Feminist perspectives on social entrepreneurship: critique and new directions

Susan Clark Muntean
Department of Management and Accountancy, University of North Carolina, Ashville, North Carolina, USA, and
Banu Ozkazanc-Pan
Department of Management, University of Massachusetts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Received 28 October 2014
Revised 14 March 2015
26 October 2015
27 April 2016
Accepted 7 May 2016

Abstract

Purpose – The authors bring diverse feminist perspectives to bear on social entrepreneurship research and practice to challenge existing assumptions and approaches while providing new directions for research at the intersections of gender, social and commercial entrepreneurship.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors apply liberal feminist, socialist feminist and transnational/post-colonial feminist perspectives to critically examine issues of gender in the field of social entrepreneurship.

Findings – By way of three distinct feminist lenses, the analyses suggest that the social entrepreneurship field does not recognize gender as an organizing principle in society. Further to this, a focus on women within this field replicates problematic gendered assumptions underlying the field of women's entrepreneurship research.

Practical implications – The arguments and suggestions provide a critical gender perspective to inform the strategies and programmes adopted by practitioners and the types of research questions entrepreneurship scholars ask.

Social implications – The authors redirect the conversation away from limited status quo approaches towards the explicit and implicit aim of social entrepreneurship and women's entrepreneurship: that is, economic and social equality for women across the globe.

Originality/value – The authors explicitly adopt a cultural, institutional and transnational analysis to interrogate the intersection of gender and social entrepreneurship.

Keywords Feminist theory, Transnational, Womens entrepreneurship, Postcolonial, Liberal, Social entrepreneurship

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The role of business in addressing social and environmental concerns is now a central conversation in academia and the media. One area that has emerged as relevant to this conversation is social entrepreneurship, whereby individuals and organizations are critical actors in alleviating social ills such as poverty, illiteracy, health inequities, women's empowerment and so forth as part of their business propositions (Mair and Noboa, 2006; Phillips *et al.*, 2015; Seelos and Mair, 2005). The debates surrounding how this field is being defined and conceptualized are ongoing, including considerations around whether this is a "new" kind of entrepreneurship, the boundaries of the field and

International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship
Vol. 8 No. 3, 2016
pp. 221-241

1756-6266
DOI 10.1108/IJGE-10-2014-0034

what constitutes social innovation (Choi and Majumdar, 2014; Dees, 1998; Dees and Anderson, 2006; Mair and Marti, 2006; Nicholls and Cho, 2006; Sullivan Mort *et al.*, 2003; Weerawardena and Mort, 2006). Scholars in this growing field have also suggested that context rather than differentiation of entrepreneurship activities constitutes the "social" (Dacin *et al.*, 2010) and examined the manifestation of "social entrepreneurship" in different countries and regions, such as Europe (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010), China (Chandra and Wong, 2016) and sub-Saharan Africa (Rivera-Santos *et al.*, 2015) among others. In addition, a growing number of scholars adopting critical perspectives have begun to question the very assumptions and foundations of the field (Peredo and McLean, 2006) and examine how new assemblages of community actors towards social transformation can redirect the very notion of social entrepreneurship (Daskalaki *et al.*, 2015).

Despite the explosive growth of the social entrepreneurship field, the relevance of gender to conceptualizations and analysis in this field are still lacking despite claims that social enterprise can address social issues such as women's empowerment. Thus, although women may be the intended beneficiaries of particular forms of social enterprise, there is not a gender-aware framework to examine unvoiced assumptions guiding concepts and research in the social entrepreneurship field more broadly (Brush *et al.*, 2009). To address this gap, we focus on gender as central to conceptualizing and understanding social entrepreneurship, given that men and women are positioned differently in societies. Related to this notion, scholars have suggested that existing societal gender orders may become replicated in enterprise activities in different economic, political and social contexts (Gawell and Sundin, 2014). It is in this critical vein that we apply feminist theorizing to extend such perspectives in social entrepreneurship and to underscore assumptions related to gender and entrepreneurship more generally.

Specifically, we apply feminist perspectives to problematize the gender-neutral and gender-blind assumptions related to the "social entrepreneur" and theorizing in the field of social entrepreneurship. Feminist scholars have already demonstrated that the field of entrepreneurship arose from the "model of economic rationality alleged to be universal and a-gendered" (Bruni *et al.*, 2004b, p. 406). In addition, critical scholars have noted that a hero narrative underscores the approach to understanding social entrepreneurs, particularly by influential foundations and organizations (Nicholls, 2010). Although the field of social entrepreneurship may still be in flux regarding a cohesive paradigm, existing concepts of the social entrepreneur envision an *individual* who is particularly adept at the following:

> (1) identifying a stable but inherently unjust equilibrium that causes the exclusion, marginalization, or suffering of a segment of humanity that lacks the financial means or political clout to achieve any transformative benefit on its own; (2) identifying an opportunity in this unjust equilibrium, developing a social value proposition, and bringing to bear inspiration, creativity, direct action, courage, and fortitude, thereby challenging the stable state's hegemony; and (3) forging a new, stable equilibrium that releases trapped potential or alleviates the suffering of the targeted group, and through imitation and the creation of a stable ecosystem around the new equilibrium ensuring a better future for the targeted group and even society at large. (Martin and Osberg, 2007, p. 35).

On the one hand, if the second half of the term is stressed, the social entrepreneur is described as heroic, ambitious, courageous, strong and enterprising – a distinctly

masculine description. On the other hand, stressing the *social* entrepreneur highlights concerns with "exclusion, marginalization or suffering" and creative, generative activities flowing from such empathy (Martin and Osberg, 2007, p. 35), which stresses a feminine engagement. Thus, the term "social entrepreneur" appears to have complex gender connotations rather than gender neutrality associated with it. We argue, therefore, that both the identity of the social entrepreneur and the context in which this actor is embedded warrant analysis from a gender perspective.

Our focus is to underscore the various ways gender is relevant to understanding social entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurship and to address the normative question of whether social entrepreneurship promotes gender equality. We accomplish this by relying on perspectives that arrive from liberal feminist, socialist feminist and transnational/post-colonial feminist traditions. Expanding on and using these three lenses in turn, we critique social entrepreneurship research and attendant practices in the field while also providing new directions for the scholarly field.

To this end, our paper starts by highlighting what might seem like a positive trend, whereby leadership gains of individual women – combined with the common emphasis on empowering women across the globe and at the bottom of the pyramid in the field of social entrepreneurship – appear to challenge masculine dominance well noted in entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Blake and Hanson, 2005; Mirchandani, 1999). The relatively feminized field of social entrepreneurship appears as a crack in the proverbial glass ceiling of the for-profit entrepreneurial world, promising a reduction in gender dissonance and greater entrepreneurial legitimacy for female social entrepreneurs (Marlow and McAdam, 2013, p. 4). On the surface, it appears to be a positive turn when we find women in certain Western contexts achieving leadership positions at the top of the field (e.g. Jessica Jackley, co-founder of Kiva.org, and Susan Davis, founder of BRAC USA).

We argue, however, that the relative success of women in social entrepreneurship, when contrasted with their status in mainstream entrepreneurship research, may magnify the gendered dimensions of the entrepreneurship field. In addition, we suggest that the ways in which social entrepreneurship travels globally as a concept and practice is riddled by problematic assumptions around "Third-World" women's abilities and roles in the global economy. By demarcating the space in which particular women are legitimate entrepreneurial actors to microenterprise and social ventures, the field continues to exclude along gender lines, even if unintentionally. Such assumptions and practices can reproduce the ways in which women remain economically marginalized because of their confined legitimacy as founders and managers of "less than" lucrative enterprises. Such gendered characterizations – which we suggest are prominent in social entrepreneurship – may work to impede women's ability to negotiate societal hurdles, including implicit bias (Marlow and Patton, 2005).

Notwithstanding the growing importance and popularity of social entrepreneurship both as a practice and as a scholarly field of inquiry, the majority of articles and publications do not adopt a gender-aware framework (Brush *et al.*, 2009). Despite the complexity of issues that can be elucidated if one were to adopt a feminist perspective, the social entrepreneurship field approaches gender in two broad ways. Firstly, scholars examine women entrepreneurs' impact on society and social issues. Secondly, scholars frame entrepreneurship or social entrepreneurship as a platform for empowering women and achieving benefit in the social realm, such as greater gender equality –

primarily in the context of the developing world or a single developing country (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Datta and Gailey, 2012; Levie and Hart, 2011; Teasdale *et al.*, 2011). Research focused on women as the primary targets of diverse social enterprise efforts (e.g. microloans and microenterprise) under the broad umbrella of development programmes is disproportionally located in transition economies or developing nations. At the same time, we also find a growing trend whereby non-governmental organizations (NGOs), micro-lenders and global aid institutions (e.g. Grameen Bank, United Nations and IMF) acknowledge entrepreneurial activity as vital to economic and social development and as a proxy for women's economic inclusion (UN Report, 2009).

Shared by these seemingly disparate streams of research that attend to gender is the assumption that social entrepreneurship allows women to make significant inroads towards gender equality at the bottom and the top of the economic pyramid[1]. The general inclusion and participation of women in social enterprise stands in stark contrast to their marginalization in perhaps the most lauded form of commercial entrepreneurship: high-technology and high-growth entrepreneurship (Yang and Aldrich, 2014). Although women rising to positions of leadership in social entrepreneurship constitutes progress, we argue that an exaggerated connection of women with non-economic goals and social entrepreneurship itself may "create a detrimental perception that women are less focused and driven to succeed in their businesses than men, (aggravating) their difficulty in obtaining institutional or venture-capital financing" (Brush *et al.*, 2004; Morris *et al.*, 2006, p. 224).

To address these concerns specifically and to better understand the ways in which gender and social entrepreneurship intersect more broadly, we need to engage deeply with the assumptions underlying the field. We undertake this endeavour following the seminal work of Calás *et al.* (2009), who deploy feminist perspectives to question guiding assumptions in entrepreneurship research, particularly with respect to social change. As the landscape of social entrepreneurship is complex, feminist lenses can elucidate unvoiced assumptions, expectations, norms and values and allow consideration of how categories (e.g. gender, race and class) and relations of difference (e.g. femininity/masculinity and intersectionality) between/among women and men impact how social entrepreneurship is conceptualized and practiced. In joining feminist critiques of the broader entrepreneurship field, we argue that the social enterprise literature demands a more critical turn to examine the extent to which social entrepreneurship is effective in addressing issues of gender equality explicitly.

Feminist perspectives and social entrepreneurship

Already, feminist scholars have examined underlying assumptions and methods guiding much of the research in entrepreneurship by attending to the ways in which gender is examined or silenced (Bruni *et al.*, 2004b; Clark Muntean and Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Henry *et al.*, 2015). Feminist thought in these fields have informed the way gender is conceptualized and how problems related to gender are identified and remedied. Feminist theorists, thus, provide a strong theoretical and analytical framework for addressing the "ways in which entrepreneurial work is situated within gendered processes which form and are formed through relationships between occupation, organizational structure and the sex of the worker" (Mirchandani, 1999, p. 225).

Recent work applying critical perspectives from various feminist theories to the field of traditional or for-profit entrepreneurship challenges much of the individualistic, narrow focus and unstated assumptions of masculine dominance (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Aygoren, 2015; Dy and Carmina, 2015; Lewis, 2014; Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Marlow and Patton, 2005; Neergaard *et al.*, 2011; Verduijn and Essers, 2013). This body of scholarship notes that "entrepreneurship is embedded within prevailing institutional biases, which produce and reproduce bounded constraints regarding who can claim entrepreneurial legitimacy" (Marlow and McAdam, 2013, p. 1; see also Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Calás *et al.*, 2009). Further, these scholars acknowledge the gendered context of entrepreneuring or how entrepreneurship gets enacted such that it disadvantages females as entrepreneurs, given entrepreneurship itself is already "embedded in gender regimes that historically have excluded women" (Blake and Hanson, 2005, p. 686; also Mirchandani, 1999; Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Scholars working within these frames address whether "the flexibility of self-employment in contrast to corporate employment may create additional burdens for women, who often end up earning less and doing more of their traditional family responsibilities, increasing the sexual division of labor in the family" and thus, entrepreneurship fails to address the underlying problem behind gender-based comparative economic disadvantage, that is, "traditional sex roles that disadvantage women" (Calás *et al.*, 2009, p. 557; also Weiler and Bernasek, 2001).

Notably, such critical feminist perspectives are lacking in the field of social entrepreneurship with notable exceptions (Calàs *et al.*, 2009; Goss *et al.*, 2011; Hayhurst, 2014; Mehta *et al.*, 2009; Phillips, 2005). Extending the claims of these feminist scholars, we raise challenges regarding the gender neutrality of social entrepreneurship. Further, we raise the spectre that embedded biases and institutional constraints sort women from men into what is considered appropriate entrepreneuring for their sex category. Specifically, women and femininity are considered the best "fit" with microenterprise, limited scale, slow growth and socially oriented ventures, whereas rapid growth-oriented, scalable, highly regarded and resourced firms remain the male and masculinized domain. To further our argument in this regards, we rely on liberal feminist, socialist feminist and transnational/post-colonial feminist lenses to demonstrate how each of these frameworks yields a different set of concerns around gender and provides novel insights as to social entrepreneurship theory and research broadly (see Calás and Smircich, 2006 for an overview of these feminist perspectives).

Liberal feminist work calls attention to the challenges faced by individual women and typically proposes solutions geared towards mitigating practices and biases that prevent gender equality (see Offen, 1988 for an overview). Moving beyond an individualist lens, socialist feminist insights allow consideration of the structural arrangement and cultural assumptions that work to reproduce gender inequalities. Finally, transnational/post-colonial feminist analyses address how neo-liberal economic ideologies and practices produce a gendered political economy and entrepreneurial subject. Below, we unpack their assumptions with respect to social entrepreneurship and provide new directions for theorizing and developing research questions in the field.

Liberal feminist interventions

In general, liberal feminist perspectives call attention to the ways in which women face barriers in the workplace. Guided by an assumption that biology determines sex, gender is seen as the socialization of various norms and ideals onto biological bodies. Gender

roles then become the dominant way in which individual women and men experience their social world inclusive of its opportunities and challenges (Calás and Smircich, 2006). Solutions to these problems are framed also in individual terms, that is, as normative recommendations around what women must do or do differently to attain equality in workplaces and society. This movement has recently been criticized and re-labelled as neoliberal feminism given its overarching focus on the individual and therefore deflects from the structural and cultural factors behind gender inequality (Prügl, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014).

Applied to social entrepreneurship research, liberal feminist lenses can highlight how gendered norms and expectations around entrepreneurial and managerial roles influence the ways founders and managers of entrepreneurial enterprises are perceived and resourced throughout the entrepreneurial process. In this vein, research focused on women in mainstream entrepreneurship research suggests that firms led by women are more likely to pursue social and a wider range of non-monetary goals, as opposed to purely economic missions relative to firms led by men (Bird and Brush, 2002; Bruni *et al.*, 2004a; Hechavarria *et al.*, 2012; Jennings and Brush, 2013, p. 668, 671; Langowitz and Minniti, 2007; Meyskens *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, other research suggests that non-economic goals, such as helping others, contributing value to local communities and to society beyond wealth creation, are commonly emphasized by female business owners (Brush, 1992; Levie and Hart, 2011; Sullivan and Meek, 2012).

Despite the potential of this research, the categorization of women into certain types of entrepreneuring may bring the unfortunate consequence of replicating and perpetuating harmful gender norms and stereotypes. For example, women are assumed to have more feminine competencies such as relying more on compassion, emotion, collaboration, empathy, inclusiveness and attention to a broader range of stakeholders. From a liberal feminist lens, therefore, women – assumed to come with a more feminine management style – potentially constitute a better fit for leading social enterprises relative to men. In contrast and by default, men and masculine managerial styles are assumed to be better suited for the profit-driven, high-growth entrepreneurial environment. This prevalent gendered dichotomy explains, at least in part, why women express lower entrepreneurial intentions and why women struggle to obtain equity financing (Gupta *et al.*, 2009, 2014; Tinkler *et al.*, 2015).

Specifically, resource providers and other players critical to an entrepreneurial venture's success (e.g. directors of accelerators and incubators, venture capitalists, bankers and serial entrepreneurs) have internalized implicit gender norms and may use these schemas when evaluating entrepreneurial capacity and managerial talent. The widespread use of cognitive shortcuts in the form of gender stereotyping under high levels of uncertainty and risk explains much of the gender gap in venture finance (Thébaud and Sharkey, 2015). On the one hand, this gender dichotomy that associates men and masculinity with competence in high growth, profit-centric entrepreneurship might be believed to provide women with a greater chance of succeeding in the field of social entrepreneurship. Yet, we are not aware of any large-scale empirical study that suggests that women are actually achieving gender equality in social entrepreneurship or benefiting from a gender boost through social enterprise relative to men engaged in social enterprise.

Liberal feminist scholars can address whether social enterprise programmes "make women entrepreneurs appear weaker than their male counterparts" and might the

literature "further associate entrepreneurs as male when women appear to be in need of special assistance in order to engage them?" (Calás *et al.*, 2009, p. 555). Historically and at present, much of the literature in social entrepreneurship and women's entrepreneurship, as well as mainstream entrepreneurship, falls into this liberal (or neoliberal) category and unintentionally positions women entrepreneurs as "less than", "other" or otherwise limited and in need of male intervention to succeed (Ahl, 2002, 2006).

People internalize both societally constructed gender norms and gendered occupational norms from an early age. Girls and women who are repeatedly exposed to images and references of exclusively or predominately men as a particular type of entrepreneur (that is, founder of high-growth, for-profit or technology business) are likely to experience stereotype threat and a reduced proclivity towards this type of entrepreneuring (Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Inzlicht and Schmader, 2011). On the other hand, girls and women who are repeatedly exposed to images and references of female entrepreneurs as recipients of microloans and owner-managers of microenterprises and social ventures are likely to experience stereotype boost, which increases their entrepreneurial intention to form a microbusiness or social venture (Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Inzlicht and Schmader, 2011). This gender dichotomizing of men and women into separate entrepreneurial realms is not only harmful for women who choose to establish and grow businesses in entrepreneurial arenas in which they have been proscribed access but also secures the relative economic privilege of men in business, finance and society.

All in all, liberal feminist perspectives can call attention to the ways in which such gender stereotypes and gender roles prevent women from attaining the resources that are much more readily available to men. They can also make people aware of what must be done on an individual level to mitigate these barriers. Research questions guided by liberal feminist concerns around gender equality can focus on why women are over-represented in social entrepreneurship activities, whereas men are over-represented in high-technology start-ups as a means to uncover the mechanisms through which gender segregation takes shape. These questions need to be asked simultaneously, as they are related areas of research. Yet to be effective, we argue these investigations need to move away from (neo)liberal feminism and engage other, more expansive feminist lenses. To recognize how and why barriers exist, we need to consider cultural barriers and structural arrangements and they ways in which they can work to perpetuate gender norms and roles.

Socialist feminist interventions

In general, socialist feminist theorizing calls attention to the ways in which gender is constituted processually and relationally through intersections of gender, race, class, etc. as both ideologies and relations of difference taking place within the context of patriarchal capitalism (Calás and Smircich, 2006). Within this context, organizations are sites where power relations across gender, race, class, etc. are produced and reproduced through work embedded in capitalist economic arrangements. Challenging these processes, practices and ideologies necessitate a simultaneous awareness of capitalism as a set of structural arrangements guiding the ways in which gender stratification takes place in societies and organizations.

Adopting a socialist feminist viewpoint, we move from liberal feminist approaches constituting the "fixing (of) individual women" to changing structures to affect real social change, that is, "the need to change a patriarchal society – the wider environment devaluing the feminine" (Calás *et al.*, 2009, p. 558). For example, we conceptualize society's inordinate allocation of domestic and care-giving responsibilities to women "as a structural, organizational concern rather than a personal problem" and, as such, we challenge the solution of self-employment, home-based businesses and owner-management of small-scale businesses that "allow" women to continue to bear this unequal burden while bringing income into the household, as these perpetuate women's lower status, lesser economic power and reduced entrepreneurial and social legitimacy (Mirchandani, 1999, p. 231).

Furthermore, societal acceptance of this distinct sphere of "women's enterprising" – that is, starting modest businesses in lower-profit, slower growth and feminized industries – highlights structural divides based on gender. In the near term, "women's enterprising" delivers gender role and occupational role congruence, particularly in traditional societies that have not experienced much in the way of a women's movements. In social enterprise, the local context and place shapes opportunity identification and exploitation, and there are gender differences embedded in these contexts. As geographers studying women entrepreneurs remind us, "women are socially located within places differently from men" (McDowell, 2011), including place-specific ways that women are positioned in relation to business ownership. Thus, gendered positions in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and gender relations more broadly are likely to be important in "creating opportunities for innovations and in determining their values" (Blake and Hanson, 2005, p. 686).

In addition to this observation, we suggest that a socialist feminist perspective calls attention to the continued bifurcation of women and men in entrepreneurship. Women's entrance into social entrepreneurship can be understood at the outcome of intersecting "inequality regimes" (Acker, 2006): structural arrangements in start-up ecosystems that allocate fewer resources (i.e. equity finance) to women engaging in for-profit ventures while simultaneously valuing cultural and social capital associated with women less than those associated with men. Social entrepreneurship then marks the gendered segmentation of entrepreneuring efforts, whereby existing "gender orders" (Gawell and Sundin, 2014) are replicated, rather than the oft-expressed celebratory space, where individuals engage in social innovation to change the social world.

Based on this lens, an examination of the structural and broader societal issues is necessary for real and sustainable social change to occur. Gendered perspectives in the social entrepreneurship field that view women as somehow lesser (e.g. less serious about growth, less capable as leaders of rapidly growing, lucrative businesses) are likely to be internalized by women themselves and those interacting with them (social entrepreneurs, microlenders, etc.). As Morris *et al.* (2006, p. 222) suggest, "this perspective creates unconscious biases regarding capabilities and potential, thereby potentially creating a harmful feedback cycle that is difficult to overcome". Thus, gender norms coupled with gendered economic arrangements may prevent women from participating in the social and economic realm on equal par with men. Although both the liberal feminist and socialist feminist perspectives contribute much to our understanding of social entrepreneurship, there is still more to consider. Next, we outline how transnational/post-colonial feminist approaches inform the conversation with

regards to gender and social entrepreneurship. Following this, we discuss new directions for research inclusive of the specific contributions of each set of feminist lenses.

Transnational/post-colonial feminist interventions

In general, transnational and post-colonial feminist perspectives attend to the living and working conditions of women (and men) in the "Third-World" or "Global South" to highlight their roles as low-status, low-wage workers working in the context of globalized capitalism. We acknowledge differences in these two streams of feminist work stemming from their distinct epistemological and material concerns, but use them in tandem to voice concerns regarding the social entrepreneurship field. Specifically, post-colonial feminist analysis focuses on the gendered subject of the "Third-World" and attends to epistemological concerns over voice and representation (Spivak, 1996). In contrast, work that addresses the role of the nation state and global governance in producing gendered lives and subjects does so under the rubric of transnational feminist thought (Kim *et al.*, 2005). Applied to entrepreneurship, such critical feminist lenses can outline the ways in which gendered subjectivities and assumptions around who can become a particular kind of entrepreneur limit the kinds of activities and opportunities available for women (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2014, 2016). Moreover, they can also highlight, "what other knowledge is made invisible through practices for "helping poor women""? (Calás *et al.*, 2009, p. 563).

In the social entrepreneurship literature, women's engagement with entrepreneurship is conflated with empowerment, and within the context of developing nations, such enterprise activities are undertaken as part of women's economic development programmes (i.e. microcredit and microfinance) based on neo-liberal ideologies (Chant, 2013; Staudt, 2010). That is, the practice and study of social entrepreneurship have begun to include women, but in subscribed and problematic ways. Women's labour in establishing and managing microenterprises is currently an unreflectively and un-reflexively celebrated "solution to poverty, marginalization and subordination" (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013, p. 519). Further, the field of social entrepreneurship and particularly microfinance follows the "global shift towards greater neo-liberal individualism" and its accompanying heightened value placed upon the merits and actions of the individual entrepreneur (Ahl and Marlow, 2012, p. 544). The social entrepreneurship literature is riddled with the same assumptions as the literature on women entrepreneurs in transition economies, which characterizes all women entrepreneurs as "necessity-driven" (Manolova *et al.*, 2007, p. 421; also Welter *et al.*, 2006). As other scholars have noted, the microfinance literature in particular "tends to portray women as the targets rather than as the initiators of social enterprise initiatives" (Jennings and Brush, 2013, p. 697).

These programmes depend on gendered assumptions such as women lacking sufficient agency to help themselves, their families and their communities. As such, the female prototype in the field of social entrepreneurship is not the celebrated heroic, competitive, aggressive innovator described in the for-profit, traditional entrepreneurship literature, a staunchly male prototype (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). We posit that men remain over-identified with competency in the for-profit, rapid-growth entrepreneurial sector of the economy, and this practice may be magnified

as women become more distinctly identified with the social sector and with microenterprise.

Yet, rather than replacing the male hero of for-profit enterprise with a female entrepreneurial heroine, our aim here is to call attention to the very global economic arrangements that produce a particular kind of gendered entrepreneurial subject in the Third World/Global South. The gender structuring of social enterprise as it is in practice in which the vast majority of microloans go to women and in which many social enterprise efforts explicitly target poor women with self-employment opportunities is problematic on many accounts. To this end, implicit biases about the normative role of women in society into minimally compensated and marginalized economic activities such as small scale crafting, food production and other low-profit services and production activities serves to solidify culturally based gendered occupational role stereotypes. Women's ability to exit low-wage, low-status jobs is compromised, particularly in manufacturing particularly when state-sponsored economic development goals include welcoming foreign multinationals to take advantage of a compliant, cost-effective workforce (Rai and Waylen, 2013).

In social entrepreneurship, women are profiled as rising from abject poverty to self-employment, but not as ambitious and capable of managing innovative, scalable, impactful enterprises. Structurally, the vast majority of industries, such as manufacturing, technology, banking and finance, remain the domain of men, and hence the control of wealth and power across the globe remains highly gendered, with women largely left out of the game at the top. Rather than defining success as women climbing corporate ladders and having for-profit motives, our aim here is to address the fact that those kinds of ambitions are not available for the female entrepreneur, particularly in the Third World/Global South context. In the field of microfinance, for example, the interest payments on the loans issued to impoverished women accrue as profits to the financial institutions that issue them, which are still largely run and owned by elite men (Calás *et al.*, 2009, p. 564). Thus, widespread and much lauded entrepreneurial activities such as microfinance may not be universally positive and may even contribute to the problems they purport to be resolving (Calás *et al.*, 2009).

As such, social enterprise and entrepreneurship activities do not appear to change power relations and dependencies between the developed and Third World/Global South, and indeed may perpetuate them. Gendered governance structures in place at social enterprise programmes targeting Third World/Global South women do not change existing economic and structural arrangements or cultural assumptions in the local context or on a global scale. Moreover, states may be less inclined to engage in policies aiming at gender equality if the assumption is that women's entrepreneurship necessarily yields empowerment and economic development (Chant, 2013; Datta and Gailey, 2012; Watson *et al.*, 2014). As such, there still remains much to be addressed with respect to the potential for social change and gender equality emanating from social enterprise programmes and activities. Next, we discuss these issues within the context of social entrepreneurship theory and research.

Discussion

Up to this point, we have discussed three different feminist perspectives and their distinct engagement with social entrepreneurship in regards to assumptions around gender. Here, we focus more broadly on issues that arise out of a feminist engagement

with social entrepreneurship by focusing on the challenges still facing the field inclusive of academics, practitioners and policy makers.

Our first contention is that women have become the objects of social entrepreneurship efforts where the responsibility for fixing economic and social problems is placed squarely on the shoulders of individuals most negatively impacted by these problems. For example, with microenterprise, the responsibility for overcoming abject poverty is placed on individual women who are the target of micro-lending programmes. Scholars and practitioners operating with such an individualistic focus deflect attention from changing structural, cultural, political and institutional barriers women face in both the developing and the developed world. Gendered role and occupation expectations and perceptions of who women are and what they can do remain highly problematic in the field of social enterprise. Indeed, the field of social entrepreneurship – by advocating self-employment as the highest goal for women – may inadvertently "ghettoize" women entrepreneurs into slow growth, low-profit microenterprises in feminized and undervalued industries. This individualistic solution to addressing poverty through microenterprise ignores the myriad structural, institutional, societal and economic barriers to women's equity with men in the home and in the public realm.

Second, identifying women with the realm of social enterprise and microenterprise in particular may unfortunately magnify the marginalization of their entrepreneurial and economic identities by subtly suggesting that their normative place remains in lower-valued, much smaller-scale entrepreneurial endeavours relative to those of male entrepreneurs. In fact, social enterprises and microenterprises might magnify structural gender pay gaps. As women exhibit fewer barriers and greater support when they establish and run businesses in feminized industries (e.g. crafts, caregiving and other services) and in industries considered "kinder and gentler" relative to relentlessly competitive arenas such as information technology, they may continue to self-select into these gendered fields. Empirical research suggests compensation penalties in fields associated with females such that occupations and industries which are feminized become economically devalued (Dill *et al.*, 2016; Lindsey, 2015; Jamieson, 1995). On the flip side, masculinized arenas such as technology entrepreneurship retain glass ceilings for women while they attract greater esteem and resourcing.

In contrast with the widespread image of the female microloan recipient etching her family's way out of abject poverty through engaging in necessity-driven microenterprise, the high-profile entrepreneurial images and role models portray elite, typically white males from the developed world (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Carter *et al.*, 2009). Further on this point, individual entrepreneurs are categorized into the sex-based binary "male-female", even though statistical analyses reveal greater within-gender variance than between-gender variance; thus, scholars inadvertently risk "reproducing women's subordination" in the production of knowledge (Ahl, 2006, 2002; Calás *et al.*, 2009, p. 562). Yet, why does this remain the case currently? How are such privileged positions maintained and perpetuated through existing structural arrangements in start-up ecosystems, cultural assumptions in society and academic research? These are questions and concerns that arrive out of feminist positions and can substantially redirect entrepreneurship research as it stands currently.

Implications for theory, research and policy

We argue that academics and practitioners in the social entrepreneurship field, including those purporting to improve the quality of life for women, still may inadvertently harm the prospects of women and negatively impact their potential through the phenomena of stereotype threat and stereotype boost (Gupta *et al.*, 2014; Inzlicht and Schmader, 2011). In other words, academics can play a significant role in perpetuating gender stereotypes and giving support to practices that continue to marginalize women from enterprise activities generally associated with men. To address these concerns, we expand on issues related to the academic field of social entrepreneurship.

By focusing on small scale self-employment opportunities as the dominant solution to feminized poverty and economic and social inequality, academics and policy makers sidestep the endemic structural problems of undercapitalization because of bias in lending and equity investment, inequitable access to networks and gatekeepers and workplace subordination in the forms of both vertical and horizontal gender segregation in the economy (Marlow and Patton, 2005). The concentration of women in low-status, low-skill and low-pay employment continues to offer entrepreneurially minded women with poorer business prospects relative to men. As a whole, social entrepreneurship focuses on women in traditional feminized niches, such as personal services, small-scale food production, craft work and retailing and, thus, fails to address how they remain largely excluded and/or are not taken as seriously in more lucrative, masculinized fields (Bates, 2002). The institutional reproduction of modest self-employment that microfinance fosters does not enable women to break away from cyclical disadvantage (Marlow and Patton, 2005, p. 725) and is supported through research efforts that do not explicitly address the mechanisms and foundations of gender inequality.

To expand on this idea, extant "social policies and gender status beliefs" found across the globe, thus, contribute to gender inequality "by structuring both the context in which individuals perceive business ownership as a viable labor market option and the interactions through which they gain legitimacy and support for their business idea" (Thébaud, 2010, p. abstract).

The widespread practice of associating small and slow-growth businesses with women in particular denies the fact that across the globe, there are still more small businesses run by men and self-employed men than there are self-employed women; in effect, women are "marked out" as being inferior entrepreneurs with "non-serious businesses" relative to men, and this presents problems, normatively and for theory, practice and policy (Lewis, 2006). The association of women with no and slow-growth firms has been identified as "a female problem", which on the flip side in the mainstream entrepreneurship field contributes to "the maintenance of the dominant discourse of heroic masculinity which informs enterprise and entrepreneurial activities, preserving its privileged position and devaluing the meanings and interpretations contained in this alternative, 'female' discourse" (Lewis, 2006, p. 457).

The status quo in which women and men underestimate the competency of women as opportunity-driven entrepreneurs overestimate the competency of men as opportunity-driven entrepreneurs and over-identify women with lower status, lower-profit and lower-impact microenterprise relative to men is, thus, highly problematic (Langowitz and Minniti, 2007). Under the dominant economic regime of gendered globalized capitalism, men and masculinities are privileged, producing gender inequalities in

economic power and influence (as well as political power and influence when ineffective campaign finance laws enable money to buy political influence, as is the case in the USA). We argue that closing the gender gap in entrepreneurial outcomes would narrow the gender gap in compensation and influence in the financial and business sector overall as entrepreneurial women grow and scale their businesses to maturity over time.

In addition, a logic of commercialization of social ventures has also began to take shape in social enterprise discourses beyond contemporary discussions around new organizational forms, such as hybrids, that are now addressing social ills (Battilana and Dorado, 2010). From a feminist perspective, this trend highlights how neo-liberal ideology impacts the very concepts and practices in the social entrepreneurship field and the ways in women experience opportunities and constraints in labour markets and society. Specifically, new organizational forms do not change existing gendered socio-cultural, political and economic dimensions of society. As such, these new forms that purport to be "solutions" to gender inequality and other social challenges are in effect, the *outcome* of gendered economic arrangements.

Future research: new directions

Substantive change must begin in the political and economic systems, institutions and institutional arrangements that shape perceptions and stereotypical expectations with regard to gender, organizational roles and the quantity and type of entrepreneurial efforts (Baumol, 1990; Langowitz and Minniti, 2007). Policies should explicitly target the gender gap in perceptions of women's competency as founders and managers of higher-growth, larger-scale businesses relative to men, both among individual women across countries and among gatekeepers and resource providers in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. As Langowitz and Minniti (2007) suggest, programmes targeted at transforming the perceptions women have of themselves can challenge the gender ghettoization of women's entrepreneurial activities, but they do not address sociocultural, political and economic foundations of inequality. Thus, the focus of such policy efforts should not be on how many women these programmes can push into self-employment or microenterprises, but rather, how women can be equal participants in social, political and economic dimensions of society. This might entail fewer women going into feminized forms of self-employment and a greater structural focus on eliminating the second shift disadvantage through socialization of caregiving and housework.

Further, as women for-profit entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs are innovating and providing value to their communities, we call on researchers to showcase the myriad strengths of feminine modes of entrepreneuring and social entrepreneuring in the future – a research agenda that arrives out of radical feminist concerns (although not discussed in our paper specifically).To level the playing field for women in the entrepreneurial world, widespread "gender stereotypical signals" in the academic literature, texts, popular business press and mass media need to be eliminated; public policies addressing this need may be more effective than existing interventions focused on "fixing" individual women (Gupta *et al.*, 2014, p. 274).

For real change to happen, the manner in which women entrepreneurs "are embedded in wider processes of disadvantage needs to be recognized" and "persistent stereotypes which devalue women" need to be confronted (Marlow and Patton, 2005, p. 728, 730). Given that countries that exhibit greater levels of gender equality hold greater

normative support for women's entrepreneurship and more opportunity-based entrepreneurship relative to necessity-based entrepreneurship overall (Baughn *et al.*, 2006; Clark Muntean, 2013), we suggest greater emphasis on prescriptive measures of institutionalizing gender equality as a means of improving the entrepreneurial ecosystem for women and men. In effect, social enterprises may not only well bring benefits to the communities they aim to serve but also may serve to perpetuate gendered expectations around the kinds of enterprises women can found, expand and head. Public, private and collaborative cross-sector efforts to empower women through entrepreneurial activities that do not simultaneously and aggressively challenge societal, structural and institutional sexism may inadvertently magnify gendered characterizations and, thus, aggravate more substantive attempts at inducing gender equality (Marlow and Patton, 2005). The programmatic focus of social entrepreneurship on self-employment is not advantageous to women, as it "is unlikely to alter women's structural positions in the labor market or the household" (Green and Cohen, 1995, p. 312; also Mirchandani, 1999, p. 224).

To these ends, a new direction for social entrepreneurship might be in reducing conflicts women face between their economic activities and other life responsibilities, perhaps by socializing domestic work and equalizing men's time spent on these activities. We note research suggests that women who perceive fewer work-family conflicts are more optimistic about their entrepreneurial ventures and ability to surmount challenges and are, thus, more likely to have a higher growth orientation (Morris *et al.*, 2006). Another rich area to explore is applying the literature on identity and gender to explore what "doing gender" and performativity might look like in social entrepreneurship, for example, whether stirring "gender trouble" in social entrepreneurship efforts shifts the hegemonic gender order (Poggio, 2006). Ethnographic studies of women moving from need-driven self-employment to opportunity and growth-driven entrepreneurial activities would also be illuminating. Social entrepreneurship research would also benefit from more rigorous work on how education and programming specifically targeted to overcoming gender bias and structural and institutional gender barriers translates into more gender-equitable entrepreneurial aspirations and outcomes. Finally, more scholarship on how national culture supports women's empowerment through greater *control* over resources, including economic institutions (e.g. banks, corporations and venture capital firms) vs just access to these resources (as does social entrepreneurship), is necessary for understanding the structural factors behind the degree of women's entrepreneurial success (Kantor, 2002).

Conclusion

Contributing to the calls "for gender to be employed, not as a variable, but as a theoretical lens through which to analyze all entrepreneurship in the mainstream" (Rouse *et al.*, 2013, p. 453), we ask what feminist theorizing can do for the social entrepreneurship field as a subset of the entrepreneurship field (Henry *et al.*, 2015; Calás *et al.*, 2009). Extending this work, we make explicit how gender constitutes a widespread organizational principle for social entrepreneurship, as social enterprise is embedded in existing gender regimes. Distinct feminist perspectives allow us to question narratives in the social entrepreneurship field about fit, ability, choice and freedom, which we argue

are masculine-dominant discourses borrowed from entrepreneurship that are largely silent with respect to gender.

In our calls for change to the way we study and research social entrepreneurship, we acknowledge our institutional positions as feminist scholars located in US business schools. Thus, our perspectives and analyses arrive from a neo-liberal context in which the market is often heralded as the preferred solution to many social problems. In contrast, we understand that in other economic, political and social contexts in which entrepreneurship activities take place may or may not fit the pattern of our key observations. We acknowledge these differences as fruitful to a broader conversation on what constitutes entrepreneurship and how gender is an organizing principle of such activities, albeit manifest with variety in different contexts. Consequently, although our critiques are useful in raising these concerns with regards to assumptions in social entrepreneurship, we are cognizant that our own privileged positions do not allow us to *speak for* or *acts as agents on behalf of* many women worldwide whose living and working conditions are deplorable.

We argue that the inclusion and very success of women in social enterprise may serve to illuminate the barriers and exclusion in the high-stakes for-profit realm. Thus, our work not only contributes to social entrepreneurship but also raises broader challenges for the entire field of entrepreneurship. By adopting feminist lenses, scholars can illuminate that "under a social system where a masculine-ordered world is dominant, including its economic system, it is difficult to bring about social change to improve the situation of women via entrepreneurship" (Calás *et al.*, 2009, p. 559).

As such, we implore scholars and policy makers to examine how the masculine advantage takes shape in the global entrepreneurial ecosystem and consider social, cultural, political and economic reforms that might allow for the arrival of gender equality.

Note

1. For example, www.forbes.com/sites/women2/2011/12/16/women-social-entrepreneurs-in-forbes-impact-30/

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Corresponding author

Susan Clark Muntean can be contacted at: smuntean@unca.edu