

**Woman's entrepreneurship as a gendered niche: the implications for regional  
development policy**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper we argue that entrepreneurship is a socio-spatial embedded activity and that the social construction of gender, time, space, economy and culture is manifest in the masculinities that are ascribed a normative role in entrepreneurship development policies. Drawing on feminist approaches to articulate and perform resistance to the hegemonic 'masculinist' discourses on entrepreneurship, we argue that women's entrepreneurship is contextually embedded in institutional and social structures that both limit and provide opportunities for its enactment. Regional economic development policy has focused, inter alia, on stimulating and supporting women's entrepreneurship through the establishment of women-only entrepreneurial networks to provide support, role models and access to resources. Grounded in feminist geography and based on a detailed qualitative study of network managers and members of formally established women-only networks, we provide evidence of the disconnect between the emancipatory intent and the actual impact of these initiatives. While these networks aim to empower and encourage women into entrepreneurship, in practice they perpetuate women's marginalisation and ghettoization in gendered niches.

**Key words:** women's entrepreneurship; niche theory; gendered niches; women-only networks; regional entrepreneurship policy; feminist geography

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L26; L38; O18; R11; R58

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## **Women's entrepreneurship as a gendered niche: the implications for regional development policy**

### **1. Introduction**

For policy makers, female entrepreneurship is important for fostering national and regional economic growth and supporting economic revival (Fritsch and Wyrwich, 2016; Qian et al., 2012). However, women lag behind men in terms of business ownership, growth and access to resources, and women's businesses differ from men's in terms of their nature, location, type and operation (Hanson, 2003; Hanson and Blake, 2004) – a difference that remains under-theorised (Ekinsmyth, 2012). The creation of and support for infrastructure to encourage women's business development and innovation is therefore seen as a justifiable investment in future economic prosperity (Meunier et al., 2017; Ahl and Nelson, 2015). Indeed, women entrepreneurs are viewed as sources of economic hope through whom 'policymakers can unleash a wealth of ingenuity and creativity that can spark a new era of entrepreneurial-led growth' (Fritsch et al., 2015: 1). However, the nature of entrepreneurship policy, its scope, characteristics, targets and focus remains unclear (Xheneti, 2017), and the efficacy of women's entrepreneurship policy remains under-researched: most studies concentrate on the design and implementation of policy and less on the spatialities and practices of women's entrepreneurship and their impact on women's position with regard to equality and life opportunities (Ekinsmyth 2011; 2014; Ahl and Nelson, 2015). Feminist scholars argue that most entrepreneurship policies are gender blind or gender biased (Ahl and Marlow, 2019), prompting calls for gendered research on the support provision offered to women (Lindberg and Johansson, 2017; Pettersson et al., 2015).

We explore the impact of one element of women's entrepreneurship policy, the creation of formally established women-only networks, and address the question: 'What role do formally established women-only entrepreneurial networks play in stimulating women's entrepreneurship?' Although the 'region' is increasingly viewed as a key level at which the development capacity of an economy is shaped and economic processes are coordinated and governed (Asheim, 2006; Fritsch and Storey, 2014), the spatial aspects of entrepreneurship have until recently received little attention (Mack and Qian, 2016). This is particularly so in entrepreneurship policy research where knowledge of entrepreneurship as a socio-spatial embedded activity remains limited, due to a tendency "to underestimate the influence of external factors and overestimate the influence of internal or personal factors when making judgments about the behaviour of other individuals" (Gartner, 1995: 70). This ignores the ways in which the socio-spatial relations of economic actors are bound up with wider processes of economic change across a range of geographies (Yeung, 2005).

Given the implications of contextual embeddedness and doing gender as a constitutive social practice, the degree to which women entrepreneurs have been co-opted by a predominantly male profession that has integrated them into marginal and feminized niches where they remain ghettoized, has to be addressed. Accordingly, we adopt niche theory (Hannan et al., 2003), and

specifically gendered niches, as a framework for the study of women's entrepreneurship in a regional context. Drawing on the conceptualisation of niche as a position in a multidimensional resource space (Liu et al., 2016), women's entrepreneurship, is often advocated as a means of escaping from or transcending these gendered niches (Light, 2007). However, we will argue that the social construction of gender, time, space, economy and culture is manifest in the masculinities that are ascribed a normative role in a range of economic development policies, including innovation and entrepreneurship policies, reinforcing rather than transcending these gendered niches (Pettersson et al., 2017). Feminist approaches have been used to articulate and perform resistance to the hegemonic 'masculinist' discourses on innovation and entrepreneurship, raising the possibility of going beyond the dominant discourses of identity (Rose, 1993). As the politics of location implies that any subject can be located within particular discursive and material matrices of power, resistance and subjectivity, this resistance is not based on a prescriptive utopian alternative to the prevailing organisation of power (Sharp, 2005; 2009) but implies that there are possibilities beyond the discursive status quo that can challenge masculinist claims to exhaustiveness (Rose, 1993). In suggesting that women's entrepreneurship itself may be construed as a gendered niche and that policies to enhance it may perpetuate, rather than overcome, this ghettoisation, we view location as a vulnerability, something tricky to be negotiated: spaces, in other words, are hazardous arenas felt as part of patriarchal power (Rose, 1993). Through a detailed case study of the impact of a women's entrepreneurship intervention in a European peripheral region, we demonstrate how the disconnect between policy design and its operationalisation has had unintended consequences, suggesting that there are structural limits to the extent to which policy can and does challenge patriarchal power. It seems, therefore, that the 'subject of feminism' is more likely to remain interpellated into subject positions by hegemonic discourses than to embody a self-representation that can challenge the exhaustiveness of masculinism (Rose, 1993; Lindberg and Johansson, 2017).

In this paper we argue that spatial context plays a crucial role in understanding both the gendered social structure within networks and the asymmetrical gender relations which continue to position women entrepreneurs as subordinate across space and time. Based on a feminist geography perspective, a more nuanced understanding of spatial variations in gender relations (Lalibertie et al., 2017) returns the focus to everyday activities and social practices, allows for variation and plurality (not static or binary categories), captures the dynamics of stability, change and the paradoxes of gendered practices, facilitates our understanding of gendered patterns beyond the practices of individual actors and highlights the importance of spatial contexts in enabling and constraining the agentic potential of entrepreneurial actors (Kvande, 2007; Hanson and Blake, 2009).

We demonstrate that the outcomes of policy are often limited or contrary to intentions (Nightingale and Coad, 2013), not least because policy design ignores the structural issues of how women and men are socialized, and consider the implications of this for how we understand the socially embedded nature of women's entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow, 2019). The creation of formally established women-only entrepreneurial networks has perpetuated the embedded masculinity of entrepreneurship by reinforcing women's

entrepreneurship as a gendered niche, resulting from a disconnect between the emancipatory intent and the actual impact of these public policy initiatives.

In the following section, we discuss the role of women's entrepreneurship in regional economic development. We then set out the theoretical framework for the paper anchored in the gendered niches construct and developed in the light of the contextual embeddedness of women's entrepreneurship. Following a discussion of policy initiatives, we outline our research design and data collection and analysis protocols. We summarise and discuss the key findings from our research in section five and conclude by considering the implications of our arguments for both research and policy.

## **2. Theoretical perspectives**

### **2.1 Women's Entrepreneurship Policy and Regional Development**

There is growing interest in the role of women's entrepreneurship in economic development nationally and regionally (Meunier et al., 2017; Stough, 2016; EIGE, 2017). A key element in regional development has been the role of formally constituted business networks as a mechanism to stimulate women's entrepreneurship. Women's networks tend to be more geographically restricted, with fewer extra-locality links, and more oriented to social support than business development than those of men (Hanson and Blake, 2009; D'Exelle and Holvoet, 2011). Given this, and the evidence that, in social capital deficit small communities, club membership increases the level of entrepreneurial activity (Baurenschuster et al., 2010), it is unsurprising that an important aspect of women's entrepreneurship policy in regional development has been the creation of formal women-only networks, to address issues of diversity and difference in light of the homogeneity and discrimination characteristic of competitive production systems (Ettliger, 2001).

However, entrepreneurship policies targeted at women are contributing little or nothing to their equality, well-being or independence. This may be because policy formulation reinforces male norms (Pettersson et al., 2017): most interventions are gender blind and incapable of addressing the underlying infrastructures and mechanisms which impede gender equality, are gender-biased in disadvantaging women, and take insufficient care to ensure that there is consistency between the philosophical underpinnings of a policy and its implementation and outcomes (Berglund et al 2018). This androcentric bias in entrepreneurship policy (Ahl and Marlow, 2019), relies on three assumptions. First, entrepreneurship is gendered masculine and successful entrepreneurs are male. Women are deemed successful only if they launch businesses in the 'right' (male dominated) industries and produce growth trajectories matching those of male-owned and managed businesses. Second, as entrepreneurship is abstracted from the context in which it is ineluctably embedded, the societal setting in which policy is enacted is deemed to be unimportant and so that which constrains and channels what is otherwise presented as agentic self-actualisation, is removed. Third, the focus is on the individual level, addressing the failings and/or limitations unique to women, rather than on systemic, industry or institutional challenges.

This is not, of course, unique to entrepreneurship. Three decades of feminist critique and theorising of policymaking in general have highlighted an androcentric bias, ignoring many issues of concern to women and contributing to the reproduction of gender inequality and inequalities structured by other social hierarchies' (Lombardo and Meir, 2016: 610). Feminist scholars have challenged the validity of a priori positive views of entrepreneurial activity as a force for positive socio-economic transformation in general, and women's entrepreneurship in particular, within capitalist, one-dimensional economic systems (Gill et al., 2017). Specifically, they question the validity of the male model of entrepreneurship policy, (with its roots in the neo-liberal ideology of autonomy, individualism and self-responsibility) and the 'deficiency' model of women's perceived underperformance (rooted in liberal feminism) (Pettersson et al., 2017). The consequences of defining women in terms of their shortfall from male entrepreneurial performance and as an underperforming economic asset (Marlow, 2014), means that little or no attention is paid to women's wellbeing and their independence (Ahl and Nelson, 2015).

While the manifestation of policy, in the form of women's business and entrepreneurial networks, is regional and local, the drivers of this policy are rooted in the dynamics of neo-liberal capitalism and the tension between the reproduction of effective methods of capital accumulation and psychic investments in the efficacy of particular kinds of work as sites of personal 'satisfaction' (Cockayne, 2015; Cockayne and Richardson, 2017). If networks are 'the active product of reciprocal relationships between economic behavior [and] the politics of representation and identity' (Jones, 2009: 251), then any such discussion must acknowledge the role of gender as a marker of identity and difference (Sharp, 2009). This recognises that neoliberal reason shapes and influences all genders to the 'extent that only enterprising and self-satisfied working lives are rendered fully recognizable ... [through] ... an attachment to the generalization of the entrepreneurial or enterprise-based form of work ... [in which] the production of entrepreneurialism itself [is] a desirable object of neoliberal work' (Cockayne, 2015: 468-469). Within this broader perspective, feminist economic geography has established the importance of place, at a variety of scales, to understand gender relations (Gibson-Graham, 1996). It has highlighted how the differences between men and women in the experience of work is grounded and constituted in and through space, and that the structure and practices of economic institutions remains suffused with (often unexamined) gendered assumptions (McDowell, 2006). It is in this context that we examine women's entrepreneurship policy as a gendered niche.

## **2.2 Gendered niches**

Niche formation, the concentration of disadvantaged groups (women, migrants, ethnic groups) in one sector of the labour market, and the relationship between the development of niches on the one hand, and gendered labour market segmentation (De Groot and Schrover, 1995) on the other, has been extensively studied, particularly in migration and ethnic entrepreneurship (Schrover et al., 2007; Light, 2007) and female entrepreneurship (Yang and Aldrich, 2014). A number of core themes can be identified. First, networks play a central role in the emergence and perpetuation of niches in general and of gender differentiation in particular. Specifically, the business and interpersonal networks of women and men are different: women's networks

are typically smaller and more homogeneous than those of men, and are more likely to be kin-based, with fewer ties to co-workers (Moore, 1990; Renzulli et al., 2000). These differences, in form and function, for men and women help to explain niching and labour market segmentation. Second, women make choices (for part-time work, flexible hours, home-based work, security and stability) that reinforce niching and segregation to a greater degree than men (Thompson, 1983). Third, systematic discrimination, such as being denied access to certain jobs, training and education, restricts the chances of women (Tilly, 1993). Fourth, this is reinforced by differences in aptitudes and skills. Women are considered to be a disadvantaged group in the labour market as they are perceived to have less or less valuable human capital than men. Finally, according to the Sullerot (1968) thesis, the image of a job deteriorates as women move in and colonise a particular segment or sector. The feminisation of the labour market, or parts of it, reinforces niching as an association develops between low status, the rewards for a job and the fact that it is performed by women. This perpetuates gendered inequalities in occupational segregation and supports the continuation of gendered niche economies in which women are confined to low tiers of super-exploitative work (Liu, 2000).

Despite the argument that women can transcend the negative associations of niching through cultural and aesthetic practices (Liebelt, 2013), agentic leadership (Silverman, 2003) or entrepreneurial activity (Lee, 2006), the implications of niche theory are that it reinforces and reproduces the marginalisation of women in enclave economies (Wilson and Portes, 1980; Portes and Shafer, 2006). This is supported by evidence of the sexual division of labour, into men's work, women's work and gender-neutral work, and of highly gendered workplaces, on the basis that 'anatomy is destiny' (Bradley, 2007: 11). This gendered division of labour has both a horizontal and a vertical dimension: horizontal in terms of men and women being concentrated in different types of job, occupation and industry; and vertical in that within any industry, occupation and job women tend to occupy the lower echelons with men clustered towards the top of the employment pyramid (Bradley, 2007). However, even where men and women appear to be doing the same thing there are often differences, frequently subtle, in the tasks they carry out. For Crompton (1997), women's occupation of these gendered niches reflects continued beliefs that women are more suited for some activities and men for others. In turn, this is represented by differential work conditions (the enduring gender pay gap, higher levels of part-time work, lower levels of job security) and career attenuation through glass wall and glass ceiling effects (Wiedenfeller, 2012).

Given the negative implications of both niching and the gendering of work for women, the emancipatory view of entrepreneurship appears to offer women a way out of 'the segregated world of girls and girl culture' (Bradley, 2007: 9) to more liberal forms of individual and collective existence (Verduijn et al., 2014). Accordingly, women's entrepreneurship has the potential to reduce or even end women's economic disadvantage and clustering. However, as women-owned businesses are less likely to have employees, are smaller (in terms of employment and revenue generation) and are less profitable than their male-owned counterparts, it is unlikely that any such expansion would reduce women's segregation or abolish niching. Indeed, women's entrepreneurship may be less a basis for economic emancipation than a gendered niche that perpetuates rather than challenges the 'heroic male'

grand narrative of contemporary entrepreneurship discourse (Essers, 2009). This highlights the importance of understanding the relationship between gender and spatial divisions, and of challenging their supposed naturalness and legitimacy (Rose, 1993; Castree et al., 2013; Lalibertie et al., 2017).

### **3. Research Setting**

The research setting is Northern Ireland, a peripheral European region where female entrepreneurship is low and which lags behind other nations and regions in supporting women-owned and led ventures: when this research was conducted only 1 in 20 women considered starting a business compared to 1 in 11 men and 1 in 14 women in the rest of the UK (Hart, et al., 2013). Since 2001, the regional development agency (InvestNI) has implemented a range of policies to increase women's levels of entrepreneurial activity (Fleck et al., 2011; Conlon and Stennett, 2015), beginning with the *'Investing in Women'* initiative in 2001, a programme of women's business networks, seminars and conferences which was embedded in the *Accelerating Entrepreneurship Strategy* (2007):

In line with Targeting Social Needs and equality policies, entrepreneurship will be proactively promoted to those from under-represented groups such as women, young people, older people, disabled people, ethnic minorities and those in disadvantaged and rural areas. There are significant gaps between men and women in Northern Ireland and between women in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK. However, not only is the level of enterprise among women in Northern Ireland very low but also the nature of entrepreneurship among women is "poor" in the sense that it is characterised by being part-time and service sector. The Investing in Women initiative has set out a number of key actions which seek to accelerate female entrepreneurship (InvestNI, 2003).

To rationalise the proliferation of generic business advice organisations and develop an inclusive culture of entrepreneurship better aligned to growth, InvestNI launched the *'Pathways Programme'* in 2007: women were provided with assistance in connecting with regional advisors (mainly in rural areas) and other women entrepreneurs (InvestNI, 2007). This in turn was replaced in 2009 by the *'Booster Programme'* focused on assisting women entrepreneurs to explore their growth options and make the transition to mainstream support. From 2010, there has been a further shift in Northern Ireland entrepreneurship support policy to include women's entrepreneurship with other forms of minority entrepreneurship (InvestNI, 2009), and to rely almost exclusively on women in business support networks for implementation (Table 1).

Table 1 here

While this emphasis on viewing women's entrepreneurship in the context of minority entrepreneurship resonates with the intersectionality debate (Knight, 2016), and the emphasis on transitioning women to mainstream [sic] support is indicative of gender mainstreaming (Bock, 2015), it seems that these are accidental associations. The complexity of gender theory and its implications has eluded policymakers in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere. Indeed, policy

formulation and articulation is driven mainly from a neo-liberal perspective (Pettersson et al., 2017). Following Bacchi (2009), who calls for close scrutiny of policy documents, this is evident from the language used in Invest NI's documents that women are viewed as a under-utilised economic resource whose success is evaluated against that of their male counterparts, with a focus on under-performance deficiencies that perpetuates women's subordination and frames male privilege whilst at the same time marginalising subjects.

Almost two decades of women's entrepreneurship policy in Northern Ireland has been based mainly on the development of formal, locally-based women-only business networks with the remit to empower women, by developing their confidence, networks and entrepreneurial capability (Fleck et al., 2011). Networks are embedded in social interactions and the positioning of social actors is in relation to each other. Such interactions, therefore, are always about gender (McDowell, 2001; Sharp, 2005; 2009). However, the spatial aspects of gendered networks have received scant attention in the literature (Hanson and Blake, 2009), notwithstanding the recognition that different economic structures, including networks, result in unique gendered spaces with their own particular gender relations. In other words, 'gender matters; gender ... is mutually constituted through a range of social relations including in the workplace and the home' (McDowell, 2016: 2093). How exactly gender matters, in terms of the consequences of gender segregation and hierarchy, of course depends on time and place, and contextual variations of gendered patterns are important to distinguish in entrepreneurship policy and research.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research design**

Our starting point is the feminist focus on the perceptions and experiences of individuals and groups in their own localities (Lalibertie et al., 2017) based on "situated knowledges that are derived from the lives and experiences of women" (Stachel et al., 2004: 1–2). Although there is no one feminist practice of geography, and therefore no universally accepted feminist methodology, there is a direct relationship between theory and the methods used to investigate theory. Feminist geographers are consistent in that they seek out techniques which are in line with their feminist philosophies (Lalibertie et al., 2017). Despite a strong tradition of quantitative research in the feminist geography domain (McDowell, 1997; Lawson, 1995; Kwan, 2002b) given our focus on the efficacy of the creation of formally established women-only networks in the context of regional economic development, we align with a more qualitative perspective (Dowler, 1999).

Our research design is predicated on recognizing the spatial dimension of context, the social gradients associated with space and distance, as it affects the role of networks in the entrepreneurial process. Thus, we take a micro-level approach to contextualization, concentrating on understanding the experiences of the women involved in women-only networks. In keeping with feminist geography ideals (McDowell, 1992), we conducted this research "with" or "for" as opposed to "about" women (Sprague, 2016), addressing

phenomena in their ‘natural’ setting, identifying and considering the influences, factors and forces that affect entrepreneurial behaviours and outcomes, and paying close attention to flattening and problematizing the relationship between researcher and researched in more or less participatory methods (Shepherd, 2006: 16).

#### **4.2 Data collection and analysis**

Methodologically, an analysis of the emergence, production, change and impact of institutions, such as women-only entrepreneurial networks, cannot be achieved through using obvious or easily identifiable indicators, but must be extracted from social practice. We do this using in-depth interviews to uncover the social processes and relations of power that underlie geographical patterns (McDowell, 1992; Bathelt and Glückler, 2013). This allows us to access the encoding and enacting of institutional scripts into action and the replication, revision and objectification of these scripts through action (Barley and Tolbert 1997). We adopted a purposive sampling strategy and conducted semi-structured interviews with members of formally established women-only networks (n=14) and with the network facilitators (Tables 2 and 3). The respondents were aged between 35 to 45 years and all were Caucasian.

Tables 2 and 3 about here

All formal business networks in Northern Ireland were identified and approached to participate in the research: these comprised six women-only networks, all of which had been established as part of the regional women’s entrepreneurship support programme, and five mixed networks with no gender restrictions on membership. We interviewed the facilitators of all of these networks, giving us comprehensive coverage of that population. Women entrepreneurs were recruited through the facilitators: Data collection comprised two stages. First, respondents initially completed a short questionnaire soliciting basic biographical information on them and their business, their motivations for joining networks and their perceptions of the benefits, outcomes and behaviours associated with network membership. Second, these initial questions were then explored in more detail in face to face interviews. In stage one we received responses from 17 women entrepreneurs, evenly split between nascent (under three years in business) (n = 8) and more experienced (three years or more in business) (n = 9) entrepreneurs. In stage two we interviewed 15 of the 17 initial respondents, 14 of which provided sufficiently robust data for analysis. Despite our best efforts it proved impossible to follow-up with the remaining two women. Entrepreneur participation in the research process was restricted due to economic circumstances and the pressures this created. Although a relatively small sample, the salient dimensions of the spatiality of gendered life worlds were revealed (Kwan, 2002a; Sharp, 2005). All the women-only networks and the three largest mixed networks were represented in our women entrepreneur sample. Furthermore, some of the women belonged to both women-only and mixed networks and responded about their experiences of both. This was the case for more experienced entrepreneurs who were more likely than nascent entrepreneurs to belong to multiple networks, involving greater commitment of money and time. These women tended to remain in the women-only networks for support, a point to which we return below.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the network premises and lasted between one and two hours. Sample interview questions included: what were your main motivations for joining the network?; What were the key advantages of being part of such a network?; Are there any disadvantages associated with its membership? Two members of the research team recorded the interviews, which were subsequently transcribed verbatim, and wrote up field notes.. The interview data were supplemented with archival analysis of documents gathered from a variety of sources including white papers and government reports (Table 1). This provided the basis for rigorous thick description based on contextualised scripts conceptually embedded in analytical frames (Pratt, 2009; Hill et al 2010).

Analysis involved iteration between the data and the developing theoretical argument (Strauss and Corbin, 1997), creating provisional categories and first order codes which were developed in a recursive process of moving between these codes and the emerging patterns in the data until adequate conceptual themes emerged). We organised these themes into broader theoretical dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013) (Table 4). In reporting the results below, and to contextualise the data, we use the following acronyms to identify the respondents and the network to which they belonged EFD - Entrepreneur in female dominated sector; EMD - Entrepreneur in male dominated sector; EGI - Entrepreneur in gender integrated sector; NC- Network co-ordinator.

Table 4 about here

## **5. Women’s Entrepreneurial Networks: Findings and Implications**

We have identified four main dimensions around which to discuss women’s experiences of participating in women’s entrepreneurial networks: first, *women’s entrepreneurship policy*, encapsulating the idea that women require special attention, the role of networks to empower them, and the extent to which women considered themselves to be entrepreneurs or indeed enterprising; second, the *contextual embeddedness of entrepreneurship*, that is the ways in which business structures are gendered masculine and the impact that patriarchal attitudes and parochialism play; third, the existence of *gendered niches*, represented through the creation of pink ghettos and restricted entrepreneurial ambitions; and fourth, the degree to which these lead to the *liberation* of women or the perpetuation of the norm, in other words the extent to which women-only networks are focused on providing social support or business support. Each aggregate theme (Table 4) is now discussed and illustrated with salient fragments of the narrative, or “power quotes”, chosen to capture the essence of the data (Pratt, 2009).

### **5.1 Women’s Entrepreneurship Policy**

Structural influences that position women in socio-economic spaces that militate against them achieving their entrepreneurial ambitions are erroneously and stereotypically interpreted as agentic shortcomings. This has underpinned a range of policy interventions in developed economies based on the assumption that entrepreneurship is an open and meritocratic field where actors can achieve their potential through the application of energy and determination

(Ahl and Marlow, 2019). However, *“Northern Ireland has the lowest female entrepreneurship in the whole of the UK, you’re not going to tell me that women don’t need a leg up”* (Olivia-EMD). There was widespread recognition of the role of policy: for example, the network managers of women-only networks remarked that *“XXX had some money that they wanted to spend on women’s issues”* (Lucy-NC) and *“As part of the Invest NI accelerating entrepreneurship strategy, there was an investing in women’s initiative and within that business networks were identified as a one of the key strands as well as access points”* (Elsie-NC). These sentiments echoed the masculine worldview in women’s entrepreneurship policy, that women are a problem that needs to be fixed (Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Marlow and Swail, 2014; Pettersson et al., 2017): *“They (Invest NI) were drastically looking around for someone to deliver a measure for women and it landed on the network’s door”* (Lola-NC). Interestingly, this was not lost on the women themselves – *“Maybe it (women-only networks) is an overcorrection thing that we need in the short term and hopefully after time you wouldn’t need to separate them”* (Jessica-EFD). In similar vein, Emily (EFD) remarked *“You don’t get any men networks that are just men in business. It’s such a bad idea”*.

From a gendered niche perspective it is clear that the networks were aimed at high potential start-ups and not “me-too” businesses: *“X (low growth, part-time business) wouldn’t be regarded as an Invest NI hot ticket kind of thing but in terms of our type of network we have to”* (Rosie-NC). Women’s entrepreneurship policy discourse refers to supporting and empowering women in order for them to realise their full potential, and so in turn boost the regional economy (Ahl and Nelson, 2015). This was a common sentiment amongst the network facilitators: *“We are very much about empowering women”* (Lola-NC), and *“our aim is to make sure that the information is out there – so women are empowered, to break down barriers”* (Alice (NC) ). However, this sentiment was not shared by the women entrepreneurs and there appeared to be a disconnection between the aim of policy and the reality as experienced by those it was intended for (Pettersson et al., 2017). *“This empowerment word that has been battered around, people don’t really know the full value of it – to actually be empowered, it goes to a completely different level and that’s not happening with these businesses”* (Mia-EFD); *“We talk about this word empowerment but it’s actually not very active in these networks”* (Lily-EMD). For some, this was not even seen as empowerment: *“I think its encouragement as opposed to the empowerment of women into business; they encourage women”* (Olivia-EMD).

As a result of the unrealized empowerment potential of policy initiatives, there is a disparity between the idealized target of the initiatives and the actual recipients. : *“there is a big mismatch between women’s perception of themselves and those of policymakers”* (Elsie (NC). Entrepreneurship policy discourse is both gender blind (reinforcing male norms) and gender biased (in disadvantaging women) and tends to reaffirm women’s secondary position in society through the reproduction of gender inequalities (Pettersson et al 2017; Lombardi and Meir 2016). This is underpinned by assumptions of the male norm of entrepreneurship, of women as ‘different’, of entrepreneurship as an individualistic undertaking and of the separation of family and working commitments (Hall and Woodward, 2010). While public policy ostensibly aims to improve women’s position, in practice it serves to reinforce women’s

entrepreneurship as a gendered niche by failing to reflect the broader socio-economic gender disadvantage which shapes women's approach to and experience of entrepreneurship (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). The consequences of gender segregation and hierarchy, where men/masculinities are ascribed higher value than women/femininities, 'often take the form of uneven distribution of power, resources and status between men and women in organisations and society' (Lindberg et al., 2015: 478).

These uneven distributions in turn raise identity issues, both for the women themselves and for the policy makers' understanding of them as embodied in the initiatives and interventions they design (Ekinsmyth, 2011; 2012). There are two aspects to this. First, the women themselves appeared to have difficulties seeing themselves as entrepreneurs and had a tendency to undermine their entrepreneurial ability and undersell themselves (Table 4): "*there is this modest idea of "wee (small) women with a wee business", they don't recognize themselves as entrepreneurs or even business owners. They might just about consider themselves as self-employed*" (Matilda-NC) and "*I'm trying to be quite clear with people to stop saying that you run only a "wee business"*" (Lucy-NC). Specifically, many women had issues with claiming legitimacy as an entrepreneur (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009): "*There is still a sense of inferiority, it's about accepting "I've done well, I've got this, I'm doing all that and they are still putting themselves down"*" (Sophie-EFD). This reflects their defensive response to gender practices on the one hand and their development of and access (or lack thereof) to entrepreneurial skills. It is reinforced by the economics of these women's entrepreneurial activities, many of which are lifestyle businesses, geared toward supporting the owner's income and personal requirements (such as personal interest and work/life balance) rather than maximizing revenue. It is not surprising, therefore, that the network managers had difficulties in persuading the women (particularly those members of the women-only networks) to see themselves as entrepreneurs (the target of the policy initiatives): "*At a recent event, there were 15 women there and only one of them said their business's name, now that wouldn't happen in a man's network*" (Alice-NC). Accordingly, there appears to be a need for policy to be more in tune with what is happening at ground level and to acknowledge that the majority of businesses in female dominated sectors, and the target of women-only networks, are in fact lifestyle businesses: "*Policy is a problem, Invest NI doesn't like talking about lifestyle businesses, they are only interested in growth businesses. If policy undervalues this type of business then why should we expect women to value it*" (Elsie- NC).

Overall, this suggests that the creation of formal women-only networks is a structural barrier and a significant gender-related impediment for women in accessing resources due to the lack of adequate knowledge and information, access to well-connected and credible contacts and role models which can provide introductions to key gatekeepers and resource suppliers. Women appear to be both positioned and self-described as inadequate in creating their own networks and in networking activities. The rationale for establishing formal networks is to assist them in developing confidence, building skills and acquiring various types of capital to allow them to fully participate in neoliberal capitalism. However, while these networks may have helped women entrepreneurs develop affective and passionate attachments to their work (Cockayne, 2015), they did not offer a space for women to formulate and act on what is

problematic for them in terms of gender inequality, in that they did not address structural impediments which might restrict their efforts to secure resources. Indeed, for many of them, the benefit of network membership was ‘learning to play the game better’ as a precursor to entering the malestream entrepreneurial domain.

## **5.2 The Contextual Embeddedness of Entrepreneurship**

One of the unique challenges facing women as they launch businesses is the patriarchal nature of business structures. The “good old boy” system, offering patronage to well-connected men entering business, is commonly acknowledged and is reinforced by the heroic masculinist grand narrative of entrepreneurial discourse (Essers, 2009). Women entrepreneurs are often seen as “other” and so carving out their place in the entrepreneurship arena can be challenging: *“it is still a man’s world in business but at least if you are a business owner there is no glass ceiling because you are your own boss but now I’ve changed my mind slightly because in the network you realize you’re up against other issues”* (Jessica EFD). Accordingly, the women felt that the onus was on them to exercise personalized agency to fit in with norms associated with entrepreneurship: *“It (entrepreneurship) is predominately controlled by men and you have to think and learn how to think like men and play the game -Women just need know to how to play the game right”* (Lily- EMD).

This suggests that women entrepreneurs may face challenges in relation to cultural issues, depending on the degree of patriarchal values practiced by society (Mordi et al., 2010). Patriarchy is a determining factor in how spatial relations are worked out and how those spatial relations contribute to women’s oppression (Lalibertie et al., 2017). This sentiment is summed up by Olivia (EMD) *“I think it’s just the way in Northern Ireland, because it’s still a patriarchal society”*. For women entrepreneurs within a patriarchal system, their business potential is restricted and limited, as they operate within a society that favours male norms: *“They think you should you be at home looking after your children, not running your own business. Northern Ireland is definitely behind the mainland (GB) in some of those attitudes* (Grace-EMD). Accordingly, the interviewees talked about having to negotiate the challenge of societal expectations and stereotypes associated with women as mothers, homemakers, caretakers and nurturers which may impact the likelihood of entrepreneurship being considered or realised as a viable career option: *“My husband is sort of supportive but sometimes he’s not, I can see him think should you have done the housework while you were working, he doesn’t mean to and he wouldn’t outwardly do it but it’s a natural thing”* (Isabella-EGI). This reinforces the socially embedded nature of women’s entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow 2019), rooted in the gendered nature of everyday activities and social practices (Lalibertie et al 2017) and contextually enacted through the shaping of women’s attitudes, beliefs and entrepreneurial behaviours (Kvande 2007). Furthermore, entrepreneurial ambitions may be tainted by parochialism (Marlow, 1997): *“Most businesses are very localised (generally service oriented, introspective, low aspirations... we don’t see many high growth models due to, history and culture”* (Matilda-NC) and *“We’re finding that the local is important and I think it’s just the culture here”* (Rosie-NC). So, institutional constraints “in the form of local traditions and norms that determine gender roles within families help explain why female entrepreneurs start in specific, oftentimes low growth and low-income industries” (Welter, 2011: 168). As such,

institutional and social expectations which position women as primarily domestic actors, act to shape the nature and profile of their enterprises such that they are more likely to be home-based and part-time (Duberley and Carrigan, 2012). In essence, the manner in which gender is contextually enacted and understood is critical in shaping women's attitudes, beliefs and entrepreneurial behaviours in ways that enable or deny their voice and visibility as entrepreneurial actors (Baughn et al., 2006).

This suggests that to understand women's entrepreneurship, it is necessary to look at the broader factors that influence the structures within which women are located. We can distinguish between macro-level institutional embeddedness, meso-level spatial embeddedness and micro-level family and business embeddedness (de Bruin et al 2009; Ettl and Welter, 2010). At the micro-level, the social embedding of women entrepreneurs is mediated through family, household, and wider social contacts (Elam, 2008). At the meso-level, the spatial context is relevant, in terms of the general regional environment, regional support settings, networks and sectors (Nijkamp, 2003). At the macro-level, the overall institutional embedding of women's entrepreneurship consists of institutions which frame enterprise behaviour, condition the culturally accepted basis for entrepreneurship and determine the regulatory framework within which entrepreneurship is legitimized (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009).

### **5.3 Gendered Niches**

Given the well documented occupational segregation and gender inequalities encountered by women, it not surprising that entrepreneurship has been referred to as one way in which women can escape the constraints of the labour market. However, our findings (Table 4) reveal that occupational divisions and subordination are reproduced as opposed to being challenged, with business ownership resulting in women occupying the lower echelons of the retail and service sector (Bruni et al., 2004) in what are often referred to as "pink ghettos" (Fine, 2010: 56). Accordingly, most female self-employment is confined to traditionally feminised activities such as education, health, catering, caring, personal and business services (Hundley, 2000): *"There's a lot of clustering in the service sector"* (Elsie-NC); *"Our membership is probably a lot of the service sector in general; it's very traditional...beauticians, hairdressers and retail"* (Lucy-NC); *"the women in the women's only network is made up of women that have very small businesses in the local area for example flower shops, fruit, homeopathy, that type of thing"* (Amelia-EMD). Accordingly, the 'hobbyist' label often accompanies such forms of entrepreneurship, and this reinforces rather than overcomes gendered niching in the labour market (Lee, 2006; Light, 2007). This was evident from the findings and is summed up by Eva (EFD) *"It's like you are either in it (entrepreneurship) or you're not, business isn't a hobby, that's where women in business get a bad name"*. Such hobbyist businesses often have limited scalability and potential for growth. This was evident in the findings as reflected in the frustration of both network managers and members of the mixed networks about women's restricted entrepreneurial ambitions. So, for example, Eva (EFD) remarked *"I think that's what is lacking...its survival mode rather than let's plan to open ourselves up in Europe, lets open ourselves to outside of the street I work in"*, whilst, Lucy (NC) commented *"We want the women to start looking outside their own local area, to realize that there is a bigger world out there"*.

These comments provide further evidence of a disparity between the aim of macro policy initiatives and their reality. However, it is important to recognize the influence of occupational segregation and the complex manner in which it positions women-owned firms in certain sectors (i.e. gendered niches) and influences growth trajectories and ambitions. Hence, socio-economic positioning influences the industrial sector women chose to enter, as well as the accrual of resources from which they can draw. Therefore, the industrial sectors in which women-owned businesses are predominantly located mirror those that have high levels of female employment, and self-employment often reproduces the segregation experienced by women in the labour market feeding the cycle of disadvantage. Furthermore, although owner attitudes and vision are important to fuel growth ambitions, these will be tempered by market conditions, serendipity and the institutional environment: *“I think that you need to take your vision outside, of this little pot (NI) and I think that’s where the expansion and growth within a lot of women doing business has to go because they are always hitting a glass ceiling if they are not prepared to move”* (Sophie-EFD) and *“They (women business) need to up their game an awful lot”* (Grace-EMD). Unsurprisingly, given the gendered niching of women’s entrepreneurship, rather than being a means to secure freedom and achieve agency, self-employment instead may be constraining (Adkins, 2002): These gendered niches in effect reinforce and reproduce the marginalisation of women in enclave economies (Portes and Shafer 2006): cultural practices, agentic leadership and entrepreneurial activity do not enable women to transcend these niches.

Gendered niches embody continued beliefs that women are more suited to some activities and men to others (Bell et al., 1993), reflected in their ghettoization in that while men and women may have the same job titles they do different work (Crompton, 1997). Drawing on niche theory’s conceptualization of a niche as a position in a multidimensional resource space and on Rose’s (1993) view that spaces are hazardous arenas felt as part of patriarchal power, women’s entrepreneurship is often advocated as a means of escaping from or transcending these gendered niches (Yousafzai et al., 2019), overcoming the ‘location is vulnerability’ trap (Rose 1993). However, given the implications of contextual embeddedness and doing gender as a constitutive social practice, this raises instead the question of the extent to which women in entrepreneurship have been co-opted by a predominantly male profession that has integrated them into marginal and feminized niches where they remain ghettoized. Indeed, women’s entrepreneurship itself may be construed as a gendered niche and policies to enhance it may in fact perpetuate rather than overcome this.

#### **5.4 Liberation or Perpetuation?**

Previous research has shown that while entrepreneurs may be characterised by their autonomy and independence, they are also very dependent on ties of trust and cooperation (Slotte-Kock and Coviello, 2010). As studies on entrepreneurship as a niche demonstrate, an entrepreneur’s ability to construct and develop networks is crucial for entrepreneurial growth (Hoang and Antoncic, 2003; Stuart and Sorenson, 2005). Networking provides significant advantages for entrepreneurs including access to advice, information, strategic alliances and the acquisition of credibility and legitimacy for their ventures. The entrepreneurship literature has mainly

adopted a gender-as-variable approach to exploring network processes, behaviours and outcomes based on the de facto assumption that men and women belong to homogeneous, but different groups. For example, variations have been identified in the process of networking and the benefits and outcomes of network membership for male and female entrepreneurs and in the sex composition of women's networks, which tend to be composed entirely of other women who are used for emotional support. Consequently, attention has been drawn to the limited diversity and homophilous nature of women entrepreneurs' networks (Renzulli et al., 2000). This is a key element in the operation and perpetuation of gendered niches, and was clearly evident from the findings (Table 4): "*A lot of them like that the fact that its women only, a very friendly open environment* (Elsie- NC); and "*I think if you are a sole trader, it quite lonely*" (Phoebe-EGI); "*For me it's socializing, it's nice to meet people like yourself and socialize*" (Isabella-EGI).

The regional policy justification for women-only networks is to provide networking opportunities to support women's entrepreneurship and in turn, result in a boost for the Northern Ireland economy (Table 1). However, the limited business potential of these networking opportunities was remarked upon by some of its members: "*Is it just a tea party or is it going to be more than that? Never mind the social element*" (Mia-EFD), while Chloe (EFD) observed "*You get introductions and that's as far as business dealing go... it is nice to have a nice tea but you just sit there*". "*Most women are at a point where it is all tea and scones, they need to make a jump and take a risk and there's not an awful lot of women's networks that do that*" (Sophie-EFD). There appeared to be some resentment amongst the members of the mixed networks about being "*herded into women-only networks*" (Lucy-NC), in a clear demonstration of the politics of representation and identity in which 'gender' becomes a key marker (Jones 2009; Cockayne 2015). This resentment appeared to be based on the artificiality of such environments and lack of reflection of the real business world comprising diverse players, including men (McAdam et al., 2019). In addition, there were concerns that by not engaging with men or having access to key players resulted in a limited ability to learn how to play the game of entrepreneurship. This is summed up by Sophie (EFD), "*So that's why you have to go into the mixed bag of affairs (male and female), that's where you learn because it's a massive game*". Furthermore, it was acknowledged that learning the rules of the game facilitated getting their business to the next level. "*It (women-only) can be very limited, there is very few people that can help you get to the next level*" (Chloe- EFD). Accordingly, mixed networks appeared be affiliated with greater credibility: "*it was imperative to join XXX (mixed network), it was not a question of do I like them, it needs to be done because an awful lot of business is about credibility*" (Phoebe-EGI); "*It's at a different level, they have raised the bar. Not being derogatory about some of the women's networks but it's very sedate –it's not mind blowing. The mixed networks are more proactive* (Ruby- EGI).

## **5.5 Policy Implications**

This evidence suggests that in practice women's entrepreneurship policy reflects a decontextualized standpoint which is grounded in the belief, implicitly accepted by many women themselves, that public policy should address women's entrepreneurial underperformance. This top-down approach is embedded in a masculinist worldview which

ascribes superiority to certain actors while marginalising others in a distinctly gendered fashion (Lindberg, 2014; Pettersson et al., 2017), reflects the power of public authorities to determine policy activities, and defines women as a problem to be fixed and policy as the solution. However, the outcomes of this androcentric biased policy (Ahl and Marlow, 2019) are often limited or contrary to intentions, not least because policy design ignores the structural issues of how women and men are socialized, and the implications of this for how we understand the socially embedded nature of women's entrepreneurship (Pettersson et al., 2017; Ahl and Marlow, 2019). Within the domain of feminist economic geography, how we do gender has become increasingly important (Sharp, 2005; McDowell, 2006; 2016), requiring a more nuanced understanding of diversity and spatial variation in gender relations (Lalibertie et al., 2017). This focus on everyday activities and social practices is important for three reasons: first, it allows for variation and plurality beyond static or binary categories; second, it captures the dynamic tension between stability and change and the paradoxes of gendered practices; and third, it facilitates our understanding of gendered patterns beyond the practices of individual actors (Kvande, 2007). As such, a feminist geography perspective on entrepreneurship recognizes the importance of spatial contexts in the enabling and constraining of the agentic potential of entrepreneurial actors (Hanson and Blake, 2009).

Notwithstanding the belief that 'the influx of women into the labor force ushered in significant gains in economic growth and worker productivity' (Fetsch et al., 2015: 1), there is a clear and continuing sexual division of labour between 'men's work' and 'women's work' (Hakim 2000). This essentialist and voluntaristic perspective posits that the gendered division of labour reflects women's unique female qualities, preferences and career choices: women harbour different qualities to men and become economically active in areas that valorise women's gender-specific tasks. In contrast to this preference theory perspective, the contextual embeddedness and structural view of women's position in the labour market, emphasizes the existence of gender segregation, inequality and discriminatory practices as structural barriers (the lack of mentors, collegial support, information and professional networks) that restrict women's progression (Ettlinger, 2003).

This has significant implications by raising complex and important issues for the field of gender and entrepreneurship and posing significant challenges for public policy. We have found that the 'parallel tracks' approach to policy design and delivery, that is treating women differently from men, by creating women-only targeted initiatives, results in ghettoization for women. We have also argued that status quo and apparently gender-neutral approaches are either not effective or only very slowly prove to be beneficial for women.

There are, as we have discussed, two very different perspectives on women as entrepreneurs (Grundetjern and Sandberg, 2012). The first sees them as marginalised and passive within the structural constraints of a gendered economy and the hypermasculine social context. This has its roots in a structural explanation of social behaviour, and in a radical feminist tradition that emphasises how women are oppressed in a male dominated society or sub-culture. As such, it supports the development of separatist solutions, such as those presented in this paper. Based on our analysis, we argue that these do not necessarily lead to empowerment but instead

represent a flawed basis for the development of entrepreneurship policies. In developing the idea of paradoxical space and the geometries of distance, Rose (1993) has argued that the claim that women-only spaces enable the recovery of an essentially feminine identity is a mere reflection of the importance of boundaries to hegemonic subjectivity, with all the virtual exclusions that entails. Separatism, consequently, is a 'reverse discourse' which inverts the dominant value system without challenging its fundamental categories. The challenge, as she sees it, is to create a space of interrelations, a breathing space to reflect, meditate, gain strength and recover a sense of identity and avoid the chauvinism of exclusion (Rose, 1993: 152-153).

The second, more recent account is of women as competent and skilful entrepreneurs, possessing some advantages on account of their female and feminine characteristics. This is grounded in an agency-based explanation of behaviour and reflects a more liberal feminist perspective. In its most recent manifestation, this is embodied in postfeminism which underscores women's agentic individualism and self-determination (Ahl and Marlow, 2019) and posits entrepreneurship as a site of personal 'satisfaction' (Cockayne, 2015; Cockayne and Richardson, 2017). However, while some studies of, for example, bottom-up innovation and entrepreneurship policy making (Lindberg, 2014) and gender-sensitive business counselling support (Lindberg and Johansson, 2017) suggest that there are circumstances where changes in the gendered pattern of entrepreneurship can be stimulated, this study shows little support for this more optimistic position.

However, there is a third possible position, which draws on both liberal feminism and feminist geography traditions and reemphasises gender as a social category. This undercuts the essentialist/non-essentialist divide and charts the problems of subordination, differentiation and hierarchy to expose the possibilities as well as the limits of gendered selfhood (Ross-Smith and Huppatz, 2010). Our analysis suggests that supporting women-only networks is a way of "paying lip service" to women's unequal positionality and power without actually having to address structural inequalities and thus disrupt a neoliberal focus on fostering women's contribution to economic growth. Unfortunately, given this there is not a 'quick fix' for policy design in this area. Policy makers and academic researchers alike need to recognize that women entrepreneurs and would-be entrepreneurs operate in a gendered economy in which their capabilities and access to resources are structurally constrained by their past and present positions. This will not be changed by adopting a policy of gender neutrality through the removal of formal, especially legal, impediments to equality, not least because those who have suffered inequality of treatment may be unable to take advantage of such an open-door policy. Nor will it be changed by governments, through the adoption of level playing field policies based on affirmative action and positive discrimination (at least not in the short to medium term). Instead, we suggest that self-conscious effort is required by all stakeholders involved to identify, address and eliminate the more nebulous forms by which cultural bias is perpetuated moving beyond simple equal opportunity and its ameliorative actions to a restructuring of the ways social institutions are conceived (Graham, 1994). Despite the structural constraints of their position, this allows for women's embodied capital, such as is accumulated in gendered niches, to include the possibility for creative strategy and agency: while these may be structurally limited they offer the potential to transcend a marginal

position. In other words, if women's entrepreneurship is considered a gendered niche, policy makers' regional economic development aspirations for its impact will not be achieved. Instead, policy formulation and implementation should be founded on different philosophical assumptions: while the neoliberal argument that women's entrepreneurship might be emancipatory and positive is attractive, it can only be so in practice if the wider structures and culture do not hinder it. Given the perpetuation of masculinist hegemonies in both entrepreneurship and top-down policy making, we need to engage in widespread structural change to achieve more even regional development. Addressing these issues will require a re-examination of both the process and content of policy interventions.

## **6. Conclusion**

The need to develop a deeper understanding of women's entrepreneurship and its assumed uniqueness across different cultures, social norms and institutions that influence women entrepreneurs' behaviours and outcomes has been strongly advocated (Mari et al., 2016; Welter, 2011). Whereas research that acknowledges the embeddedness of women's entrepreneurship in family and household contexts has been sufficiently developed through the 'family embeddedness' perspective (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003), studies on the influence of country and region-specific peculiarities are still rare (Pathak et al., 2013). It is widely assumed that any shortcomings of women's entrepreneurial activities are the outcomes of their individual attributes (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). This underplays the view that the entrepreneurship phenomenon is influenced by both individual and contextual factors (Shane, 2003), and has limited our understanding of women's entrepreneurship, as the reality that women face in carrying out their entrepreneurial activities cannot be revealed. Future entrepreneurship research would benefit from shaping, guiding and even provoking public policy discussions. Drawing upon feminist geography perspectives, we have provided greater conceptual clarity regarding the contextual embeddedness of entrepreneurship and the implications of this for understanding women's entrepreneurship.

Our specific focus has been on the extent to which one element of women's entrepreneurship policy, the creation of formally established women-only entrepreneurial networks, has reinforced the embedded masculinity of entrepreneurship through the perpetuation of women's entrepreneurship as a gendered niche. This reflects the importance of geographic propinquity for the establishment of homophilous relationships through the formation of localized niches in social space (McPherson, et al., 2001). As networks are constellations of relationships that develop among members of a social system and provide a key source of social capital, information, resources, access to markets and business development support, the spatial and the social are closely interrelated: propinquity fosters communication, knowledge sharing and collaboration (Arenius and Franzén, 2016). As ties between non-similar individuals dissolve at a higher rate than for homophilous ones (McPherson et al., 2001), there is a potential 'dark side' to the formation of these spatial and social localized niches, which can perpetuate and intensify similarity of perspective and lack of access to resources. Accordingly, we argue that spatial context plays a crucial role in understanding both the gendered social structure in networks (Forsberg, 2001) and in turn the asymmetrical gender relations which continue to position women entrepreneurs as subordinate across space and time. Space is often referred to

as the contextual dimension by which to frame gendered relations as opposed to a potential explanatory factor informing and shaping these relations. Furthermore, Sharp (1999) has argued that the concept of place, not unlike space, was first viewed as a “bounded piece of space or territory,” which is imbued with certain characteristics which make it unique compared to the surrounding space (Lalibertie et al., 2017). In this context, our findings resonate with the argument that power permeates socially constructed relations and institutions (Sharp, 1999; Bacchi, 2009). For several of our respondents, a key feature of mixed networks was that they could often feel “out of place” when they entered these spaces. Irrespective of their training or experience, they were disempowered in that they did not share in the masculine culture of the place.

As a consequence of our feminist geography stance, we uncovered social processes and relations of power that underlie geographical patterns (McDowell, 1992) and in so doing acknowledge the presence of inequality as a relational construct (Allen, 2003). There are different forms of power embedded in different configurations of relational geometries (Yeung, 2005). However, if agency is both the capacity to influence and the capacity to act, that is to exercise the capacity to influence through actor-specific practice, then it is clear that the policy of creating women-only networks has not empowered women entrepreneurs (Baughan et al., 2006). They are not powerful, in the sense of having the capacity or influence arising from either the structures of relations within which they are embedded or the emergent effects of social practices (Yeung, 2005). Instead, they remain powerless in the face of the masculinist hegemony, confirming the argument that network connections themselves do not necessarily make a difference for different types of actors in different contexts (Ettliger, 2003). In other words, it is not a given that policy initiatives to support women’s entrepreneurship will actually contribute to gender equality, to social change or to change in the gendered structure of society or even achieve their immediate aim of increasing women’s entrepreneurial activity, well-being and financial independence (Pettersson et al., 2017; Ahl and Nelson, 2015). In seeking to improve the relevance and impact of policy in this area, attention needs to be given to the wider recent debates around post-feminism, which in a reversion to liberal rather than radical feminism highlights women’s choice, agentic individualism and self-determination. This marks a retreat from structural accounts of inequalities, viewing them as ‘just how things are’, and imposes on women themselves a requirement for harder work and more entrepreneurialism rather than societal transformation. While superficially attractive in emphasising individualism, choice and differences, post-feminism, in reviving a belief in ‘natural’ sexual differences, moving from objectification to voluntary subjectification and occupational choice (including the retreat to home and part-time working) as a choice not an obligation, reaffirms the marginalisation of women in the discourse of entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, we have illuminated the unintended consequences of one instrument of regional development policy. Even though established on the belief that networks play a critical role in influencing the entrepreneurial process, shaping outcomes and facilitating business development through the provision of information, resources and contacts, the delivery of counselling support and the creation of opportunity, they instead have served to reinforce

‘women’s entrepreneurship’ as a gendered niche. The challenge for researchers is to use this contextually embedded analysis of one policy instrument in one particular place as a basis for interrogating the development, implementation and effectiveness of this and other policy interventions to encourage and support women’s entrepreneurship in other geographies and spatialities. The challenge for regional economic development policy makers is clear (Bathelt and Glückler, 2013): the effect of institutions (and their underlying rules, regulations and governance arrangements) on economic relations and outcomes can be unexpected, unforeseeable and even counterproductive. Policy formulation needs to be ‘reflective, responsive, and adaptable to the specific local and non-local contextuality of economic action ... in order to support expected outcomes’ (Bathelt and Glückler, 2013: 357). While participatory approaches to policy making may give the marginalised a voice, they can also impose, not overcome, power relations when ‘delivered’ as a technocratic top-down solution (Kesby 2005; 2007; Lindberg, 2014). As such, a more explicit articulation of the spatial assemblages of power, in which spatiality is imbued with power and power is intertwined with spatiality (Allen, 2003), will be required if the role of (women’s) entrepreneurship in the relationality of regional economic development is to be understood more fully and influenced more effectively.

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**Table 1: Evolution of Women’s Entrepreneurship Policy in Northern Ireland**

<b>Policy</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Main instruments</b>
Investing in Women Initiative	2001	To increase the number of women starting a business and encourage those already in business to develop and grow their business. <i>“Women are the largest under-represented group when it comes to enterprise in Northern Ireland and there is enormous benefit to be realised for our economy if more women are encouraged to maximise the use of their skills in new business start-up.”</i>	Women in business networks; women’s seminars; conferences
Accelerating Entrepreneurship Strategy	2003	To establish Northern Ireland as an exemplar location for starting and growing a successful business and achieve higher levels of entrepreneurial activity	Development of an infrastructure that enables new business ventures to progress and grow rapidly, particularly globally trading, and knowledge based projects.
Pathways Programme	2006	Improve access to business support for women and increase the level of female entrepreneurship across Northern Ireland	Established ‘access points’ for women, connecting them with regional advisors and other female entrepreneurs
Booster Programme	2009	Support women in Northern Ireland with the ambition and potential to expand their business turnover, profitability, exports, and increase their leadership and management skills	Interactive workshops and seminars focusing on dealing with the main challenges of growing a business.
Propel Pre- Accelerator Programme	2010	To help Northern Ireland entrepreneurs turn a business idea into a world class company.	Accelerator programme, comprising, mentorship, workshops, seminars and access to VCs and investors
Entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland: A context paper	2018	To be a dynamic and enterprising region, supporting innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship at its core with a culture of new business development, higher start-up activity and more businesses realising high growth potential.	Awareness – Women in Business Connect Programme Enablers – Women in Business Network

**Table 2: Details of Women Entrepreneurs**

<b>Respondents*</b>	<b>Network Type</b>	<b>Business</b>	<b>Industrial Sector**</b>
Amelia	Mixed	Inward Investor Facilitator/ Talent Management	<b>Male Dominated (MD)</b>
Olivia	Women only	Life Insurance	<b>Male Dominated (MD)</b>
Emily	Mixed	Training and Consultancy – health and wellbeing	<b>Female Dominated (FD)</b>
Ella	Mixed	Life coach	<b>Gender Integrated (GI)</b>
Jessica	Women only	Event’s organiser	<b>Female Dominated (FD)</b>
Isabella	Women only	Tea and coffee importer	<b>Gender Integrated (GI)</b>
Mia	Women only	Designer – hospitality and leisure industry	<b>Female Dominated (FD)</b>
Sophie	Mixed	Events/ Conference Organizer	<b>Female Dominated (FD)</b>
Lily	Mixed	Finance	<b>Male Dominated (MD)</b>
Grace	Mixed	Insurance Broker	<b>Male Dominated (MD)</b>
Eva	Mixed	Virtual Office Services	<b>Female Dominated (FD)</b>
Ruby	Mixed	Business Consultancy	<b>Gender Integrated (GI)</b>
Chloe	Women only	Beautician (chain of shops)	<b>Female Dominated (FD)</b>
Phoebe	Women only	Professional networker/ facilitator	<b>Gender Integrated (GI)</b>

\* Pseudonyms have been used.

\*\* **Female dominated (42%); Male dominated (28%); Gender integrated (28%)**

**Table 3: Details of Women-Only Networks**

<b>Network Coordinator (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Year of Formation</b>	<b>Rationale/ Purpose/ Aim</b>
Alice	2002 by 10 female business women; Formally established 2005 – Board established – funding obtained from local development agencies	To provide support (help each other, be with likeminded women), information providers, networking (making connections)
Matilda	2001 with budget from local development agency of £5000 to provide increased business opportunities	To provide support and to develop women’s networking capability
Lola	1986, formally established 1996, established by group of female businesswomen and academics; funding from local development agencies	To provide information and experience sharing, to address discrimination and to provide training courses
Lucy	1989/99 with funding obtained from local development agencies	To support women going into business; to provide signposting, networking, making connections
Elsie	2004 with funding obtained from local development agencies	To support women going into business, share information, develop business opportunities, break down barriers, identify role models
Rosie	2003/4 with funding obtained from local development agencies	To support women

**Table 4: Inductive Analysis and Data Coding**

<b>First Order Codes</b>	<b>Sub Themes (Second Order Codes)</b>	<b>Aggregate Themes</b>
Statements about identifying women as an underrepresented group (A, B); fixing the problem of women (A, B); correction (A, B); disconnect between macro and regional levels (A, B); women's self-perception's (A)	In need of special attention Empowering Women within the region Enterprising Self Women's Entrepreneurship and regional development	Women's Entrepreneurship Policy
Statements about identifying women it's a man's world (A); being seen as an outsider (A); historical context (A); women's role in society (A,B); women as caregivers (A); insularity (A); local focus (A, B)	Masculine Business Structures Patriarchy and Parochialism	Contextual Embeddedness of Entrepreneurship
Statements about women type businesses (A); clustering in the service sector (A,B); lifestyle businesses (A,B); not being taken seriously (A); limited growth aspirations (A,B)	Pink Ghettos Restricted Entrepreneurial Ambitions	Gendered Niches
Statements about socialising (A); reducing isolation (A); limited business opportunities (A); being part of something credible (A); herded into silos (A);	Support Vs Business Groups Credibility Gap Hierarchy of networks Spatial aspects of gendered networks	Liberation or Perpetuation

**Key: A - data from semi-structured interviews; B - supplemented with archival data**