



## Abstract

### **GENDERED INSTITUTIONS MATTER**

**A middle ground between feminist and gender-blind perspectives on enterprise development**

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A central idea behind the global push for women's enterprise development is that it contributes to economic growth and women's empowerment. It is perhaps a naïve idea, but certainly disruptive as donors, governments, NGO's and impact investors are devoting a great deal of attention and money to it. The goal of this thesis is to examine the interactions between informal gendered institutions, women's entrepreneurial logics and the emancipatory effects of market innovations on women's enterprise development. It is motivated by the concern that enterprise development policy and practice is mainly informed by research which, by design, excludes the role of informal gendered rules and expectations, considers female entrepreneurs a homogenous group, and assumes emancipatory effects of market innovations on the lives and businesses of women, rather than actually theorizing or empirically measuring such effects.

This thesis draws from secondary data and primary qualitative data collected through expert informants, focus group discussions and life-story interviews with thirty-six female entrepreneurs operating micro and small businesses in rural and urban Malawi. The female entrepreneurs were selected because they use a market innovation to grow their business and have different household positions (e.g. single, married, divorced or widowed). The methodology focuses on uncovering the gendered nature of institutional processes by examining the scripts, routines and practices that structure agents' actions and interactions in their everyday entrepreneurship. For interpretation and analysis, it combines theoretical lenses from different strands of literature, which thus far have been underused or not sufficiently integrated. It combines concepts and analytical tools from pragmatic feminism, feminist institutionalism and small business economics.

Through four separate but connected studies, this thesis brings into focus the more hidden aspects of gendered institutions. It highlights how gendered rules and expectations structure heterogeneity and dynamism in women's entrepreneurial logic and deepens our understanding of how their unique strategies to manoeuvre gendered constraints and risks across phases of life affects their growth potential. Female entrepreneurs are not a homogenous group. In addition to survivalists and growth-oriented entrepreneurs, an intermediate segment called constrained gazelles is distinguished. The entrepreneurial logic of the female constrained gazelle is geared towards growth, yet her behaviours, aspirations and outcomes are deeply entangled in unwritten expectations and rules about what is acceptable and legitimate for women to do, be and have at the time of her social positioning. In addition to a poor business environment, female constrained gazelles face additional constraints and risks as a result of the gendered rules and expectations that govern the home, business, market and community and which reduces their growth potential. This shows that entrepreneurial logic is not

static, nor is it determined by the gender of the entrepreneur. Rather, it is dynamic and structured by gendered rules and expectations which vary across life's phases.

This thesis also examines how female entrepreneurs navigate and resist constraining gendered rules and expectations. By highlighting how gendered institutions intersect across domains of the home, market and community, it demonstrates that even gender-blind market innovations for enterprise development can have emancipatory effects. New market rules and mechanisms do not empower women *per se*, but female entrepreneurs can use their material and immaterial gains as means to strategically ease constraining gender rules and expectations in another domain, such as the home or community.

The results of this thesis suggest that there is indeed potential for advancing feminist goals through market innovations for enterprise development. Yet it concludes that it is unwise for policymakers and practitioners to ignore the profound influence of informal gendered institutions on enterprise development for three reasons. First, ignoring informal gendered institutions bears the risk of misinterpreting the unique and dynamic enterprise development strategies of different types of female entrepreneurs. Second, it generates one-size-fits-all policies that leave informal gendered institutional constraints untouched and are bound to mismatch the needs of female entrepreneurs, in particular those of the female constrained gazelle. Third, it obscures the emancipatory effects of market-based approaches for enterprise development, leaving potentially impactful pathways towards improved well-being for different types of female entrepreneurs unexplored.

To be meaningful to the lives and businesses of diverse female entrepreneurs, policymakers and practitioners need to embrace the gendered complexity, dynamism and heterogeneity of agents' entrepreneurial logic and integrate this into the definition of goals, problem analysis and solutions. This does not imply that female entrepreneurs should be considered a 'special target group' in need of separate programming. Rather, this thesis calls for inclusive and life-cycle proof enterprise development policy which manages gendered institutional constraints and risks and equips different segments of entrepreneurs with new and relevant opportunities and resources, at the right time. I recommend for enterprise development policy and practice to broaden the aim and scope of the policy menu and to adjust solutions to different segments of entrepreneurs according to their age, aspirations and income. Rather than aiming for 'business growth' as the ultimate *end state*, it should be considered a *means* to improve the well-being of all entrepreneurs, irrespective of their age, firm size, gender or aspirations. Altering the goal (and monitoring) of enterprise development towards a more process-oriented goal of improved well-being, broadens the scope of interventions. Repairing business environments and market deficiencies need to be accompanied with interventions that redress gendered constraints and risks experienced in the market, community and at home. In addition to evaluating and measuring the impact of enterprise development in terms of the scale of individual economic gains, how that contributes to the depth of emancipatory effects and improved well-being should always be present. Such enterprise development solutions are informed by local institutional context analysis through a gender lens. These include a life-cycle approach and segmentation strategy to differentiate between survivalists, growth-oriented entrepreneurs and constrained gazelles. In addition to market and business environment or analyses, explicit attention is given to entrepreneurs' 'real and everyday lives' and include how they are affected by what goes on in their homes, communities and markets.

This thesis shows the value of integrating pragmatic feminism and feminist institutionalism with insights on entrepreneurial heterogeneity for future research. The middle-ground perspective it proposes is a step towards more integrated enterprise development research in the future. It is midway between the feminist critique of 'what is lacking', and the goal of creating 'universal knowledge for economic growth'. It views enterprise development as an everyday and dynamic process geared towards improved well-being and deeply embedded in gendered institutional contexts. It values and

empirically measures multiple outcomes of enterprise development over time. In addition to measuring economic gains, the depth of emancipatory effects should always be present. It rejects the idea of the 'female entrepreneur' as a homogenous group. Rather, diversity and dynamism in entrepreneurial logic is prevalent and entrepreneurs are gendered and embodied beings, embedded in a family and community life with different levels of 'constrained' (or privileged) entrepreneurship defined by the ways institutional contexts grant or restrict their agency, access to and control over resources. This perspective offers room for nuance, complexity and uncertainty and the opportunity to acknowledge that multiple paths can lead to different futures, even unsettling gender-blind and market-driven ones. It is expected to help generate deeper, more nuanced and empirically grounded understandings of the effects of informal gendered institutions on enterprise development and how to support female entrepreneurs in their strategies for institutional change, more freedom and improved well-being.