



**Case Studies on Perspectives on
Entrepreneurship and Sustainability**

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Gender Identity and Entrepreneurship: Breaking the Gender Stereotype

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ABSTRACT

Like many women during her times, Anuradha Agarwal grew up with stereotypes around and was conditioned to lead a life of conformity. Through this life experience, she came to the realization that there was an expectation mismatch. There was a tension between expectations from self and societal expectations that were gendered. Breaking the gender stereotypes was not only a necessity for her own life goals for innovative pursuits, but also for becoming a change agent in empowering other women trapped in a paradox of balancing self and societal expectations. Anuradha has been breaking the gender stereotypes in more ways than one. Graduating from Delhi University, she went on to do her Masters from University of Nottingham in 2014. Traveling away from home was part of her attempt at breaking the stereotype. At a very early age of 24, she stepped into the shoes of an entrepreneur and has been achieving one milestone after another. As an accomplished marketer which is predominantly a male dominated space, She went onto become the country's top 3 marketers under 30, being a Young Lions Finalist in 2018 and 2019, organised by Cannes Lions. Even when the world was still coming to terms with Covid-19, Anuradha made it to the coveted Business Mint's list of Under-30 Inspiring Entrepreneurs in 2021, and Think North Consulting was also recognised as India's Most Admirable Brand 2021 in Branding, Marketing Communications and Marketing Technology. She recently got featured in the Forbes India. Being a woman, breaking the mould and myths associated with the gender, these achievements went a long way in proving her business acumen and technical competence in the marketing world. In a predominantly male-driven environment, she emerged as competent and competitive as her male competitors and collaborators. This single case study is useful for future scholars in gaining an initial understanding of gender identity and entrepreneurship.

Dilemma/research questions: The challenge for the protagonist was how to break the gender stereotype at personal, professional and societal level.

Theory: This illustrative case study enables a theoretical understanding of gender identity in entrepreneurship. More specifically, the case uses intersectionality lens to view gender identity in the entrepreneurship phenomenon.

Basis of the case: Phenomenon

Type of the case: Applied Problem Solving

Protagonist: Anuradha Agarwal

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Findings: The findings show that the protagonist faced stereotyping in four categories; workplace, family and society and identity trappings. She broke the gender stereotype by challenging the status quo at in all categories and her drivers to break the stereotype were identified. She decided to model her actions by bringing in 'equal pay' concept in her own enterprise to all her employees. She introduced 'authentic self' concept in her mentorship of young girls, to teach them self-care and self-sustenance and fight these biases early in their life. She also realized that as a leader she had to be 'future ready' and inspire other women in this process of becoming.

Discussions: Through her life experience, the protagonist opines that having assessments based on assertions is always helpful in proving a theory to the world. She feels that it is unfortunate that women need external validation to bring out their unique gender identity. This case presents a novel perspective on how the protagonist used external validation as a resource to establish her gender identity. The protagonist takes it as her emancipatory vision to inspire other women trapped in their imposed gender stereotype to liberate themselves and live up to their full potential. As part of creating her gender identity, emulating compassionate leadership, she also aspires to create a benchmark organisation culture that celebrates inclusivity, appreciates empathy and draws strength in vulnerability. She firmly believes that the entrepreneurship world needs more of women to represent the values and ethos that only a woman can carry the feminine virtues in leadership.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Gender Equality, Stereotyping, Entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotyping, the role of family prejudice and discriminatory practices create disadvantage for women entrepreneurship (Loscocco et al., 2009). While some scholars have defined gender identity as an inward looking biological characteristic, others have expressed it as something which is constructed through social and relational interactions with other individual and social structures. Warner (2016) defines gender identity as an identity that is based on an individual's own understanding of her/his gender. Identity is socially constructed; influenced by one's own personal as well as gender related conceptualization of 'self'. Such gender-based identity influences gender related behaviour, including self-regulatory processes (Bussey, 2011). The gender related self-concepts are an outcome of various social influences including that of parents, friends, peers and external environment. A gender identity is a reflection of the social structure in which the person has been embedded for a long time. Given the identity entrusted by society, based on conventional understanding of gender roles, the individual begins to see the given ways existing 'out there' in the society which determines how she grows up as an individual (Warner, 2016). When the individual lives through experiences of inequality in societal power structure, she/he begins to perform actions that create new identity and does not ascribe with the existing social structure (Warner, 2016). Gradually with evolving identity individuals transform not only their own identity but also alter gender based self-conceptions and bring about social change in the social structure itself. Though still far from the desired, a change in gender identity is leading to changed actions which in turn are bringing about a change in gender roles too.

Entrepreneurship is a socially constructed, relationally interactive, societal phenomenon rooted in socio-political and cultural context (Steyaert and Katz, 2004, Lumpkin et al., 2013). Gender identity closely interacts with the concept of intersectionality (Essers and Benschop, 2009;) and demonstrates how gender and entrepreneurship along with the other social identities interact with each other and show how gender identity is constructed and entrepreneurship is situationally performed. Gherardi (2015) expresses that gender and entrepreneurship positioning

are performed through narratives, discourses, entrepreneurial practices, social norms, language and values which give an idea of the socially constructed images of an individual (McAdam, 2012).

Researchers have carried out studies that reveal how women entrepreneurs cope up with a normative perception of femininity in entrepreneurship, and employing various strategies/tactics to create their personal identities. There are identity studies on gender identity in the context of migration and ethnic employment (Mushaben, 2009), older women entrepreneurs (Stirzaker and Sitko, 2018) skilfully balancing work and family (Wang, 2018) and women creating their own identity amidst constraining socio-cultural environment and tradition and modernity (Constantindis et al., 2018). This everyday strategizing with different roles that women play in their entrepreneurial activities to create personal gender-neutral identity, reflect an evolving process of intersectionality between gender and entrepreneurship process (Chasserio et al., 2014; Diaz-García and Welter, 2013). This intersectionality of multiple social identities helps them keep their boundaries between different roles flexible and help sustain their businesses (Loscocco et al., 2009). With the narrative account of a woman entrepreneur, we identify and describe how she struggled her way towards an entrepreneurial identity by making her way through a gendered societal and professional environment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We take 'Intersectionality approach' as a theoretical lens in our understanding of gender identity and entrepreneurship. Dy, and Agwunobi (2018) define intersectionality as "interaction of social structures, such that advantages or disadvantages attached to social categories and their hierarchical positions – e.g. of race, gender, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age and disability, to name a few – work "simultaneously and in concert" (Essers et al., 2010). Shields (2008) define intersectionality as relation among different social identities, and one which has transformed how research conceptualizes gender. It uncovers how an individual's social identity influences her/his beliefs about and experience of gender. Researchers have now come to acknowledge that an individual's social location (context) as reflected in intersecting identities should be the prime point for studying gender identity. Shields (2008) opine that though intersectionality differs from one context to another, all social identities are borne out of social relations. They are mutually constituting (relational to one another), reinforcing (identity as dynamic), and naturalizing (one identity becomes evident over another). He says that an individual practices her/his identity based on the dynamic inputs from all her/his other identities.

An intersectional perspective acknowledges the limitation of a single identity. It explains that a single identity is unable to explain why an entrepreneur is who she/he is. We have multiple fluid and dynamic identities. Gender is the most omnipresent, obvious category of identity (Shields, 2008). Intersectionality holds promising horizons to bring about changes in social practice liberating and emancipating women entrepreneurs (McCall, 2005). Such an approach takes us away from conceptualizing women having similar experiences (Díaz García and Welter, 2011). Different women experience gender and other social categories differently (Holvino et al., 2010). Taking the cue from research studies carried out by other authors like Ahl (2006), Hughes et al.'s (2012), (Williams and Patterson, 2019) took the study a step further by including gender intersectionality

lens in women entrepreneurship. Exploring gendered nature of entrepreneurship within social context gives meaningful insight into understanding gender being socially constructed; examining intersectionality between gender, entrepreneurship and context (Bourne and Calás, 2013). This also informs us on how an entrepreneur gets shaped by their communities and how they use their experiences and their agency to challenge structural constraints and influence their context (Welter, 2014; Wang and Warn, 2018). Thus intersectionality forces researchers to view world from alternate perspectives (Shields, 2008) allowing us to “grasp how women entrepreneurs simultaneously live as disadvantaged and privileged.” (Chasserio et al., 2014).

Intersectionality holistically sums up how different people respond differently to their social environment and also how this environment responds to them and shapes them. It embraces complexity and inclusivity of human experiences (McCall, 2005). Since intersectionality acknowledges mutually constructed social identities, and how they are all embedded into one another, it also sufficiently explains how the protagonist broke gender stereotype at professional, personal and societal level.

Hence this study seeks to answer the following research question:

- 1a. What are the gender stereotypes that a women entrepreneur faces in creating her gender identity and
- 1b. To identify the drivers and corresponding actions taken to break the gender stereotype and create her unique gender identity

METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative approach, we have Anuradha Agarwal, Founder of Think North Consulting, as an illustrative case study to understand and describe the phenomena of gender identity in entrepreneurship, using the theoretical lens of Intersectionality. Such cases inform us better on a phenomenon being studied (Harling, 2012). Here, the case is used to understand how a gender identity is created; one that breaks the gender stereotype. The case demonstrates how the women entrepreneur negotiated and managed her various social identities to create a unique gender identity for herself. The case brings out how the lady entrepreneur builds on her unique capabilities and resources to break the stereotype and myths associated with being women entering the field of entrepreneurship which is still predominantly thought to be a man's world. The research was based on primary data, collected by conducting a series of narrative interviewing with the entrepreneur. There were 8 rounds of interviews taken by the first author, ranging from 20 min to 2 hours. The analysis was carried out by the first author using thematic analysis, and the findings are shown in the coming sections. The thematic analysis process brings rigor for ensuring consistency, trustworthiness, and transferability of the data analysis. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, followed by systematizing for researcher interpretation (Nowell et al., 2017). The third author came in as a researcher who did not interact with the entrepreneur, and would made sense of the data analysis and interpretation of the first author from a distance. By suggesting ways at improving the findings and contribution, he added to the reliability of the study. The second author, by drawing upon his senior scholarship in the field, contributed in taking a decontextualized view of the study to ensure theoretical fitment and relevance. Interviews with

the entrepreneur created a narrative about her life experiences and journey to entrepreneurship, and how she came about breaking the gender stereotype and developing an identity of herself in that process. Often the interviews took shape of a long interaction that was intense, establishing trust and comfort between the researcher and the entrepreneur. By being a patient and sensitive listener, the researcher enabled the protagonist (the entrepreneur) narrate her story spontaneously through listening and interacting. This exercise of giving voice to the lived experiences of the entrepreneur by invoking confidence in the researcher, establishes credibility and trustworthiness of the data. At times, the sharing was overwhelming and engaging.

FINDINGS

The Entrepreneur and the Enterprise

She was born into a household with two brothers and no expectations from her except to get married and have children. Despite opposition from the family since childhood, she fought the existing normative structure and challenged to establish herself not only in personal life but also in a professional world of entrepreneurship dominated by men. She quips that often she would be the only women in the room of 40 entrepreneurs and would practically be invisible. Adding to her woes was the fact that not only she was in a male-dominated field but more so into marketing and brand communication using Artificial Intelligence (AI), again a typically male frequented area of work. *Think North Consulting* (TNC), her entrepreneurial venture is an award-winning firm providing branding, marketing communication and marketing technology services. Marketing technology is a new vertical added to TNC. With a professional course done from the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Calcutta on AI powered marketing for learning how to pursue that as a business opportunity, she wanted to be frontrunner thinking ahead of time. She had her share of failures too as TNC was not her first venture. She took lessons from her failures, learnt forward, and wisely incorporated them while founding TNC. Her journey was certainly not easy, but her challenges had been rewarding.

Analysis

A woman's entrepreneurial practices are supported and discouraged by normative structure, financial capital, societal structures, cultural traditions and power relations influencing even the macro discourse (Blake, 2006; Brush et al., 2009;). They also face barriers in market access (Shane, 2003), access to financing capital (Bruno and Tyebjee, 1984) and management of human and organizational capital (Aldrich, 1999) in order to launch and scale a venture. Women entrepreneurs strategically utilize and build on their resources that are often connected with who they are and the social identities they have. This helps them create and sustain their ventures (Chasserio et al., 2014).

A deeper analysis of the data emerged as themes to reveal how the women entrepreneur was able to break the gender stereotype and what actions did she take to support the same. The data revealed that there were not one but many intersecting social identities that were giving rise to a contextual understanding of a new gender identity being created. Those social identities were professional identity, personal identity, role identity (daughter, founder, entrepreneur, memberships

of various social groups). We found intersectionality between mentioned social identities from gender perspective, entrepreneurship and social context giving rise to identification of drivers that helped creating a unique gender identity. These drivers from the emerging themes contribute to a better understanding of intersectionality between gender identity and entrepreneurship in this unique case of a women entrepreneur. The thematic analysis also helped us form categories of gender stereotypes and the drivers that were applied to each of the category. The study also shows how processually since her early years there was a consciousness towards breaking the gender stereotype and establish a new gender identity of her own. This case has been taken up specifically to understand gender identity in entrepreneurship through intersectionality lens as it shows a longitudinal journey of more than 20years. There has been a conscious effort by the woman entrepreneur to beak the stereotype. Her life story depicts various high and low points that show how this process came about, what were the actions that she took at different points in her life, the drivers that brought about this change in her own identity. At all such times in her life throughout her 20years, she has embodied and discarded multiple identities in order to be where she is today, an established successful women entrepreneur. This unique case also brings out that breaking the gender stereotype and establishing a new gender identity is a long drawn process and happens over a period of time. Based on codes, the themes that revealed the stereotypes with four categories: *Professional Stereotyping; Family Stereotyping and Societal Stereotyping and Identity Trappings*; and as counter-strategy to these stereotypes was the theme *Identity Evolution and Breaking the Stereotype*. Breaking of the stereotype was done in two ways; actions as an entrepreneur and actions as a woman. From herein, her unique gender identity as a women entrepreneur emerged.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis for Categorizing Gender Stereotyping and Identity Trappings

Representative Data	Themes
When you're starting a business, it's the way the investor treats you because you are a woman and also because there are very few women entrepreneurs. In the market a man is paid twice as women though even the work may not be half as good	Workplace Stereotyping
The market takes advantage of women entrepreneur when you are growing as an enterprise and are not up there yet	
I think what comes across very strongly was that my right to go into a good school by my family was not given to me just because of my gender.	Family Stereotyping
I wasn't being sent to a boarding school. My both the brothers were sent to the boarding school. They said one of the children has to stay back and that had to be naturally me though I was better in studies. I fought and went, but it wasn't easy.	
Though people have their perceived notions, If I start judging everyone with that lens, I won't be able to move ahead. So there are a few things that I will have to tolerate.	Societal Stereotyping
The whole environment was such that nobody had even imagined that the girls should be treated equally	
I am originally from a small town in U. P. Where girls of my age either went out of city to study or stayed there and got married and had children	

As shown in Table 1, Anuradha Agarwal shares that it was very difficult for her to establish herself professionally as an entrepreneur. Since she faced lot of challenges in the presumably man's world, she was not taken seriously at business forums and similar spaces. Often, she faced

situations where the investors would offer lesser amount for the work rendered by TNC, just for the fact that she was a woman. Since resources were always scarce, the entrepreneur recollects, “there were days that they would experience crazy high as a founder where everybody was applauding you, everybody was celebrating and then there were days where you had to struggle to keep the vision on and keep believing in yourself, and you also had to ensure that the team was following your vision”. She says that “for a woman, entrepreneurship is not easy and certainly not for the fainthearted. It’s a very big mental game and many times you almost give up”. She continues, “you have skills but you can’t really implement those skills if you do not have the mental bandwidth to manage the clients and your own team and with the hit of the pandemic, you also have to ensure everybody survives”. As a professional, she feels that women are treated very discriminatively.

As family, she feels she was treated unfairly as compared to her brothers in terms of opportunities and validation. She feels that though she was better than others in academics, she was supposed to be the one staying back to lend a helping hand, not for any other reason but for the fact that she was a woman and hence it was naturally expected. She also feels that a woman is more dependent on external validation which is almost negligible in their case. One thing that comes out very strongly in her story is that women cannot afford to fail, and that they are expected to succeed.

At a societal level, she feels much is yet to evolve. She thinks her family is also not to be blamed. The previous generation has not seen anything other than the fact that woman were only supposed to get married and give birth to children. The fear of failure is seen to be prominent in the case of family as well as societal stereotyping. From her early years, as a society, women are taught to hide their true feelings and dislikes. They are taught to tolerate. She feels society gives less opportunity to women.

She reflects that much of her identity was trapped as a result of these stereotypes. The deep seated conditioning to bear and not express became a bottleneck, something she wanted to get rid of. She says that as a women when you think that you are supposed to be more caring, compassionate as a person, over-caring becomes a vice and brings you disadvantage.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Identity Evolution Drivers to Breaking the Stereotype

<i>Representative Data</i>	<i>Themes</i>
So, while I was working on the outside on who I am, I was also working inside on who I was and who I wanted to become	Identity Evolution
Nurturing your team is good but over nurturing becomes negative	
Those deeply ingrained things started right when you’re at 10 somewhere, I had to consciously break it down.	Breaking the Family Stereotype
I’m perhaps one of the only girls who have gone in my generation because I fought for it, my fair chance.	Breaking the Societal Stereotype
I am also into mentoring girls of 20-25years of age. I told them that I’m not here to tell you that you got to be me. Nobody is there to tell you what you got to be. Rather I am here to tell you that you’ve got to be you. And we got to walk this journey together. i am there to give you a helping hand.	

It has to be a win win relationship for both parties. If I were responsibility towards you, I also have a responsibility towards my team	Breaking the Workplace Stereotype
I did a course in AI powered marketing which is very futuristic because the entrepreneur in me told me that I got to be ready for the future and be there when it happens. And so I started learning before it arrived.	
I think everybody individually has an entrepreneurial mindset	

As shared in table 2, Anuradha has come a long way. Looking into the past, she says it might look easy today but it was not at all easy and had been a rather long drawn struggle. She has evolved as a person. From tolerating and not expressing herself, she be pulled back from all endeavours, today she compromises and tolerates only to gather herself and raise a voice for herself and for women in general. She also realized the importance of striking the right balance in care and compassionate leadership. She mentors women close to her age. While she celebrates her vulnerability, she does not give anyone the right to demean and puts it succinctly, "I might not agree with you on something, but you have no right to yell at me. I can put across that point in a very nice manner and dignified manner is what I think". As a woman, she shares that you have to rely more on internal validation because ecosystem is still hesitant to support you. She approached futuristic leadership in her own unique way bringing in compassionate leadership, one that exuded positive feminine energy, kindness and vitality, vulnerability and space to grow and a chance at mistakes.

DISCUSSION

The study highlights gender identity in entrepreneurship using intersectionality between gendered social identities, entrepreneurship and context. An understanding of masculine form of entrepreneurial characterization of entrepreneurship does not match with the softer and feminine nuances of feminine identity (Marlow and McAdam, 2012). The study identifies drivers that helped creating a unique gender identity thus breaking the existing male characterization of entrepreneurship. These drivers contribute to a better understanding of how a unique gender identity is created from the existing stereotypes. The thematic analysis also helped us form categories of gender stereotypes. The study also shows how processually the protagonist's identity underwent evolution bringing out from her trapped identity to a more evolved and liberated identity. Since her early year there was a consciousness towards breaking the gender stereotype and establish a new gender identity of her own. It was observed that her narrative kept shifting and overlapping from individual story to collective identity as women, as her narrative kept changing while addressing sometimes herself as a person and sometimes identifying herself with women as a gender. The analysis revealed that her journey as a woman entrepreneur has evolved and by creating her own unique gender identity, she has been successfully able to break the gender stereotype and become an inspiration to many. As actionable for breaking the stereotype, she introduced three concepts in her workforce, her mentees and her women acquaintances. These initiatives were equal pay to all her team members without any discrimination; encouraging the female mentees to be their 'authentic self' and by demonstrating futuristic leadership, she set an example for others to follow and be future ready. By bringing equal pay she removed the fallacy of

men being better at work than their female counterpart and hence eradicated any discrimination amongst them. She encouraged the young girls to be their authentic self, the 'real' me and stop following others and pretend to be someone they are not. Earlier research points out that women competency is often questioned including the nature of business they should be doing or are supposed to do (Mirchandani, 1999). Anuradha Agarwal stays ahead of others by exhibiting future readiness not only in her product, the new marketing vertical, but also by upgrading herself in terms of technical competence, financial knowhow and legal affairs. She implores other women to do the same. The study has been limited to only one woman entrepreneur and her unique context thus the findings cannot be largely generalized.

CONCLUSION

Entrepreneurship has for long fashioned around risk bearing capacity, aggression, competition, and profit (Ahl, 2006; Diaz-García and Welter, 2013). Thus, a male entrepreneur's identity comes to be associated with success and accolades, and superiority (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). As opposed to this, we find that women are expected to juggle between various roles and follow the norms of social structure (Lindsey, 2011). As a future research avenue, researchers may further delve into such intersectionality in other contexts and find out whether the emerging themes have any commonality and whether some of the findings can be generalized for women entrepreneurship. Since intersectionality is gaining more focus and momentum due to its ability to explain complexity, a similar study with a cross section of women entrepreneurs can be attempted to enrich the phenomenon further. This particular study brings out how a woman entrepreneur coming out of a small town, went on to become an awarded entrepreneur by successfully breaking the gender stereotype, though the fight still continues... This research case helps create a better understanding of phenomenon of gender and entrepreneurship through intersectionality lens and brings out how a woman entrepreneur against all odds, fought with the professional, family and societal stereotyping and went onto evolve her identity, creating a new identity by breaking the prevailing gender stereotype. However, carrying out a similar study with woman entrepreneurs in different context and analyzing their drivers and mechanisms of breaking the gender stereotype could be future study.

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