without feeling they needed to sacrifice their values for raising their kids the way they wanted to. For many of the participants who were seeking to balance motherhood and work, they would say how entrepreneurship made them a better mother, in their opinion, because they still had flexibility to spend time with their children, but also had the confidence and sense of purpose that came with business ownership.

The tone of participants when describing themselves as entrepreneurs starkly contrasted with the tone they used when describing themselves in their prior work environments. Though they reiterated how much work it was to be an entrepreneur, none wanted to return to being an employee. The description of their former work bore a sense of frustration and discouragement. Even when speaking of similar struggles, such as balancing home life and work or dealing with sexism, the sense of control they felt as entrepreneurs acted as a protective factor against discouragement. For example, as an entrepreneur, they could choose how they interacted with a sexist client, either by choosing not to work with them or using a male partner as the face of the company. This differed from their descriptions of being forced to deal with double standards or discrimination within a more structured work setting. This sense of control appeared to be valued by the participants and perhaps a way they considered entrepreneurship emancipating.

**Impact on identifying as feminist.** As part of the evolving sense of self and relationships with others, I asked participants whether they identified as a feminist and if this had changed since becoming an entrepreneur. I did not define
the term for them, but, when they asked me, prompted them to use their own understanding of the word. When asked if they identified as feminist, all participants noted that they identified with at least some of the goals of feminism (equal pay for equal work, no harassment based on gender, equal opportunities, sharing both work and domestic sphere equally between partners), but some would not call themselves a feminist based on the cultural narrative of a feminist as a “man-hater” who “doesn’t shave or wear a bra.” However, whether they identified with the label of “feminist” or not, they still reported pursuing goals of gender equality in pay and equality in both home and work. Those who took the label of feminist and those who did not were fairly evenly split. Becoming entrepreneurs appeared to re-affirm or move participants more toward identifying with feminist ideals but did not necessarily increase their identification as a feminist. However no participant said she became less of a feminist after entrepreneurship.

Not a feminist. Those who did not identify as feminist stated it was due to their understanding of what the term meant. There was surprising uniformity in their descriptions of what they understood a feminist to be: a man-hater who doesn’t wear a bra or shave. Almost verbatim this negative cultural image was repeated. However, these women qualified their statements by saying they did believe in equal pay for equal work, no harassment based on gender, equal opportunities, sharing both work and domestic sphere equally between partners. One participant who did not identify as feminist noted several issues related to equality for women including not using derogatory language:
“When you think about some of the things that people say in passing derogatory comments, like, ‘don't be a pussy’ or ‘don't be a bitch.’ I'll correct everyone. Semantics are so important to me. So you say ‘okay, don't be a pussy.’ I'll be like, ‘tell me more about what that means you?’ And I'll say, ‘don't insult women.’ And they will say, ‘No, I'm not.’ And I will say ‘yeah, you are’” (D17).

Some women, who did not identify as feminist, said they did not fully understand what the term meant or had conflicting information on the meaning:

“I don't know what ‘feminist’ means. I don’t know. I don't really know what that word means. Because there's positive connotations to it and there's negative connotations to it and I don't really know the true meaning of it. I haven't really taken the time to figure out the meaning of that word because I haven’t really cared to” (D17).

Several participants moved to the U.S. as adults and did not feel the term means or do not resonate with it because of being brought up in a different culture:

“I don't know what feminism means. I grew up in [a communist country] so that wasn’t a concept I grew up with... I support women and I think we have, like I said, if me pushing women to brag a little more is feminism, then yes” (D7).

Overall, these quotes demonstrate that although these women endorsed many feminist values, they did not identify with the label either because they expressed they did not know what the term meant or did not identify with the image of what they understood a feminist to be (e.g., man-hater).
**Identified as feminist.** There was very little difference in the professed values of the women who identified with the label of feminist, but most expressed some personal connection with the term, such as a family member or mentor who modeled feminism:

“When I was in college I had a wonderful professor and this is one of those big lecture hall classes and she said, ‘stand up if you’re feminist.’ And probably two thirds of us stood up. And she said, ‘Okay great. Everyone who’s sitting down can go to the bursar’s office and drop this class because I have nothing to teach you. Because feminism is nothing more than the belief that men and women are equal…But it has stuck with me all these years. The idea that it’s really just the belief in equality. And that was it” (D11).

Others saw feminism as a foregone conclusion for all women and could not understand why some women would not describe themselves as such: “I think anyone who is a woman is a feminist. I know lots of women want to say, ‘I’m not a feminist’ and then I want to say, ‘so, you don’t think you deserve equal treatment?’ It has definitely gotten a bad rap so people are drifting away from it. But, to me, if you are a woman you are feminist” (D19).

One older participant who observed the cultural shift against identifying as a feminist and theorized on why women were less likely to take the label:

“In the world in the 80s, of course you were a feminist. If you were girl you were a feminist. Everyone knew that before you took your first
Though their beliefs, advocacy, and attitudes shifted because of becoming entrepreneurs, it did not greatly impact them adopting the label of feminist. Few of the participants noted a change in identification with the label of feminism as a direct or sole result of being an entrepreneur, but in answering the question of how their identification had changed as a result of entrepreneurship there was a trend towards more awareness of gender inequalities and more advocating for equality rather than a simple change in identification with the label of feminist. Those participants who had shifted their identity to now identify as feminist noted this shift was due in part because of seeing a famous persons identifying as feminist (e.g., Emma Watson and Beyoncé). For example, one woman noted Emma’s Watson’s speech to the U.N. had prompted her to re-examine feminism. This highlights the power of not just personal role models for feminism, but also role models in popular culture to contradict the image of feminist as angry and unshaven. Therefore, entrepreneurship appeared to shift their values and advocacy for gender equality, but did not have a large impact on their identification with feminism.

Impact on Relationships

Being an entrepreneur impacted the way the participants experienced their relationships with friends, family, and children. The changes to their self-perception, mentioned above, changed the way they interacted with loved ones and how they experienced interpersonal interactions. Owning their company also
placed demands and constraints on relationships, which required support from a spouse or partner. For some individuals, partners were not supportive and the relationships ended. For others, partners were supportive and both the relationship and the business benefitted. I will first describe general shifts in relationship dynamics, then describe ways in which entrepreneurs felt either supported or unsupported and the ways in which this impacted them, their relationships, and their businesses.

**How entrepreneurships changed relationships.** Changes in self-concept impacted the way the participants interacted with others. One woman (D1) noted that owning a company had given her confidence in dealing with her very conservative and critical family in a more empowered way. The control and freedom she felt in her business gave her a sense of autonomy that allowed her to ignore negative messages from them and their demands (i.e., focus her energy on marrying an attractive and successful man and having children) to live a life congruent with her own goals and dreams of running a successful company. Other participants stated they had increased patience and grace with people in their lives because they had to develop this in themselves by practicing self-acceptance when they made mistakes in business. Though some entrepreneurs had chosen to own their business because they saw it as a compatible employment option for motherhood, others decided after starting a business to not have children as they found meaning through their work. One woman who had started two multi-million dollar companies chose entrepreneurship because she knew she wanted five children. Another (D11) said she decided not to have children and
her husband told her, “your company is your baby.” Both were happy with their decisions and found meaning in their work and family lives.

Being an entrepreneur changed the way participants interacted with family because children and spouses were required to take on more domestic duties or jump in to support them at work when needed:

“I think that owning a business and running a business has made our relationship stronger. We had to lean on one another and support one another. Sometimes when I'm really busy I will say, ‘Can you feed them? I need to go to my office for two hours and get this done.’ And he'll do the same thing when he has his deadlines and demands at work where he needs to work extra hard and then I'll pick up slack. And I think that we work as a better team now than we did before. I have friends where they're the wives and they do all the work at home because their husbands have these corporate jobs and that's just how it is for them. But we're supporting each other in different ways. And our kids see that. And I love that they are men and they get to experience this. They can see that just because mommy's home she also works and is a pretty important job, too” (D14).

Support at home from domestic partners. All of the participants spoke of the importance of support at home. It should be noted, that though racially and ethnically diverse, the participants interviewed were all in relationships with men; therefore, this study cannot speak to the experiences of women with women partners (see study limitations below). The participants shared relationship
experiences falling all along the continuum from completely supportive to aggressively undermining. Multiple participants reported divorces or break-ups that were due in part to their entrepreneurship. Gender dynamics were often mentioned by women as an issue that negatively impacted their business and home life. For those women who had spouses with more traditional views of gender roles, this created conflict. One woman (D1) who had gotten divorced twice as an entrepreneur said:

“But if you want me to take care of everything, I cannot be an engineer or have a business and be a wife, be a mother, be a cook, and be a cleaning lady. If I'm to be the business owner and you're going to quit [your job], then you have to be the wife here. Then you are going to have to do the cleaning and paying the bills and all that. They wanted all the benefits without the effort.”

Other women (D7) reported their romantic partners wanted to have undue control in their business and were offended when they were not heeded, even though this person was not involved in the company in any way:

“There's a lot of choices that I did... A lot of times to please my [ex]boyfriend. Because he would get so emotional, so aggressive about me not listening to him. Like the name of the company. He chose the name. He came up with the name and I was fairly passive about it and I hate the name. I wish I had taken more time on the name.”

Some women went through a series of unsupportive relationships before finding a partner who would support them in their business:
“My baby is to have a successful company and have more successful companies. That's my main goal. It's not something that I know that a lot of women want, but I know that there's also a lot of women that do want that. So, it's a foreign world to guys sometimes. Where it's just like, ‘What? You don't want to just stay at home and have babies and go to Pilates and do whatever you want to do?’ So definitely it's been a relationship killer, for sure” (D15).

One woman (D7) who had been in a long-term relationship with an entrepreneur noted the double standards placed on men and women business owners and the different expectations each faces:

“Women in business, no matter how you look at it, you cannot ignore the fact that women at the end of the day have something bigger to care for at home. Women who have children, particularly. And women who don't have children have to care for their men. I mean I was changing the light bulbs in our house. I went through years of making excuses for him not being available where it mattered. Ignoring his family and his friends because I would just think he was a mad scientist and he was going to accomplish these great things. I'm going to be supportive. As women we always care for somebody else. So here's my business and I go home and I care for somebody else. Men can allow themselves, as I've seen, to be fully wrapped into the identity of the business.”

This expectation of women as caregivers and the negative cultural attitudes against women who put work first was hard for some of the women to
navigate because they felt less supported by spouses and family. One woman (D11) pointed out that men who are workaholics are congratulated, but women workaholics are vilified, whether they choose to have children or not. Participants also noted they felt their male partners were competitive with them and the partners felt threatened if they were more successful in their careers. Others had helped their husbands to start their own company and took time away from their own business to help the men, impacting their own success. Another woman was unable to get a loan because they had already taken one out for her husband’s business and it was assumed his would take priority, despite the fact her company was more profitable.

Whether the participants had positive or negative stories of support, they all spoke of the importance of support at home. Because this study interviewed current entrepreneurs and not former entrepreneurs, stories of women leaving their businesses due to lack of support were told secondhand by women who chose to remain in business. Participants shared stories of friends who did not maintain their businesses due to pressure to quit or lack of support from family. These stories were mostly told as support for their statements about the importance of support at home. As one participant (D19) with a supportive spouse put it:

“I think that is the trickiest part of owning your own business because you need someone who is supportive and you need someone who understands you have to put so much effort into it to grow it and to make it successful. You just need a team player in your life.”
Despite the multiple stories of lack of support, many of the participants were able to find supportive men who would support their business efforts in a variety of ways. Though some men were involved in the business, by far the most common mode of support was to be emotionally and domestically supportive. The participants who worked with their spouses saw it as a mixed blessing and, at times, a challenge to their marriage. Most were happy to have their romantic partner uninvolved with their business, but supportive in the home:

“He’s been very supportive from the beginning. Just watching our son late at night when I had to catch up with orders and bouncing ideas off of him. And a shoulder to cry on when I have bad customers and experiences. He’s been very supportive” (D14).

Other examples of support were a husband who took six months leave from his job to help start a participant’s company and watch the kids; a boyfriend willing to be flexible and creative to see her when she had time off, even when it was at odd hours; picking up slack with kids or cooking; and moving or changing jobs to support her business.

Aside from their domestic partner, participants noted other sources of support (or non-support) that impacted them as entrepreneurs. Parents and siblings were often noted as important sources of support, emotionally, practically, and financially. Several entrepreneurs said they had family help (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents) with funding, marketing, or other practical business matters. Others highlighted the importance of their family’s emotional support and unwavering belief in their ability to succeed in business. Some had
relied heavily on their teenage children working in their companies. Others noted supportive friends and business partners. Interestingly, a few participants made a point that their male friends who were gay were their best supporters:

“But I think it also goes with like being a minority. Well, not just a minority because women aren’t minorities but anyone who’s ever been discriminated against in any way. You kind of have a brotherhood or sisterhood or whatever or ‘okay we need to band together to support each other because we’re a bigger group when we are altogether than when we are on our own.’ So, I absolutely love all the gay men in my life. They are such strong supporters. They are probably like the biggest supporters. And I think it is because there’s just an understanding that you have to work that much harder. You have to break down that many more barriers and walls just to be equal. And then to go above and beyond is a whole other story. So I think that, yeah, it is this interwoven connection” (D4).

Other women noted the negative impact of unsupportive family, friends, work acquaintances, and mentors: “I had a mentor who, for the first six months, who I had to really honestly justify the fact that I was a woman. And I justify the fact that I had hired women...And the fact that they were African-American women blew his mind. And I'm like, ‘Are you fucking kidding me with this?’ No” (D17). One participant (D16) who opened a chain of retail spaces said acquaintances would stop by the store when she first started and would predict she would fail. This negative attitude was frustrating to the women, but they were less impacted by unsupportive people outside their immediate family.
Those who came from extended families with either entrepreneurship or working women as the family norm, felt more supported than those who were expected to fulfill a domestic and caregiver role due to their gender. If the participant had to work against the family expectations for her, there was more sense of isolation than those who were congratulated for business success. If a family had a value for marrying and having a large family, the women often felt judged for and undermined in their business ventures. These women often sought out supportive friends or women’s networks to gain social support resources.

Many of the women relied heavily on other women entrepreneurs as a source of support because they were more likely to share their unusual schedules, understand their struggles, and value their work as a legitimate business and not assume they were just engaged in a hobby.

“Some women. And I don’t know if it's just a lack of information or they don't know much about it because I haven't spoken about it. I wouldn't say they're not supportive. They just do not comprehend exactly what running a business and being a woman entrepreneur means. They just think that it's all crafty and happy paper and glitter...I would say I think it's mainly now it's the moms that stay at home. Maybe they did have corporate jobs at one point but they are just solely staying home and taking care of their kids now. I don't think it's anybody else. I do have women friends who are stay-at-home moms who are also business owners and they get it. And we can talk for hours about how hard it is at times. And about how we are
stretched in all different directions. So maybe the ones who are not in this kind of field, they don't get it” (D14).

A theme shared by all participants was the importance of having supportive family and friends. The most important sources of support were those closer to home such as romantic partners. The participants interviewed had all found a way to navigate entrepreneurship with the supports they had, though some lost or strained relationships because of it. Those who had a supportive male partner often noted they felt they were the lucky exception and told stories of friends who did not have supportive men in their lives. Of the women who were divorced or had broken off long term relationships, they did not express regret at the loss but instead, framed it as having been with the wrong man. They expressed hope in finding a supportive partner. And this was not unfounded based on the number of participants who had shed old unsupportive partners and found new supportive ones.

There was a theme of evolution in relationships that mirrors the evolution in their sense of self, noted above. As the women developed more confidence in their abilities and found satisfaction and meaning in their work, it changed their way of interacting with others. Also, financial responsibility and freedom gave them more confidence in challenging their relationship structures, either with their parents or with domestic partners. One woman said she came to realize her family and ex-spouse weren’t paying her bills or supporting her in any way, so why should she bend to demands they had on her behavior? In many cases,
financial success led to psychological empowerment and a freedom to practice authentically with their own values.

**Synthesis and Summary of Themes**

In this section I provide an initial synthesis and summary across themes that were observed in this study. A guiding model of these themes and this summary is presented in Figure 1. This figure serves as a heuristic to help synthesize and organize the experience of participants. Though there may be other ways to synthesize across quotes and themes, what is offered below is one way to describe the experience of women as entrepreneurs.
Figure 1. General model to summarize and synthesize study findings.
Looking at the model from left to right, we first see that when describing why they wanted to be entrepreneurs, women shared many push and pull types of factors based on their experiences in the corporate work world and their vision for how they could experience greater empowerment as an entrepreneur. As the arrows indicate, the push and pull factors interacted with one another to shape women’s decisions to pursue entrepreneurship. Within the push factors, experiences were divided between those that were gendered (e.g., doubles standards based on gender, overt hostility) and those that were non-gendered (i.e., schedule, culture). These factors were often not mutually exclusive and participants frequently noted both gendered and non-gendered push factors; therefore, this is indicated by bi-direction arrows. Together, these push and pull factors led to becoming an entrepreneur. Thus, in the model there is an arrow from these reasons to the middle circle of one’s experiences of being an entrepreneur.

The middle circle, titled “Entrepreneurship Experiences” organizes the participants’ experiences around the common thread of empowerment, which was often woven through other experiences. Industry choice, value congruence, freedom and control, community, and even sexism and the strategies they used to address sexism, were all interconnected with one another and infused with themes of empowerment. For example, the experience of sexism within entrepreneurship mirrored the push factors of sexism in formal work in many ways. However, because of the empowering factors of freedom and control, value congruence, and community, women felt and had power to deal with sexism on their own terms.
Thus, there was never a full escape from sexism but rather the participants now had the resources and freedom as entrepreneurs to deal with sexism in a way that aligned with their values.

These experiences of entrepreneurship impacted both their sense of identity and their relationships; therefore, an arrow points to the final box, titled “Impact of Entrepreneurship.” Within this box are the interrelated impacts on identity, including a growth in confidence and self-efficacy (e.g., increased self-knowledge and confidence in abilities) and identification with feminism (i.e., the label and/or values). This growth in confidence captures the themes many participants noted of growing in empowering ways including psychological empowerment, efficacy, and esteem. As a result, there was an evolution and crystallization in their identification as feminist and their advocacy for feminist values of equal opportunities, treatment, and compensation. They also experienced a sense of increased access to financial resources and security. These experiences impacted their sense of self and identity, which in turn impacted their relationships with others.

There was interplay between themes of impact on identity and impact on relationships. Relationships were particularly impacted by two factors. First, the evolving sense of self changed how women interacted interpersonally. Second, the time and attention demands of entrepreneurship had either a positive or negative impact on their relationships depending on the supportiveness of the individuals with whom they were in relationship. Interpersonal relationships were categorized as supportive or unsupportive, based on the participant’s description.
or labeling of it as such. Whether it was described as positive or negative, participants noted entrepreneurship impacted their relationships. Therefore, though the themes flow from the motivating factors, through the experiences, into the impacts, all themes are interactive and impact one another dynamically.

Throughout the descriptions of experiences, hard work, and challenges of entrepreneurship, the overarching theme was that participants loved being entrepreneurs and did not want to ever go back to being employees in a larger company. Some said they were born to be entrepreneurs, some said they were too stubborn and independent to ever work for someone else, and all said that after having experienced entrepreneurship, they could never go back to formal work. They found the freedom, control, ability to do work on their own terms and in a meaningful way worth the risk and hard work. Many said entrepreneurship was probably not for everyone, but they said it was the only way for them. Thus, in this sample, it appears that entrepreneurship truly was connected to experiences of empowerment.

**DISCUSSION**

The present study used a qualitative approach consisting of 20 in-depth interviews of women who were entrepreneurs living in Chicago to gain insight into their experiences of starting and running their own companies and how these experiences may be experienced as a form of empowerment. I used a qualitative approach, in part, as response to feminist scholars’ exhortations to examine women’s experiences using their own words in order to set aside gender biases that may exist in prior literature (Ahl, 2006; Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2006;
Gatewood, Carter, Brush, Greene & Hart, 2003; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Therefore, the findings were drawn from the narratives of these women in response to broad open-ended questions. Overall, findings suggest that entrepreneurship may serve as a form of empowerment for many women, despite the continued barriers of sexism and gender bias. As noted in the guiding model (Figure 1), there were consistent themes that arose across the participant sample. These are now described with a focus on key findings and implications for entrepreneurship as empowering.

**Key Findings**

Consistent with the literature, women noted push and pull factors that motivated them to pursue entrepreneurship (Buttner & Moore, 1997; Deakins & Whittman, 2000; Moore, Moore, & Moore, 2011). Participants described both gendered and non-gendered push factors, such as double standards based on gender, being penalized for motherhood, and lack of flexibility for upward movement in the company. All participants described their hopes for what entrepreneurship would offer them (pull factors), including more freedom and control and psychological empowerment. It was notable how many participants specifically noted empowerment, of self and others, as a pull factor for starting their own company. This pull factor of empowerment was often juxtaposed with the description of their former work settings as disempowering, which motivated them to create a work setting for themselves and employees that was consistent with their value for empowerment.
Once in entrepreneurship, multiple factors interact to create a sense of empowerment for the participants. Many of the participants’ expectations for empowerment through entrepreneurship were realized, including an increased sense of freedom and control and value congruence. Empowerment through increased control over their resources and the ability to create a work environment that offers an alternative to formal work settings they find oppressive that is congruent with their values is consistent with the major theories of empowerment I detailed earlier (Prilleltensky, 2008; Rappaport, 1981). Additionally, the participants described increased sense of confidence, personal power over their circumstances, and efficacy, which align with definitions of psychological empowerment as beliefs about competence and ability to alter and exert control over circumstances (Zimmerman, 2000). Overall, participants appeared to experience both psychological and actual empowerment, showing empowerment to be a both-and rather than either-or experience for women. Indeed, an actual increase in control and power set the stage for women to experience feelings of increased confidence and efficacy. This shows the dynamic ways these forms of empowerment tended to work together, rather than in isolation.

However, some participants noted they still faced sexist attitudes and behaviors similar to those that motivated them to leave the formal work world. But, it was notable that participants described these sexist incidents in entrepreneurship with a greater sense of psychological empowerment, due to having more control over their work and their business partnerships. Though they may suffer in material ways, such as funding, informal networking, and growth,
they expressed a sense of energy and determination to continue their work and circumvent or combat these discrepancies. In other words, their increased sense of control served as a protective factor against discouragement and they were able to handle work and personal setbacks with resiliency. This is an interesting finding given feminist critiques on empowerment theorists’ focus on psychological empowerment while neglecting whether resources were actually gained (Riger, 1993). The findings of this study suggest that, indeed, women may still suffer from discrepancies (e.g., gender role expectations that limit growth, difficulty accessing informal “Old Boys” networks) that negatively impact their business growth and financial gain, but the psychological empowerment did not seem to blind them to these discrepancies, but rather gave them resiliency to combat or circumvent them. Whether this sense of empowerment leads to greater growth in their businesses is something that is beyond the scope of this study, but would be an interesting topic for future research.

One of the important support factors for women and one way they created an empowering culture of entrepreneurship was through engaging in formal and informal networks for women in entrepreneurship, dubbed “the New Girl’s Network” by one participant. Through participation in these networks and in federal set-aside programs (e.g., Woman Business Enterprise (WBE) certification), participants were able to gain access to contracts, resources, and partnerships that enabled them to compete in male-dominated fields. Although the participants may have created an alternative setting through entrepreneurship, they still found ways to connect with the larger community of women so they
were not isolated. Stepping outside of the traditional work world created a void of connection that many attempted to fill with these non-traditional networks. In some ways these networks also may be forms of empowering alternative settings (structures) that do not operate by the same rules as other networks (networking and supporting other women who were competitors) and, in fact, several of the participants explicitly noted they chose to create network groups as a reaction to negative experiences they had competing with women in the corporate world. Therefore, some of these collaborative groups were created as an alternative to other networking structures experienced by the women. As I discuss below in more detail, this is consistent with the Riger (1993) and hooks’ (2000) contention that an alternate model of empowerment based on ideals of collaboration and communication be developed to challenge the competitive patriarchal model.

As noted in the summary model, I also found that entrepreneurship impacted the way participants viewed themselves and interacted in their relationships. By in large, they listed positive changes to their self-image such as increased sense of efficacy and confidence, which is one aspect of psychological empowerment. They also expressed an increased identification with and advocacy for feminist values of women’s empowerment and equality, even if they did not adopt the label of feminist. These changes impacted how they interacted with others (e.g., confidence to leave unsupportive relationships). Additionally, entrepreneurship placed demands on their time and energy that strengthened some relationships and ended others, depending on the willingness of the romantic partner to support them emotionally and share domestic responsibilities.
Consistent with the literature, the women in relationships with more traditional views of gender roles struggled to balance domestic and work duties, which had a negative impact on their business and their sense of well-being, which for some resulted in an end to the relationship (Hammer et al., 2004; Kim & Ling, 2011; Noor, 2004; Welter, 2004). On the other hand, some participants reported supportive romantic partners who adapted the family roles to take on more caregiver and domestic responsibilities.

It is also noteworthy that all participants enjoyed entrepreneurship and did not plan to return to formal work. Though they were not shy in detailing the hard work, sacrifice, and risk involved in being an entrepreneur, they also stated that the freedom, control, increased confidence, and ability to create a work environment congruent with their values was worth the challenges. Overall, participants described their experiences of entrepreneurship as empowering to them. This empowerment was both psychological (sense of efficacy) and material (control over resources), and these two aspects of empowerment interacted with one another (e.g., with increased control over material resources came increased sense of control and confidence over multiple domains of life). Additionally, the participants’ descriptions of empowerment extended past themselves to their employees, family, friends, and communities. This form of empowerment through empowering others and engaging in collaboration rather than competition (e.g., participants noted they shared resources with other women whose businesses were their competitors) is consistent with Riger’s (1993) and hooks’ (2000) vision for empowerment --not as the patriarchal model of zero-sum
competition--but rather as a model with more traditionally feminine values of cooperation and communication, which lead to strength through collaboration and sharing of resources. The participants noted that through empowering others and engaging in communities with other empowering women entrepreneurs, they were themselves empowered.

Overall, though I had some expectation that participants would note some sense of empowerment through entrepreneurship, I was surprised at the degree to which they spoke eloquently and at length about how the desire for empowerment motivated them to business, gave them a sense of purpose, increased through their experiences as entrepreneurs, and impacted their identities and their relationships. This may be partly due to the sample consisting of women who were successful entrepreneurs, and experiences of empowerment may be significantly different for women who are not successful in this venture. However, empowerment, both psychological and material, appears to permeate the experience of entrepreneurship for the women in this sample. Additionally, the empowerment they gained through the control they have over their employment environment, served as a protective factor against discouragement from sexism and other challenges they face in employment. Through qualitative methods, this study was able to examine the participants’ experiences and descriptions with a richness and depth that may have been more difficult with other measures and adds to our understanding of women who are entrepreneurs.
Limitations

Although the current study contributes to our understanding of how entrepreneurship may be experienced by women as empowering, the study is not without limitations. First, the participants were located in Chicago, Illinois, a large Midwestern city with its own unique culture, economy, gender norms, history, and networks. Therefore, generalizing the findings of this study to women outside of this region should be approached with consideration and caution. The experiences of a woman who is an entrepreneur in Chicago may very likely be very different from someone in a rural area, another major city, or outside of the United States. To address the importance of place, I attempted in the introduction to briefly describe some of the salient factors related to geographic place that may influence how the participants experience entrepreneurship. It is my hope that by being aware of these various factors, the reader will be more informed when considering generalizability.

Another potential limitation to generalizability is that, though the participants were somewhat diverse in age, race, and ethnicity, all participants who were in relationships were with men. It was not my intention to exclude women in same-sex partnerships and participants were recruited through entrepreneurship directories that attract a diverse group of women, so it is possibly just matter of chance selection. Unfortunately, this limits the generalizability of results to women in same-sex partnerships. Given this study’s findings on the importance of support in romantic relationships and how
entrepreneurship changes relationship dynamics, future research on these areas in a more diverse population of women would be interesting.

**Future Research Directions**

In addition to examining a more demographically diverse sample of women, future research directions could also include examining specific subsets of entrepreneurs in more detail or comparing different subsets to determine factors that impact their experiences of empowerment. For example, examining women in different regions, industries (male or female dominated), and generational cohorts may yield a broader understanding of empowerment through entrepreneurship. Also, participants who emigrated from other countries noted differences between gender roles in their home countries and that of the U.S. and how this impacted women business owners in multiple domains. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine the entrepreneurship experiences of women in other countries and how gender role ideology and culture impact their sense of empowerment.

More research is needed to understand how, if at all, the creation of these alternate work settings is impacting the culture at large. As the literature on alternative settings notes, alternative settings may not make changes on existing systems, but rather may serve to prop them up by never getting large enough to challenge the status quo and siphoning off those individuals who may have challenged the old system more had they remained in it (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). Therefore, more work needs to be done to understand if the growth of women in entrepreneurship challenges existing formal work structures.
The current study captures a snapshot of a particular set of women at a
certain moment in time. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine
entrepreneurs who are women over a length of time in efforts to address several
interesting questions. First, the findings of the current study suggest that
psychological empowerment may have increased resiliency to combat or
circumvent sexist and discriminatory experiences. A longitudinal study
measuring psychological empowerment and the impact on business growth would
give us further information of the relationship between psychological
empowerment and more material forms of empowerment such as control over
resources. Second, a longitudinal study of psychological empowerment, self-
efficacy, and other aspects of esteem could examine changes over time and could
be studied in comparison to women who remain in the corporate world.
Incorporating such a comparison group would help to strengthen claims about the
impact of entrepreneurship. Third, the participants noted changes in their
relationships as a result of becoming entrepreneurs. A longitudinal study of
relationship dynamics, including data from both partners, would clarify the nature
of these changes and give us further information on the factors that impact them.
Prior research has shown women entrepreneurs experience greater domestic and
caregiver demands than male entrepreneurs and this negatively impacts their well-
being and business growth (Kim & Ling, 2011; Hammer, et al., 2004; Noor, 2004;
Welter, 2004), therefore understanding relationship dynamics that help or hinder
women who are entrepreneurs may give direction on how to better support them
in their ventures.
Implications

The current study demonstrated ways in which women were not only redefining work, but redefining empowerment. This has implications for policy, research, and larger society. The participants left formal works settings to create environments more consistent with their values and found empowerment through engaging in collaborative and supportive communities of like-minded women who were entrepreneurs. Rather than compete with other women, as participants noted had been a pattern in their former corporate environments, they collaborated with other business owners and gained collective strength. Understanding the role that this collaboration and cooperation plays in the success of women in entrepreneurships can aid in creating policies that support these already existing patterns. For example, if women are gaining strength through formal and informal collaboration, policies aimed at fostering the growth of these networks and rewarding this cooperative behavior may be a benefit to women in addition to policies that may foster competition. Additionally, the findings expand upon prior research by continuing to show the important role of supportive domestic partners. Therefore, policies aimed at supporting women and their families may give women the extra time and support to create high-growth ventures that have a wider impact.

The current study also adds to our understanding of empowerment theory and supports the feminist critiques that another, more cooperative, model of empowerment is viable. Also, participants in this study created alternate employment settings where for many empowerment was an integral part of their
business model and mission. Despite many challenges, they had succeeded in their business up to this point with this model, providing an interesting case study to support an alternate model of empowerment suggested by Riger (1993) and hooks (2000). Also, this study contributes to the growing body of research that answers the feminist critique of current entrepreneurship literature that calls for studies that do not use existing, possibly biased, measures. Indeed, examining the stories and lived experiences of women allowed for a picture of strength and resiliency to emerge, showing the distinct ways that women viewed their gender as an asset and that the ideal entrepreneur could indeed be a woman (in contrast to the existing assumption that masculine qualities are what define the ideal entrepreneur; Ahl, 2006; Brush, de Bruin, & Welter, 2009). This study is thus a first step of better understanding women’s experiences and articulating the unique ways that they are redefining work through entrepreneurship.

This study has implications for larger society as well. There are a growing number of women in entrepreneurship but they still face challenges to their growth and sustainability. By understanding the perspectives of these women and the factors that contribute to their growth (e.g., empowering networks, supportive domestic partnerships), we can better understand how to support them. Women-owned businesses are an ever-increasing segment of our economy and by understanding their unique strengths and challenges, the larger economy and landscape of work benefits.
Conclusion

Women entrepreneurs are a fast growing segment of our economy, but face challenges that cause growth disparities and greater rates of closure. Despite the risks and challenges of entrepreneurship, women continue to choose to start companies at an ever-growing rate (Center for Women’s Business Research, 2004; NWBC 2005; Women-Owned Businesses, 2004). The current study demonstrated the utility of examining the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs and showed how entrepreneurship was intimately linked to empowerment for the women in this study. Overall, I found that various forms of empowerment motivated entrepreneurship, protected against discouragement, and impacted sense of identity and relationships. These findings offer insight into the experiences of women who are entrepreneurs and the meaning they derive from entrepreneurship. By continuing to build our understanding of this growing segment of the population, we can better understand how to encourage growth and success of these businesses that can help to improve the experiences of women and contribute to the vibrancy of the larger social and economic climate in the United States.
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Appendix A

Interview Guideline

Introductory Statement:

Before we begin with the interview, we need talk about informed consent. Please read through the informed consent page and let me know if you have any questions as you read or after you are done reading.

[If participant consents to participate.] This conversation is being recorded for research purposes. Please let me know now if you do not agree to being recorded. You may request that the recording stop at any time. Is it okay with you if I begin recording at this time?

[For those being interviewed via phone.] For the sake of recorded documentation of consent, could you please state again whether you agree to participate in this recorded interview?

Thank you so much for sitting down with me today to talk about your experiences as an entrepreneur. I am going to ask you some questions about your experiences and feelings related to being an entrepreneur, including the impact it has had on your sense of empowerment and your relationships. There are no right or wrong answers. I just want to learn more about your personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts. You can choose to not answer a question or to end the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we start?

I am going to start with a couple of questions to learn a little more about you:

What is your age?

What is your current relationship status?
Entrepreneurship as Empowerment

- Are you married or have a partner?

Do you have children? What ages?

How would you describe yourself racially/ethnically?

When did you start your company?

Tell me more about your company.

- What industry are you in?

- How many employees do you currently have?

- Are you sole owner or do you have partners?

I. Participant’s story

Main Question: What has been your experience as a woman entrepreneur?

Prompts

- Tell me about how and why you started your own company?

- What is the underlying motivation behind starting your own venture?

- [If they were in corporate world previously] What types of challenges and barriers did you face working in a corporate environment? Do you feel like these prompted you to leave the corporate world?

- What resources (personal, social, skills from previous positions, etc) did you have (or wish you had) in creating starting a company?

- What have been the challenges or barriers you’ve faced when starting and running your own company?

- What are their aspirations for their business? (Scope, growth, employees, market share, etc?)

II. Identity and relationships
Main Question: Tell me about how being an entrepreneur has impacted the way you see yourself.

Prompts:

- What is the relationship between your home life and work? How is it different than before you started as an entrepreneur?

- Who are the men who have supported you in your career? And how have they been supportive? Who are those who have been unsupportive and how?

- Who are the women who have supported you in your career? And how have they been supportive? Who are those who have been unsupportive and how?

- [If they have partner] What role does your partner play in your business or home life?

- How has being an entrepreneur impacted your relationships?

### III. Feminism and Empowerment

Main Question: What has been your experience of empowerment as an entrepreneur?

Prompts

- Do you feel as though being an entrepreneur has given you more power or control over your life (work and home)? If so, how?

- Do you see empowerment (of yourself or others) as part of your business? If so, what are ways that feel you empower yourself or other women through your company?
Do you feel like you or other women entrepreneurs face discrimination for being women? Do you think this varies by field that your business is in?

Do you identify as a feminist? Has this identity changed since becoming an entrepreneur?
Appendix B

Appendix C

Recruitment Scripts

Script for Personal Contacts

My name is Charlynn Odahl-Ruan and I’m a doctoral student at DePaul University conducting a research study to better understand the experiences of women entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurs are one of the fastest growing groups of business owners, but little is known about them and their businesses. I hope that this research will tell us more about how women entrepreneurs navigate opportunities and challenges, their support networks, and how entrepreneurship has impacted different facets of their lives. By participating, you can help to support other women entrepreneurs.

I would love to hear your story and learn more about your experiences as an entrepreneur. The interview would last from an hour to an hour and a half at a location that is convenient to you or via phone. This study may be published and shared with women’s organizations and entrepreneurship groups, however your name and identifying information will be kept completely confidential. If you are a woman aged 25 to 65, who has founded and run a company for at least two years (that is not part of multi-tier company, such as Mary Kay or Pampered Chef or was inherited or purchased as a pre-existing business), own at least 51% or more of the company, and employ at least one full-time or two part-time employees, year round, I would love to interview you. The study has been approved by the DePaul Institutional Review Board. If you are not interested or if this just is not the best time, that is totally okay as I have other people that I can talk to. Do you have any questions? Would you be interested?

[if they say yes, start to work out the details of setting up the interview.] I also want to be sensitive to your schedule as far as when to have the interview to find a time that really works well. I also want you to know that we are really flexible with the times that we could meet for the interview and it doesn’t have to be conducted during normal work hours because we realize that you own your own business and your schedule is quite busy. So in other words we are really open to times that work best for you and your schedule. Do you have any ideas for times that work?

Do you have any other questions? Is there anything else you’d like to ask about the research? Thanks so much!

[if they say no, first thank them and then follow up to see if they have ideas for others who may be interested as noted directly below].

That’s okay, thank you for considering it!

I also wondered if you might know of any other women entrepreneurs who might be interested in being interviewed for this project? If you do, I’m wondering if you wouldn’t mind passing a short description of this project on to them to see if they would be interested, probably through e-mail. I can e-mail you a short description to send them [see snowballing description directly below], and then they can decide if they want to participate. If you don’t know of anyone, or don’t want to, or if they end up not being interested that is totally okay. Would it
be okay if I sent you the description and then you can send it along if you like? Thank you so much for the powerful work you do!

[At the beginning of the e-mail, some brief note to the person would be included such as, “It was good to talk with you yesterday and I really appreciated your time. I remember you mentioning that you might be able to pass along the information about the study we talked about. I have attached a short statement below to be sent to people who you think might be interested. Thanks so much!”]

**Script for Potential Participants Referred by Other Participants**

My name is Charlynn Odahl-Ruan and I’m a doctoral student at DePaul University conducting a research study to better understand the experiences of women entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurs are one of the fastest growing groups of business owners, but little is known about them and their businesses. I hope that this research will tell us more about how women entrepreneurs navigate opportunities and challenges, their support networks, and how entrepreneurship has impacted different facets of their lives. By participating, you can help to support other women entrepreneurs. I would love to hear your story and learn more about your experiences as an entrepreneur. The interview would last from an hour to an hour and a half at a location that is convenient to you or via phone. This study may be published and shared with women’s organizations and entrepreneurship groups, however your name and identifying information will be kept completely confidential. If you are a woman aged 25 to 65, who has founded and run a company for at least two years (that is not part of multi-tier company, such as Mary Kay or Pampered Chef or was inherited or purchased as a pre-existing business), own at least 51% or more of the company, and employ at least one full-time or two part-time employees, year round, I would love to interview you. The study has been approved by the DePaul Institutional Review Board. If you would like to share your story with me, please email at codahl@depaul.edu for more information. If you are not interested, but know an entrepreneur who may be, please feel free to share this email with them. Thank you so much!

**Script for Potential Participants Located Through Online Directories of Entrepreneurs**

[I would select entrepreneurs through an online directory, such as the link I listed above. This directory includes the emails and information of approximately 200 women-owned companies in the Chicago-area.]

Using these email contacts, I would contact the women entrepreneur via email with the script below. If I had no response from this contact, I would wait one week and would then e-mail again. If there was no response after this second attempt, I would not try to contact the entrepreneur again.

Dear Entrepreneur,

We are conducting a research study to better understand the experiences of women entrepreneurs and located your email through [online directory name] and am contacting you because of your experience as an entrepreneur.

Women entrepreneurs are one of the fastest growing groups of business owners, but little is known about them and their businesses. We hope that this research will tell us more about how women entrepreneurs navigate opportunities
and challenges, their support networks, and how entrepreneurship has impacted different facets of their lives. By participating, you can help to support other women entrepreneurs.

If you are a woman aged 25 to 65, who has founded and run a company for at least two years (that is not part of multi-tier company, such as Mary Kay or Pampered Chef or was inherited or purchased as a pre-existing business), own at least 51% or more of the company, and employ at least one full-time or two part-time employees, year round, I would love to interview you.

We would love to hear your story and learn more about your experiences as an entrepreneur. The interview would last from an hour to an hour and a half at a location that is convenient to you or via phone. This study may be published and shared with women’s organizations and entrepreneurship groups, however your name and identifying information will be kept completely confidential.

If you would like to share your story with us, please email at codahl@depaul.edu for more information. If you are not interested, but know an entrepreneur who may be, please feel free to share this email with them.

Thank you so much for the powerful work you do.