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Women Entrepreneurs: Jumping the Corporate Ship or Gaining New Wings?

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Abstract

Objective: The research aims to explore how women leaving full time employment to start up in business make sense of their experiences in relation to their career transition, and the post career transition effects.

Prior Work: The research aims to investigate the relevance of the push/pull dichotomy applied in extant career transition literature of women leaving corporate employment in favour of entrepreneurship. Are women, 'entrepreneurs in waiting' or are they pushed due to the negative factors experienced within the corporate culture (Mallon and Cohen, 2001; Winn, 2004)? The study will also build on Winn's (2004) study in relation to whether post career transition, the women view entrepreneurship as a panacea or a fallacy.

Approach: An exploratory study; qualitative semi structured interviews taking the subjective narratives of four female entrepreneurs from the service sector and a director of a local enterprise support organization.

Results: The research highlights the complex nature of the women entrepreneurs' motivations for leaving their corporate careers to start up their own business. The legacy of gendered organizational culture combined with personal and domestic circumstances and the need to gain independence and control were pivotal in women's decision to change direction. The original motivations for entering entrepreneurship were not necessarily satisfied by the career transition, however, as the female entrepreneur's businesses evolved, the personal and professional development they under went superseded any concerns they may have had regarding their original motivations giving them new wings.

Implications: This research seeks to inform; organizations, for retention purposes; enterprise support services, for training and support; and the female entrepreneurs themselves, for their own personal development. This will not only assist in understanding and appreciating the key drivers of the transition, but also the post transition effects.

Value: There is little empirical research focusing on women's career transition from corporate employment to entrepreneurship, particularly in UK, with relatively little assessing the post transition effects in relation to the women's original motivations to start up in business.

Keywords: career transition, entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship, glass ceiling

1. Introduction

Accounting for just over half of the working population, women make a significant economic contribution to the labour market, yet they are still consistently subordinated to men and kept out of the corporate boardroom (Burke and Vinnicombe, 2006). In 2006 only 17% of all Directors or Chief Executives in the UK were women (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2007), thus illustrating that gender segregation is still present (Davidson, 2007) and the 'glass ceiling' effect is at play. When attempting to conceptualize this, it is difficult to comprehend that women are still marginalized; particularly considering that by increasing women's general and senior level participation in the labour market could potentially be worth between £15bn and £23bn per annum to the UK economy (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006). With such strong statistics, it is difficult to understand, when it makes such business sense, that organizations remain gender blind.

Many professional women are increasingly taking the decision to opt out of the labour market with a small but increasing percentage starting their own businesses (Cabrera, 2007). The decision to leave a current career and lifestyle is not easy for anyone to make (Mattis, 2004). Therefore, with such a dramatic shift, both in both personal and working lives, the decision for these women to leave their current positions to start up in business where the barriers are significantly greater for women than men in the UK (Carter *et al*, 2003; Marlow and Patton, 2005), is surely not one which has been made lightly. There have been few studies exploring the career transition of women from employment to entrepreneurship, particularly within the UK (Mallon and Cohen, 2001; Terjesen, 2005). This paper addresses the subjective realities of the female entrepreneurs in how they make sense of their career transition in relation to the push/pull dichotomy, whether the glass ceiling effect has driven women away from employment as they become un-accepting of their lack of career progression (Mallon and Cohen, 2001), or whether the seduction of independence and autonomy has attracted them to start their own venture.

Whilst there is no question that increasing female entrepreneurship is extremely positive for the UK economy as a strategy for economic growth (Department for Trade and Industry, 2003), whether the transition lives up to the female entrepreneurs expectations is another question. Many researchers believe that entrepreneurship is certainly a viable and often attractive alternative for women wishing to avoid or escape the glass ceiling effect (Mattis, 2004; Winn, 2004; Orhan and Scott, 2001). However, whether the original motivators are satisfied or whether they lose their shine as the harsh realities of starting a business began to unfold is questionable. It is imperative that; employers, for retention purposes; enterprise support agencies, to inform training and support services; and the female entrepreneurs themselves, for their own personal development, not only understand and appreciate the key drivers of this new generation of entrepreneurs, but also the post transition effects for these women.

2. Literature Review

There have been distinct differences in the motivations cited by women and men taking the decision to start up in business (Davidson and Cooper, 1992). Women have most commonly cited personal or domestic commitments, career frustrations, achievement and independence needs or a feeling of no other alternative. Consequently, the push/pull dichotomy is applied to categorize these motivations (Mallon and Cohen, 2001:218). For the purposes of this paper, push factors are defined as those which turned women away from the organization, either voluntarily due to disillusionment or forcefully such as dismissal or redundancy. Pull factors are defined as those which attracted women to entrepreneurship such as autonomy, flexibility and independence.

Career Transition Complexities

To label women's motivations as either push *or* pull ignores the complexities of their lives and the issues they wrestle with in making the decision to leave employment for entrepreneurship. It is, therefore, more appropriate to view their motivations as multifaceted in order to understand fully the dilemmas they faced during the transition phase. Mallon and Cohen's (2001) highlighted three interconnecting themes that emerged from their study of women's

transition from employment to entrepreneurship which spanned push and pull factors; organizational life, values and integrity and (im)balance between personal and professional life. The paper will explore the key issues within the literature facing women leaving their corporate careers and the motivations in attracting them to entrepreneurship whilst remaining cognizant of the interconnectedness of push/pull factors.

Gendered Organizational Culture

The glass ceiling effect is the name attributed to the invisible barrier preventing women attaining career advancement to senior level positions (Mattis, 2004), receiving fewer salary progressions and opportunities for job transfers in comparison to their male counterparts (Stroh *et al*, 1992). The effect suggests that it is not down to "choice or failure on the part of women" but the result of intrinsic masculine orientated organizational values and stereotypes (Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin,1997). Cases of exclusion from networks, channels of communication and lack of challenges have left women feeling frustrated and bored (Moore,2000; Hewlett, 2002; Hisrichy and Brush, 1985; Wynarczyk, 2006) and trapped in a situation where they feel they do not have the autonomy to change (Kelly and Dabul Marin, 1998). It is women's immense dissatisfaction with the 'glass ceiling' effect which has been commonly cited as the reason for leaving their organization and starting up in business (Mallon and Cohen, 2001; Mattis, 2004). Statistics demonstrate that the percentage of women leaving employment due to disillusionment, lack of progression and opportunities has increased in the past 20 years from 25% to 46% (Moore, 2000).

Organizations have traditionally built their structure around the patriarchal family adorning men with the leadership role like that of a father due to their characteristic values and attributes (logical, rational, aggressive, strategic, decision maker, competitive) (Morgan, 1997). Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, (1997) highlight that male dominance in managerial culture is historically attributable to the working population consisting only of men, which, through time, has become embedded within organizational culture leading to them being constructed on masculine terms, with anything perceived to be non-masculine to be outside the realms' of the organization (Due Billing and Alvesson, 2000:144). Such masculinities (and femininities) are culturally and socially constructed, yet management literature and organizations still categorize masculinities and femininities as sex specific qualities; with men typically possessing attributes such as logical, rational, analytical, assertive and decisive, and women emotional, sensitive, democratic, intuitive (Park, 1996). However, masculinity is not a male phenomena, just as femininity is not a female phenomena, and neither are fixed but in constant social flux (Due Billing and Alvesson, 2000: 146). Yet, this does not impede organizations from perpetuating sex stereotyping with gender labelling and measuring women against masculine norms to assess managerial effectiveness.

As a result, women have historically struggled to participate legitimately in the eyes of the organization with the masculine ethic utilised to preclude women from progressing to senior positions (Kanter, 1977: 22). Exclusionary activity is still evident today within 'old school boy networks', deals are still being sealed at the pub, football match and on the golf course. This is disillusioning for ambitious, talented women who desperately want to progress but are discriminated because of their gender. Even in today's supposedly diversity and equal opportunities aware culture that organizations are so proud of, subjective criteria (Burke and Vinnicombe,2006) still permeates into the recruitment and selection of senior positions allowing the inherent masculine biases to prevail. Bryans and Mavin (2003) contend that this has led women to two approaches either 'learn to fit in' with male norms (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Marshall, 1995) or become something different; an organizational cross roads. It is easy to understand why women take on a 'metaphorical sex change' (Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 1997) and become an 'honorary man' as they develop behaviours and a style congruent with their peers (Bryans and Mavin, 2003) in order to be socially accepted to secure career advancement within a firm. However, a third option is becoming increasingly more practical for some women; that is to opt out. Women are increasingly disillusioned and frustrated with the pressure of working in such male dominated environments (Marshall,1995; Cabrera, 2007) they feel that the organizational cross roads presented to them is a compromise too far in their identity and core values, resulting in some women rejecting their corporate career to escape organizational politics (Hewlett and Luce, 2005) in favour of entrepreneurship, a motivation

which Weiler and Bernasek (2001) state is without question a major driver in women starting their own businesses.

Even for the minority of women who do break through the glass ceiling, there is much expectation placed on their shoulders by other women who expect them to act differently to their male counterparts and if they do not, they are criticized for not representing women's interests at large (Mavin, 2006a) giving rise to the queen bee label (Staines, Travis, and Jayerante, 1973) which serves only to perpetuate negative sex stereotypes of women in management. As such senior women begin to feel isolated as they become victims of female misogyny (Mavin, 2006b) and are "exiled from their sex" (Mavin, 2006a). This may lead some women to turn their back on corporate politics and turn to entrepreneurship to relieve the pressure of being expected to lead the feminist crusade whilst also having to perform in their managerial capacity.

Misogyny and female misogyny (Mavin, 2006a; Mavin, 2006b) has become so ingrained, not just within many organizational cultures and society as a whole that it has almost become accepted and viewed as just and fair (Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 1997). In a study commissioned by the Equal Opportunity's Commission it was highlighted that gender discrimination in the workplace has become so embedded that men and women do not view women as unequal in the workplace. Although, a women working full time is paid approximately 20% less than a man (Frean, 2003).

This historical and cultural male dominance within organizations is outdated. Organizations continue to 'think manager: think male'. A fundamental shift in organizational culture is required so that they start to 'think manager, think quality person' (Davidson, 2007). Women are not the opposition party (Due Billing and Alvesson, 2000:154) waiting in the wings to take over from men, this simply perpetuates dualism of gender stereotypes and fails to acknowledge subjectivities between men and women. Mavin, Bryans and Waring (2004: 565) call for organizations to 'unlearn' and 'rethink' their approaches to management and value men and women and look beyond gender.

Flexibility

Frustrated by the reality of the lack of flexibility that corporate life offers in respect to women's dual roles as a mother and a career woman is also another commonly cited push factor in women choosing to start up in business as their career decisions are made with careful consideration of their family and personal commitments (Powell and Mainiero, 1992; Hewlett, 2002). This was not necessarily as a result of a desire to work fewer hours but more to be in control of the hours they did work to fit in their personal and domestic commitments (Mattis, 2004). However, the importance placed on this flexibility within family life was not congruent with Cabrera's (2007), study which suggests that women do not enter entrepreneurship in the quest for flexibility and Mallon and Cohen's (2001) research in which women did not cite family as the sole factor in their career transition. However, it is questionable whether this is a sign of the times, have we moved forward so that women no longer see the need to put themselves forward as the primary carer, or is their silence on this issue more salient as they unconsciously conform with the masculine ideal of a patriarchal society?

With the emergence of the sandwich generation phenomena[1] women, who predominantly take the burden (Cabrera, 2007), do and continue to juggle their role's as a mother, wife and child carer. For some women guilt of not being able to fulfil one of their roles begins to outstrip the income and prestige that they once associated with their desire for a senior level position (Kelly and Dabul Marin, 1998), and they once again face an organizational cross roads. Schwartz (1989) contends that some women have resorted to 'mummy or daughter tracking', by gaining employment which allows them greater flexibility. However, this comes at a price as women tend to trade off increased flexibility for a decreased salary and less career opportunities. This is a harsh penalty to pay for taking responsibility for their children and/or their parents or parent

[1] The 'sandwich generation' phenomenon has become an increasingly pressing factor for most middle aged workers in the US. With life expectancy increasing and couples choosing to start families later in life, many middle aged workers have elderly parents and dependent children that require care (Pierret, 2006), which, in the majority of cases, the responsibility generally rests with women.

in-laws. But the counter argument to this is that in the majority of cases women tend to assume these responsibilities, even in cases where they could be supported from a partner. Therefore, is it the organizations lack of appreciation of the multiple roles women must contend with or is this more a gendered societal problem with women continuing to be submissive in the caring role to which society has labelled them?

Until companies start to appreciate women as talented individuals they will continue to lose out. Poor female retention is a major cost to firms in terms of key skills and knowledge but also in competitive advantage (Mattis, 2004). Creating and maintaining a diverse management team stimulates innovation and creativity, without it the organization suffers. This point is most clearly illustrated with Marks and Spencer, their senior management team lacked diversity and as a result they lost touch with their female customer and consequently lost a significant market share in the women's clothing market. In both Mattis' (2004) US study, and Mahon and Cohen's (2001) UK study, both found that a significant amount of the female entrepreneurs left their employment due to dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the firm and did not see themselves as 'born entrepreneurs', therefore their departure from the firm was not inevitable. Organizations must awaken to this and realise the impact that their actions or apathy, is working to push women away from the corporate firm.

Career Transition to Entrepreneurship: a sign of the times?

Mallon and Cohen (2001), and Moore and Buttner (1997) also identified that there were a number of women who stated that entrepreneurship was an inevitable next step in their career, and they were 'entrepreneurs in waiting'. From Mallon and Cohen's (2001: 222) research some of these women attributed their attitude to working life as an 'apprenticeship' rather than a long term commitment to their entrepreneurial background. However, a number of the women had limited or no entrepreneurial experience in their families but simply felt the need to embrace a new challenge. Mallon and Cohen (2001) content that these women felt that they made well planned and measured moves.

This increasingly popular transition has been labelled the 'new brain drain', 'careerpreneur' and 'corporate climber' (Terjesen, 2005; Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Moore and Buttner, 1997; Greg, 1985) which has given rise to the recognition that careers do not typically form a linear pattern and people are actively pursuing 'boundaryless careers'. As Mahon and Cohen (2001) highlight, people are cognizant of the fact that in today's environment job security is non-existent, and therefore the only security that people can hold onto is their employability. This decreases their over reliance on one organization and ensures that they as individuals remain competitive. As women have traditionally experienced interrupted, non-linear careers due to family commitments, it seems palpable that women would be most comfortable with this career route (Fondas, 1996), which is depicted by Sullivan (1999) as taking personal responsibility for own career management, network development, on the job learning and training, and flexible employment relationships. When assessing the parameters of boundaryless careers it makes sense that entrepreneurship features as an attractive strategy in striving for boundaryless careers. In recognition of women (and men's) fluctuating career needs, Mainiero and Sullivan (2006), formulated the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM). This has been supported by Cabrera's (2007) study in which 62% of women stated that their career focus had changed over time. The KCM is based on three attributes authenticity, balance and challenge. They suggest that initially women actively pursue challenges in their career, but over time with changes in family and personal circumstances they feel a need to readdress the balance in their life. During the later part of their career, authenticity becomes the dominant factor, a feature which Mallon and Cohen (2001) also found to be a powerful motivator in a women's career transition decision. Therefore, the key question is should and how do organizations and enterprise support agencies prepare themselves for the inevitable and expect greater numbers in this career to entrepreneurship migration as more women envisage themselves as entrepreneurs and even more women embrace starting their own business venture as these needs evolve?

Entrepreneurship: panacea or fallacy?

Much of the empirical research addressing women's career transition from employment to entrepreneurship assesses original pull of flexibility, independence and autonomy that entices women to leave their corporate employment. But few explore women's experiences post career transition to investigate whether women's original motivations were satisfied by making the

move to entrepreneurship. Did the lure of entrepreneurship live up to expectations, emancipate, empower, or give them the ownership over their own working lives they so craved, or do they still encounter the same game, but just in a different arena?

Some women who are so desperate to escape the misogyny (or female misogyny (Mavin, 2006a; Mavin, 2006b)) of the corporate world can quite easily embark upon entrepreneurship with unrealistic perceptions and be ill informed of the barriers that are presented for women starting their own business. It is essential that women are made aware of the realities of starting up and running a business so that they have realistic expectations of what is required and how the business and family interface, and the barriers that women also contend with when starting up a business (Carter et al, 2003) otherwise entrepreneurship will become another 'glass ceiling'.

Outside of the corporate world, male dominance still prevails. Women are still required to crack the established 'old school boy networks' as they must rely upon external networks for help and support and winning new business to ensure their entrepreneurial success (Brodsky, 1993; Winn, 2004;Aldrich, 1989). Women may underestimate this factor leaving many feeling isolated as they lack the social networks they once relied upon in larger organizations and frustration of people's perception of their loss in status and professionalism (Mallon and Cohen, 2001).

Another fallacy that women believe that by embracing entrepreneurship they would achieve is flexibility towards creating a more balance life (Cabrera,2007). Women still face the same role conflict (Handy, 1999) within entrepreneurship as with employment, but without the support of established organizational infrastructure to provide support and cover. The business demands and related stress encroach into their home life causing much marital friction, divorce rates being highest amongst female entrepreneurs (Brodsky, 1993), even in situations where the husband is supportive of his spouse's venture (Mattis, 2004; Winn, 2004). In some situations, this could leave them in a worse situation than when they were employed, with the dilemma of guilt of neglecting the business or their role as a mother, wife or child (Winn, 2004). As Winn's (2004), study highlights women may have to accept that entrepreneurship comes with certain "lifestyle by products" for example women who started their business single remained single because the business absorbed so much of their time and emotions they had no time to concentrate on their life outside of the business. Therefore, the aim is to explore from the female entrepreneurs perspective, whether entrepreneurship satisfied their original motivations for making this career transition.

3.Method

A subjective epistemology was taken to enable the female entrepreneurs to be grounded socially and culturally, to enable the construction of their subjective realities and allow them to 'voice' their own experiences of taking the decision to leave their corporate careers to start up in business. As Crotty (1998: 28) clearly states "the scientific world is not, of course, the everyday world that people experience" therefore it was imperative that the focus of the study was to understand how the *subjective* individual makes sense of their career transition.

However, an individual's meaning making is more complex than subjects purely imposing their realities on an object with no relationship (Grandy, 2006). It is more that, individuals engage in co-constructing and re-constructing their multiple realities, which has consequently led the research to a social constructivist paradigm. Although, the emphasis of the research still rests with the meaning making and understanding the lived experiences of the entrepreneur, it is in alignment with Grandy's (2006) belief that there is a relationship between subject and object, and it is more a concern of how individuals manage this relationship. They are, therefore, continually constructing and negotiating meaning to make sense of their experiences of leaving their corporate careers and starting their own enterprises.

Informed by the epistemological stance an interpretivist approach was taken, employing qualitative techniques. The aim was not to search for or promote radical change, but rather to explore, understand and "appreciate the different constructions and meanings that the female entrepreneurs placed on their experiences" (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 1993:30). Its focus is upon

individuals realities and the need to go in-depth to unearth underlying meanings (Burrell and Morgan,1979). Qualitative techniques have the "power to take the investigator into the minds and lives of the respondents, to capture them warts and all" (McCracken, 1988: 16) which uncovering the entrepreneurs subjective experiences demands. Therefore, an approach was required which allowed the researcher to get close to the female entrepreneurs to enable a deeper comprehension of their realities and perceptions.

It was vital that when selecting a data collection method that it did not over simplify the complexities (Saunders *et al*, 2005) of the women's' multiple realities, consequently semi structured interviews, taking a life histories approach were implemented.

The open ended structure of the technique, combined with non-directive questioning, gave the research participants the freedom to express their true beliefs and introduce concepts that were of critical importance to them without feeling constrained (Musson, 2005). Like most people, entrepreneurs enjoy talking about their work (King, 2005), however, unlike the majority, their work is not only their passion, it is their life and the line between personal and business becomes so blurred it is difficult to separate the individual from the business. Therefore, implementing the life histories technique seemed entirely appropriate in order to understand the entrepreneur's history, where they came from, and allow them to make sense of their experiences and how this has shaped their career transition.

The sampling approach was non probability as the objective was to source individuals who had experienced the corporate to entrepreneur transition (Mallon and Cohen, 2001). Four entrepreneurs and a leading professional working with and supporting women starting up in business were identified through the researcher's network. All of the entrepreneurs had businesses within the professional services sector had been in business between 6-25 years. Three of the four entrepreneurs had also run a business previous to their current venture. Each of the entrepreneurs employment backgrounds were related to the sectors in which their current business operates. The age range of the women was 45-55.

It is also important to note that through this exploratory study voice is given to the 'other' therefore the sample is female only and there is no attempt to make gender comparison within this study (Mirchandani, 1999 in Bryman and Bell).

Life histories do not presume that the researcher is impartial (Musson, 2005) and the researcher felt it entirely appropriate to invest her own personal identity (Oakley, 1993) in her relationship with the research participants. Oakley (1993) argues that conventional theory does not favour this stance, however, when opening the participants up to discuss highly personal and sensitive experiences it would be extremely difficult to retain a distance and could have been detrimental to the research.

4. Results

Three of the four entrepreneurs in the study left of their own accord, only one of the entrepreneurs were dismissed. Each were asked why they left full time employment and all were very open in discussing the reasons behind their decision to leave and their multiple realities of starting up and running their business. A number of emerging themes were identified from the data which will be discussed further, along with the categorization of the female entrepreneurs as either entrepreneurs in waiting, or their career transition being a triggered by dissatisfaction and disillusionment within the organization.

Gendered Organizational Culture

Aligned with the literature (Morgan, 1997; Winn, 2004; Mattis, 2004; Mavin, 2006a; Mavin, 2006b) there was much consensus from the female participants that organizations were male dominated and as one entrepreneur stated they were simply "geared up for the progression of men". All of the entrepreneurs ascribed at least some of their negative working experiences to the male dominance inherent within their organizations.

Jill explains that even as a senior female manager she felt that she was "actively blocked" and found it very difficult to get an appointment and further still, to be taken seriously:

> "I had to employ a male secretary in order to get appointments, that's how bad it was...institutionalism sexism is alive and well...there is a very, very strong inner circle of middle aged men predominantly, who actually want to keep the status quo".

In the case of Christine, everyday conversations and interactions within the organization was so gendered that she became increasingly frustrated. Men acted differently and only engaged in certain types of conversations with women. Christine describes one example which she felt was pivotal in pushing her away from a corporate career:

> "One thing that really annoyed me was the fact that there was this young guy who had just come into the company and he'd been in, I think he'd been in the navy doing a short commission. There was a series of swing doors in that company and I just thought he was so rude because he walked literally two or three paces ahead of me and he just let each door slam in my face. And I just thought it showed such a lack of respect that he didn't even value me as a woman, or as another human being. And it seemed such an odd thing but that was a turning point for me! But I think the other thing was that, it was just the way that the men treated women. It was very patronizing, the conversations changed, there were male conversations and there were conversations that men had with women talking about subjects that they thought the women would be able to talk to them about. So with the men it was all sports stuff and the team and football and world affairs and work stuff and with women it was *'so what were you watching on television last night then girls?'* and *'so what did you make for your husband last night for his supper?'* and you know it was just so patronizing."

The women conveyed an immense sense of frustration of having to work in such a gendered environment and even more so of feeling, or actually being unable to do anything to change it. A lack of voice was very evident throughout the narratives. Even with some of the entrepreneurs' best efforts they felt their ideas and opinions were unheard. Consequently the women felt there was little point challenging the organization as if they questioned or disagreed with organizational policy they felt ignored, and in some cases were made to feel uncomfortable. The women became increasingly despondent which all of the women noted led to a lack of motivation. Jill describes her experience with the organization she worked for when she challenged consumer pricing policy:

> "I just did not agree with it. I challenged Head Office about it and it all got quite uncomfortable but I thought I had a legitimate reason and if they'd explained to me more about why they were doing it....I probably would have kept on side, helped them....Whereas what happened was there was a lack of information I react as I react when I think something is wrong, which is I'm 200% in or 200% out – And I was out."

In Jill's case she felt she could not and should not press her challenges any further so, de-motivated and jaded by her organizations lack of interest in her opinion she left her employer and set up her own business.

Fiona, the only entrepreneur that was dismissed from employment in the study, felt that she paid the highest price for speaking her mind and not feeling constrained by traditional male norms prevalent not just within her organization but the industry as a whole. She was the only female member of staff within her organization that was not administrative and she was performing well and online for another promotion which she said made her male colleagues very uncomfortable:

> "There was definitely a marking of my card by some people and maybe...they thought I was speaking higher up the food chain and that was not allowed and by a loophole in the law they unfairly dismissed me or whatever the grounds were.... And that was it really. So I think through my own honesty and my own frankness and my own forthright approach I sealed my own destiny in that organisation"

Fiona later took the organization to a tribunal for unfair dismissal and won her case.

All of the entrepreneurs acknowledged the struggle women within gendered organizations faced, and shared some of their personal experiences. However, whether consciously or unconsciously they all separated and distanced themselves from 'women' as a whole and being seen as the 'other', with comments such as "I'm not a typical woman". Rachel believed that despite the prevalence of male dominance within her organization, she would have progressed

> "I never felt...that I couldn't have risen in that organization. In that organization, although other women might have a different opinion....I think I could have been allowed to grow and flourish with the organization."

As highlighted in Mattis' (1993) study, the female entrepreneurs saw themselves as individuals and wanted to be recognised for their individual talents and skills. Although, being a woman is part of their identity, this is not their defining feature and being labelled as such by the organization is frustrating. All of the female entrepreneurs expressed their difference from 'other women' when making sense of their behaviour both within employment and entrepreneurship. Fiona when talking about her dismissal seems to almost reconcile this with the fact that she did not conform to the strict norms women were expected to adhere to in accordance with patriarchal society:

> "they were getting rid of me because the only thing then, apart from taking over that office I think, I would have been promoted again.....and I think it would have been a problem for them, in as much as it was a very old fashioned industry. Women should be in a box....and that's not what *I* was about."

However, aside from their personal experiences and attempts to distance themselves from 'women' as a category, they acknowledged the prevalence of the gendered culture within their organizations and also conveyed their frustration and how it impacted on their decision to leave that organization. However, apart from Fiona who was dismissed, the other entrepreneurs did not cite this as the sole determining factor in the decision of making of their career transition. Although, it was a significant turn off from corporate life it was clear that their decision was attributable to a myriad of factors.

Jill discusses her departure from her employer:

> "I'd had enough...I got sick of other people pulling levers and knowing that I was never going to get anywhere near that lever pulling status. But it's a complicated picture because my husband had died two years before I set the business up, so my whole attitude to risk was completely different, I think it would be wrong to say that it was just one thing. It's always a combination of things, but certainly I was pushed out of employment because I couldn't do what I wanted to do because I wouldn't be allowed to, because of vested interests."

Personal and domestic circumstances and trigger events were portrayed as extremely influential in the women's decision which will be discussed next.

Personal/Domestic Circumstances

Domestic circumstances played a major role in women's decision to leave employment and start up in business themselves, particularly for those who had children.

Christine felt very *"ill at ease"* with working for a company who gave her a *"hard time"* for being a mum and returning to work. She describes her first day at work when her daughter had an accident and she feared her employers reaction so much so, she decided not to tell them and remained at work;

> "that was like a real wrench for me because I was like on the phone in the office and thinking I don't dare, I don't say I've got to go, not on the first day...the desire to work is one thing but the overriding thing is that when you're a mummy, you're a mummy and you want to go to your children."

Christine consequently left her position of employment with that company and set up her own business. However, the incident described above was not the main trigger, although she placed great emphasis on this incident, it was actually an office relocation which would increase her daily commute to work which would have resulted in her spending even less time with her children than she currently did which promoted her decision. As Christine reconstructs her stories it is the significance of the build up of collective incidents which lead to the office relocation being the trigger event which results in her making the decision to leave.

Rachel also had a similar trigger to Christine in her decision to leave her a full time position after her first child. She believed, based on practicalities, the distance and length of time she would spend travelling to and from work was too great and felt it would be better spent with her family:

> "I didn't really want to leave her full time with a nanny, but I thought the obvious thing to do was to start something up for myself....had I not married somebody in North Northumberland when they were in Durham I might have stayed with that company for a long time"

Rachel commented that because her husband was the bread winner this actually helped her to start up in business because she did not feel any pressure and was allowed to experiment because the family were not relying on her salary, coupled with a desire for greater independence and control so that she was not reliant upon her husband.

Independence and Control

Entrepreneurship also gave Rachel the freedom that she craved from the organizational reins and her personal circumstances. She felt that her father in-law's traditional stereotypical family views made her feel as though she was the one being controlled and entrepreneurship was an escape from this;

> "I wanted to do something for myself because it was so kind of like controlled. [My first husband's] father was a real kind of controlling, paternal figure in this family and it just used to drive me around the bend. So wanting my independence was a massive, massive thing."

Independence and control was a permeating theme. Being their own boss and being able to make their own decisions that directly impact upon the company and have the freedom to voice their own opinion was extremely attractive to the female entrepreneurs who felt that hey had been starved of this either at work or in their personal lives.

Jill remarked:

> "I wanted to be my own boss...I thought well hang on a minute I've done that for someone else why don't I do it for me....I think I was fed up of being done to, I wanted to see if I could take control and do it myself. "

Fiona believed that the simple fact she was now in control of her own destiny was extremely exhilarating. The excitement of not knowing what her next project is and not having any pay restrictions compensates for the lack of holiday pay, sick pay that goes with employment.

> "somebody [in employment] will always tell you how much you earn and the only person who can put that restriction on me is me, so I never know where my sealing is. I never know when the next fantastic idea is going to come from"

(Re)Gaining this independence and control consequently increased the female entrepreneurs' confidence in their abilities that entrepreneurship helped them to unmask. Jill experienced a new found confidence after entering entrepreneurship which she described she had lacked whilst employed and allowed opportunities to pass by. Because she had her own business for a number of years she now felt that she the legitimacy to voice her opinions and values and be heard:

> "These people were saying *'well that's about biting the hand that feeds you'*, well I said *'I'll bite the hand that feeds me if I don't think I'm getting proper food'.* I can do that now. That again is a confidence issue, because independence is one thing and actually being resolute about why you do things the way that you run your business, the way that you treat people and all of those things. I'm only just now beginning to say hang on, yeah I've got a track record I've been in business for 6/7 years".

Entrepreneurship: panacea or fallacy?

Entrepreneurship was certainly embraced by the female entrepreneurs as a preferable alternative and a means to escape their employed situation. However, the women's realities of the transition and the reality of running and owning their own business did not provide the solution to the female entrepreneurs' original motivations for starting up in business. Entrepreneurship proved not to be as compatible with family life as Rachel and Christine had hoped.

Rachel was subjected to a great deal of pressure from her husband because she was away from home frequently on business. Instead of celebrating her successes, she believed that her husband felt threatened and resented her achievements;

> "it caused lots and lots of friction and problems. And it was a big contributory factor, the fact that we got divorced because he couldn't stand it. And I think it kind of challenged his manhood really. He wasn't the hunter gather anymore, 'the wife' was."

Rachel felt that by starting up in business she would be able to gain the independence and control she craved whilst balancing family life, however, the contrary was true in reality and she actually saw very little of their children. Christine in a similar notion talks about the demise of her first business where she lost the family home and suddenly was awakened to the fact that she had been completely consumed by her business by her youngest daughter:

> "we went into liquidation in December and my daughter said *'mummy what's this all about we've never seen you for 12 years?'* and that was true and I think that was the hardest thing accepting that."

Christine felt so caught up in the business that she had forgotten the original reason that she had left employment to start her own business.

Rachel also talks about the guilt she felt for leaving her children but also the extra guilt that her husband placed on her. Originally the commute from Northumberland to Durham to her employer was too far after the birth of her first child, however, with the growth of her business Rachel frequently travelled abroad, often not knowing when she would return home. The role conflict between being a mother and an entrepreneur was best illustrated through her foregoing a business opportunity which could have led to a lucrative investment deal, to return home to the family because of the domestic pressure that her husband was placing on her to return home:

> "because of this anxiety with [my husband], [my daughter] and the earache and him being at home for a week with the children, we just had to say to the receptionist I'm sorry we're going to have to go we can't see [Man C] and legged it to get the 6 o'clock train and get home."

Although Rachel admitted feeling guilty for leaving her children, she did feel that if the roles had been reversed she would not have pressured her husband to come home early but encouraged and supported him in his achievements.

Domestic and personal pressures were not the only theme that was present within the reams of entrepreneurship, the women still faced the same gendered perceptual barriers that they faced within employment when starting up in business. The attitude that it was the men that ran the businesses and the women stayed at home and played a supportive role was very

evident from their stories. Anna describes the treatment of some female entrepreneurs at networking events;

> "they were treated as a secretary or somebody's wife, somebody's partner or whatever so they' weren't treated as business people in their own right."

Another example of this assumption is when Rachel took her business to a trade fair in London;

> "a man came up to me and said *'can I speak to your boss?'* Coz he obviously thought I was just like a sales person. I took great pleasure in telling him I was the boss and he was speaking to her. But that assumption was there, that it was the men who ran the businesses and it wasn't women who ran businesses"

Fiona describes how within one of her client organizations she constantly had to deal with snide comments and doubts in her ability from senior male staff;

> "it was hard a lot of the male staff senior male staff on the management team, apart from a close network that obviously believed in us really gave us a hard time."

All of the women noted an irritation at people, particularly of men, in underestimating their capabilities and failing to take what they were doing seriously. This was most clearly illustrated by the patronizing language that the women used when reconstructing these incidents example *"I knew what it meant to you girls"* and *"so you think you can position this...do you girls?"*.All noted that it was attitude that they had to contend with that gave them an overwhelming drive to prove people wrong. However, despite these negative aspects, which resulted in some of the women at times being in a worse situation than when they were employed, none of the women signalled that they regretted their career transition decision. All of the female entrepreneurs stated that they would never return to employment as they believed that they were unemployable and no job would satisfy their needs as being their own boss does. However, when reflecting upon their original transition motives it is difficult to establish whether theses decisions were triggered by specific critical incidents or whether they were born entrepreneurs in waiting.

Entrepreneurs in waiting or trigger event?

Using Mallon and Cohen's (2001) two category classification of how female entrepreneurs make the decision to leave employment and enter entrepreneurship (by either being entrepreneurs in waiting or their transition being triggered by dissatisfaction and disillusionment within the organization,) all of the women in this study appeared to experience some kind of trigger event/s that led to them to enter entrepreneurship which was a collective of personal and work related issues; starting a family, death of a spouse, location of employment in relation their homes, being dismissed from work, frustration of no progressing as far as they felt capable of doing, gendered nature of the organizational culture.

None of the entrepreneurs conveyed that entrepreneurship was inevitable, and that employment was part of gaining authentic mastery within a sector before starting up their own business which would suggest that they were entrepreneurs in waiting. Even those whose parents had their own business (Mallon and Cohen, 2001) this was not highlighted as a motivating factor. The women accounted for this in terms of their childhood, when their mothers had stayed at home to raise he children; their education which leaned towards home making traditions, and the North East region itself, with "legacy of traditional industry...ship building, coal mining, steel works and women always playing the support role and its not uncommon for the perception to be that women should be at home looking after the bairns." When reflecting on her career journey Rachel commented

> "I remember having in my head, well I'm just gonna get married, start a family and be at home for the rest of my life like my mother. I mean I genuinely thought that"

It appeared to be after the women's work experiences and personal life circumstances that they felt that entrepreneurship would provide them with the emancipation that they yearned for. Rachel commented further conveying her inherent entrepreneurial tendency;

> "these organizations control you. And expect you to behave in a certain way, I know that I'm entrepreneurial I just don't want to behave in that way"

As Mallon and Cohen (2001) suggest it is perhaps more complex to categorize the decision making process of the female entrepreneurs career transition into two classifications as this simplifies each individuals multiple realities. Particularly when reflecting upon the geographic and socio economic conditions of the region studied in which these female entrepreneurs were raised and worked. Their entrepreneurial propensity may have been were suppressed due to the conditioning they were subjected to within society. Therefore, within a different macro environment there may have been more entrepreneurs in waiting.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper addresses the relevance of the push/ pull dichotomy applied in extant career transition literature in terms of how female entrepreneurs make sense of their own experiences in relation to their career transition, post career transition effects and whether these women were entrepreneurs in waiting, or whether their transition was triggered by an event (Mallon and Cohen, 2001).

When analyzing the data in terms of the push/pull dichotomy it was clear that push/pull factors, as Mallon and Cohen conclude (2001), are not discrete variables but all have a relationship with one another. The entrepreneurs always reconciled a push factor away from employment with a follow up pull factor towards entrepreneurship, for example a push factor relating to the gendered nature of organizational culture would be given followed by a domestic or personal factor that enticed the women towards entrepreneurship. It is no longer enough to suggest that these women either jumped the corporate ship or gained new wings. Therefore, it was clear there were a myriad of factors that the women considered before making the career transition decision with no one dominant factor (such as the glass ceiling effect) but a combination. Three inter related themes emerged from the women narratives; domestic/personal circumstances, gendered organizational culture, and a need for independence and control which formulated the Career Transition Motivation Model (see figure 1). There was much evidence for each theme, however, neither one held precedence over the other, for example, although the gendered organization was very clearly demonstrated through evidence of the glass ceiling effect that the women conveyed, this was not the sole driving factor in the women's decision, it was always accompanied by another theme such as a need for greater independence and control. This combination of the women's motivations were, however, dependent upon their past histories and experiences. Those who had negative experiences or issues within one of the theme zones tended to continue or move employment if feeling a little unhappy. It was not enough of a push or a pull to leave and enter entrepreneurship. However, when these issues began to span two or three of the theme zones the women's apathy dissolved and the need to make the career transition to leave employment became more urgent and entering into entrepreneurship became a more attractive and realistic option for the women.

All of the entrepreneurs' career transition decisions were triggered by an event/s or an accumulation of incidents, which simultaneously, drove them away from employment and into the arms of entrepreneurship. None of the women stated that entrepreneurship had always been part of her career plan. However, as mentioned earlier, perhaps the macro environment that the female entrepreneurs were surrounded by (the region legacy, the education, the role their mothers played in the family home as they grew up), had a particular influence on their development as a child and moulded and conditioned their original expectations of working life. Perhaps, their entrepreneurial tendencies had been suppressed as result of these macro factors as each of the entrepreneurs suggested at one stage within their narratives that entrepreneurship was innate within them. But consideration must be taken that the age range of female entrepreneurs that participated in this research was 45-55 and they had been in business between 6-25 years. The women themselves believed they have witnessed a in a change of attitude towards working women and women entrepreneurs evening the last few years. It is also important to note that all of the women were out of the start up phase (being in business between 6-25 years), which is not only a significant length of time out of full time

employment. Therefore to comment on the transition over such a time period their experiences have been constructed and reconstructed numerous times of the years when trying to make sense of their experiences, that perhaps, subconsciously they feel the need to justify and reconcile their career transition through the idea that entrepreneurship was their destiny.

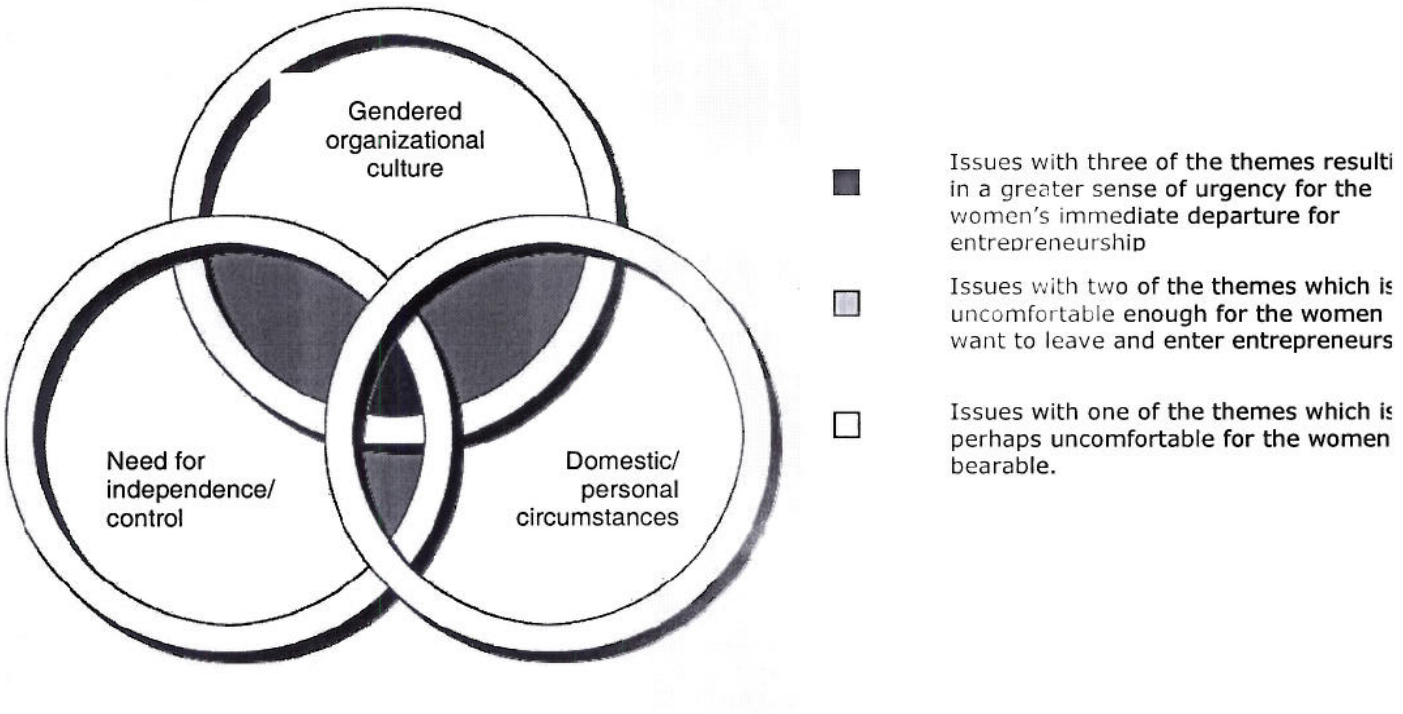

Figure 1: Career Transition Motivation Model

Female misogyny (Mavin, 2006a; Mavin, 2006b), as explored in the literature, did not emerge explicitly from the data. Although, two of the women made comments which make reference to the issue both for and against; one believing that a gender balance was imperative as an all woman organization can lead to turmoil, and another entrepreneur commenting that an all women organization is more preferable and harmonious. Within the realms of the this study there was not the space to explore this issue in greater depth and therefore would require further specific research to analyse this issue in detail.

As highlighted in the literature, there is a plethora of studies examining the pull factors that entice women into starting up their own business as an alternative to a corporate career, however as posed by Winn (2004), whether the initial allure transpires in reality is questionable. Certainly, from the women's narratives it is clear that domestic and personal circumstances are not necessarily resolved, and that gendered perceptual barriers still prevail within the realms of entrepreneurship. Therefore, do these women face the same game but simply in a different arena? From this study the women do not feel they are entering the same game. The degree of independence and control that the women gain through entrepreneurship empowers them so they have the confidence to endure, or the autonomy to change or move away from situations they are uncomfortable which supersede these experiences. Although, they are cognizant of the fact that their original motivations towards entrepreneurship had perhaps not been met or they had experienced an unpleasant circumstance, such as liquidation, which they had not accounted for, these instances are referred to as a slight glitch on their entrepreneurial journey as other more positive and personally enriching experiences overshadow those events. Therefore, from the women's subjective realities entrepreneurship was certainly not a fallacy but by all accounts the catalyst in the women's personal and professional development. It is also appropriate to consider that from the results of this study, that the women are not necessarily searching for flexibility as the literature may suggest but more for a need of independence and control.

This paper uses one method of data collection, therefore the extent to which inferences are generalizable are questionable. It would therefore be useful to conduct further studies implementing more than one method of data collection and triangulating the data which would provide richer results. It would also be useful for future research to yield a sample of entrepreneurs of differing or younger age ranges that are in the pre start up, and start up phase of their business to gain a greater perspective of the transition. This could be used as a comparator for the categorization of entrepreneurs in waiting and those make the transition due to numerous trigger events from this study.

Practitioner Perspective

From an employer perspective, it is important that they understand the complex issues surrounding a woman's career journey when assessing retention rates. It is imperative that the organization considers that a range of factors internally and externally to the organization may lead to a woman's decision to leave an organization and certainly as this study highlights organizations must watch for warning signs. It is not necessarily the one off incidents which trigger the need to change, but the accumulation of smaller issues and incidents that overtime gain critical mass in the women's subjective realities as the enter into the darker segments of the diagram above (see figure 1) and result their departure.

It is vital that enterprise support services are aware and well equipped to deal with the issues and problems that women may bring to the start up phase or those which may emerge as the business begins to grow. The need for post transition support is particularly poignant as all too often the momentum of support almost halts after the first year of trading. It is important for the women to know that as changes emerge in terms of their personal and domestic circumstances or when they face the same gender perceptual barriers they have the support, confidence and resilience to endure these challenges and continue their enterprise. It is also important for enterprise support agencies to know their customer as the demand from the growing market of the professional woman entering entrepreneurship continues to rise as they gain new wings.

From the personal perspective of the female entrepreneur is it essential as part of the pre start up phase that she is able to make a well informed decision before making the career transition. This paper provides her with a framework with which to assist in making sense of her current situation and understanding the experiences of others before entering the start up phase.

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