

Women in Self-employment: Diverse Constructions & Alternate Frames

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The question of whether and why women prefer self-employment to wage-employment in dealing with social space-work space interface has been on the research radar for some time. A careful scrutiny of research depictions of women in self-employment points towards three frames for a better understanding of whether and why women choose self-employment over wage employment while engaging with social space-workspace dilemmas - the “pragmatic-accepting” (self-employment as an arrangement at the person level in tune with social space-workspace ground realities), the “organizational-managerial” (self-employment as flight from insensate managerialism), and the “structural-contradictory” (self-employment as a fission triggered by resentful distress and strident protest against deeply embedded heedlessness).

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Research Depictions of Women in Self-employment

The question of whether and why women prefer self-employment to wage-employment in dealing with social space-work space interface has been on the research radar for some time. One view is that self-employment offers autonomy and flexibility, increasing a person's ability to balance contradictory pressures (Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001; Prottas & Thompson, 2006). The self-employed, in general, report more autonomy than employed workers (Taris et al, 2008; Tuttle & Garr, 2009). Budiq (2006) finds that many women enter self-employment to balance conflicting demands through more autonomous arrangements considering that traditionally, autonomy is defined as the freedom and discretion to decide when, where, and how a job should be carried out (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

Self-employment offers autonomy and flexibility.

Most researchers have treated the self-employed as a homogenous group

when paying attention to the role of autonomy in balancing work and family life (Loscocco, 1997; Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001; Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). Counter research suggests that self-employment demands greater commitment, greater personal accountabilities and therefore results in irregular hours, acute uncertainties and social skepticism leading to constraints and contradictions in securing autonomy in social space-work space interactions (Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001; Valcour, 2007; Voydanoff, 2004) thus to an extent dampening and neutralizing arguments in favor of self-employment over wage employment.

Autonomy is depicted in work-family literature as an important balancing resource, but what seems to be missing is the point that the dilemmas faced by women who choose self-employment over wage employment to deal with the social-space-work space interface may have more to do with subjects juggling between the need to meet social space demands and gaining access to resources through career continuity and income stability (Valcour, 2007; Voydanoff, 2004). Resource-demand lag triggers conflicts, frustrations and disenchantment as evidenced in work-life lived experiences (Moen & Chermack, 2005; den Dulk et al., 2011).

Here again research comes with another counter that work related autonomy only when combined with backing from socially situated constituents can enable self-employed autonomy to morph into a balancing resource in social space-work space interrelationships (Valcour, 2007; Voydanoff, 2004). This interpretative

strand emanates from a genre of research and practice which adopts a family oriented construction of self-employment (Cetindamar et al., 2012; Jennings & Brush, 2013). Within this frame, importance from a survival point of view is given to two forms of family support - tangible-instrumental and intangible-moral. When family members take up a consultant-advisory role, instrumental support is available to enable women in self-employment (Arregle, Hitt, Sirmon & Very, 2007; Eddleston & Powell, 2012; Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Chang, Memili, Chrisman, Kellermanns & Chua, 2009). Instrumental backing can also take the form of helping with social space responsibilities and financial support in terms of loans (Eddleston & Powell, 2012). Besides, this school of self-employment support also points towards intangible-moral social space reinforcements which facilitate survival (Cetindamar et al., 2012; Davidsson & Honig, 2003) in the form of encouragement and emotional support in coping with survival pressures (Eddleston & Powell, 2012). Studies also focus on the provision of personal support in dealing with social space-work space conflicts and constraints. Considering that women often tend to take greater load than men in child care activities (Sullivan & Meek, 2012), studies suggest that being self-employed has negative impact on social space life experiences (Ufuk & Özgen, 2001). Research also indicates that multi-tasking tends to accentuate personal problems (Welsh, Kim, Memili, & Kaciak, 2014).

However evidence from home based working which is one form of self-em-

ployment chosen by women to balance social space-work space interactions becomes a convenient site for extractive and exploitative practices on the part of employers of such resources (Pizaklea & Wolkowitz, 199; Jurik, 1998) which is sustained by an all pervasive gender based discrimination which is structural in nature (Cliff, 1998). Syed & Ozbilgin (2009) lend credence to this view when they proffer a multi-level framework for the analysis of the constructions and contradictions of the lived experiences of women in self-employment in which they give due emphasis for the societal and structural conditions (laws, institutions, culture and political economy) which create the structural basis for discriminatory practices at the level of agents who utilize self-employed resources.

A careful scrutiny of the studies referred to in the discussion so far points towards three frames for a better understanding of whether and why women choose self-employment over wage employment while engaging with social space-workspace dilemmas -the “pragmatic-accepting” (self-employment as an arrangement at the person level in tune with social space-workspace ground realities), the “organizational-managerial” (self-employment as flight from insensate managerialism), and the “structural-contradictory” (self-employment as a fission triggered by resentful distress and strident protest against deeply embedded heedlessness).

This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of self-employed women for a grounded examination to see which of these three frames is in evidence in the

life-world of today’s toiling self-employed women.

Method of Study

In this study, the researchers attempted to explore experiences of women in self-employment with a view to understanding their role constructions and contradictions in their social space-work space interface and interactions using a grounded qualitative research approach (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1994; van Manen (1998). In-depth interviews were conducted with eight self-employed subjects using the snowball technique (Patton, 2002). The data for the study was collected through conversational unstructured interviews with an indicative interview guide as suggested by van Manen (1998). All the precautions required for examining human subjects according to the best practices, protocols and principles as applicable were adhered to strictly. The subjects and the geographies have been kept anonymous to the maximum extent feasible to protect sources. The subjects at the time of interviews were women in self-employment. A brief profile of the subjects (Table 1) and the analysis, interpretation and findings are presented below.

Self-Employment as Family Role Dominant Scaling Down of Career

The advent of the respondent’s first child and her spouse’s decision to pursue higher studies in medicine transferred almost the entire responsibility of looking after not only her son but also her in laws to her. The additional family “load”

Table 1 Profile Self-Employed Subjects

S.No	Pseudonym	Age	Nature of Self-Employment	Qualifications	No. of years into self-employment	Marital Status
1	A	52	Science Training Centre	PhD	18 Years	Married with one daughter (21 Years)
2	B	35	Free Lancer (Reporter)	MA	13 Years	Single
3	C	45	Consultant	MBA	10 Years	Married with no Kids
4	D	27	Play School	MA	4 Years	Married with one son (2 years)
5	E	49	Management Trainer	MBA	8 Years	Divorced
6	F	49	Garments Store	BA	10 Years	Single
7	G	27	Computer training center	MCA	2 Years	Single
8	H	36	Medical - Own Practice	Gynaecologist	6 Years	Married with one child (4 Years)

forced her to scale down her professional practice which was in the self-employment mode since she could not be away from home for 8-9 hours considering that her spouse was too preoccupied with his studies. “Just after our son’s birth my husband joined his M.S course and the entire responsibility to look after him and other family members came on me and he [her husband] became too busy with his studies. With a small kid it was not possible for me to be out from home in a stretch for 8-9 hours. So I decided to start my own practice where at least OPD timings were controlled by me and emergency cases were there in any case in both the cases”. (Case 17)

While self-employment gave her more control over her time and greater flexibility in managing home and clinic, her professional life and career was certainly affected. This episode also points towards the reality that the family role

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Self-Employment as Care Provider Dominant Flexi Working

The significant role and responsibilities of women on the family side of the spousal equation even as they are pursuing regular wage employment also leads to relationship issues with children. The respondent in this case was concerned about her daughter becoming emotionally detached from her and suggested that this was a decisive factor in switching to self-employment for greater flexibility in

working schedules and greater availability to her daughter. “I had seen a real tough time when I was working as a faculty with Institute X [a computer training institute]. Due to number of hours required there, my daughter actually slowly became emotionally detached from me. Due to this I had to take a career break but later I decided to start something on my own as with a job my life became really painful...by working on my own which I could easily manage my work according to my responsibility towards my daughter”. (Case 69)

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What is significant is that the lived experience of conflict of sentiments flowing from her daughter’s estrangement from her makes her experience her job as “really painful”. It is this “pain” which propels her towards self-employment to achieve a balance in her motherhood role-work role dilemmas. Work continuity as an aspiration is not abandoned but is first disrupted and then curtailed on resumption with the self-employment option to better fulfill her parental sensitivities.

Wage Employment as Exploitation – Self Employment as Emancipatory Autonomy

In the view of a subject, wage employment is experienced as exploitation

given the skewed effort-reward correlation – long hours and low wages. “I worked with a parlor for two years after shifting to Ahmedabad but I realized that whatever I was getting paid there was nothing for the efforts and number of hours I was putting in. Then my husband only supported me to start my own parlor...actually first he tried to boost my confidence and reduce the fear I had about the customer’s expectation in this big city...this helped me to collect courage to start on my own. And now I feel how fruitful this decision has proved for me and supported me to earn really well”. (Case 29)

The experience of the extractive nature of wage employment is not sufficient to trigger the move towards self-employment. The subject herself recognizes that multiple fears frustrated her self-employment aspiration – diffidence in one’s own ability, fears about “big city” expectations, and anxieties about customer acceptance and satisfaction. And then comes the significant insight when attributing credit for what helped her to overcome these fears before taking the next step – the role of spousal support in boosting self-belief and to build up the courage to overcome the fears played a key role in taking the plunge. She could not have made the transition but for her husband’s encouragement. Behind the overcoming of a sense of inadequacy and inability of the diffident and dithering woman there is the

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sense of energy and vitality of the supportive man. It is this deep rooted disposition of female diffidence and self-effacement combined with the debilitating sense of deference towards and dependence on the male which is at the root of the gender divide. Every female act of independence and achievement gets to be attributed to a male support determinant even though objective fact suggests that it was entirely due to the effort and resilience of the initiating subject.

The need for fair earnings commensurate with the work effort which was not in evidence while in wage employment was also a key driver for opting for the self-employment option. This subject's life world shows that work is central to the woman's aspirations and existence and it takes three forms – paid employment, earned self-employment and home-maker work without pay. While there is at least a choice between paid employment and earned self-employment for the toiling woman worker, the bulk of the burden of home-work without pay falls on the woman irrespective of whether she is wage-employed or self-employed.

A Quest for Personal & Professional Autonomy

A significant impetus towards opting for self-employment is the combined effect of lack of fulfillment of wage employment and the gnawing need for independence from the stifling environment of subordinate existence. These insights emerge from an extract from a respondent interview: "Just after finishing my

diploma in gynecology after my MBBS, I did join with a renowned gynecologist as an assistant. She did allow me to gain much exposure by working under her for a year. I started feeling the need to become independent.....actually I was never allowed to handle any case independently. So I decided to start my own practice after a year, though I knew it would again be tough....but I was ready for that initial struggle and went ahead". (Case 17)

Holistic self-realization can only come from independent functioning which, though fraught with start-up difficulties and survival struggles, can come only through striking out on one's own. The aspirational need coming through is the desire for freedom to be and to become freed from the shackles of wage employment regimes.

Self-Employment as a Voyage of Self Discovery & Self Fulfillment

The prospect of staying at home after getting married throws up the dilemma of being caught between marital idleness and the urge to work. In a subject's own words: "I shifted to Ahmedabad after my marriage and within two months I just got too bored out of sitting idle at home....so I started looking for some opportunities and within a few months I realized the unique communication talent I had. I was made an offer to take a few training sessions on communication for call center employees andsince then I have never looked back. I realized the skills I had and how they can be used to design my career. But related to this I was sure that

I will not join any training consultancy as I wanted to grow on my own as I was confident about myself". (Case 56)

A search for work opportunities opened up a career path in communications training. Here again the choice is to eschew wage employment and opt for self-employment which offers a self-driven path to professional growth in her chosen field of specialization. The insight which emerges is that refusal to surrender to the socially constructed dictates of marital idleness and the willingness to take the challenge of a new job offer leads to self-discovery. That moment of truth also transforms the individual into a self-confident entrepreneur of her own capabilities.

Self-employment Experiences & Professional Peer Support Deficit

One of the respondents on embarking on her self-employment initiative reaching out to professional peers had a demoralizing experience. Not only did she get little or no support but also met with disrespect and derision. Even in her initial meetings, the focus was on demanding higher share for patient referrals (Case 17). "I met doctors already in practice to develop my professional network based on which the referral system works here. I was really surprised by seeing the way these doctors behaved, especially the behavior of other women doctors. Besides the fact that I did not see any chance of receiving support from them, they didn't even bother to talk with respect and even made fun of me. Some of them behaved really badly.....this

was the worst experience I have ever had. They asked me for higher share in the fees from referrals- a prevalent norm here.....I faced this problem more as in my childhood I was never taught about how to do networking and mixing with others". (Case 17)

Self-Employment & Social Prejudice based Personal Attacks

Yet another respondent (Case 56), recounting her experiences while attempting to enter into self-employment, stated that peers used personal attacks by making sarcastic remarks about her divorcee status in order to embarrass her but it only ended up strengthening her resolve to continue on the path of self-employment. "I was very clear from the beginning what I wanted to do...in this my knowledge, skills and abilities helped me as I talked about my work with lot of confidence. But frankly many of my colleagues also trainers in the fraternity were unable to take my confidence. I faced this more during my initial assignments, these trainers used to wonder how I was getting business and when they couldn't find ways to attack me on my work, they chose the route to attack on me through my personal life. The fact that I am divorced was always brought into public forums.....I feel its really cheap to control ones' competitor by attacking on their personal life if they cannot be fought with based on work. But I have also become stronger day by day and learned how to handle such people.....truth is men just don't know how to handle a strong woman. They just want every woman to be in a vulnerable

and pleading state with which they are familiar". (Case 56)

Self-employment Experiences & Spousal Behavior

The self-employment experiences of another subject provide interesting insights into male spousal behavior (Case 69). The subject in question started her self-employment initiative and she on her husband's insistence let him join her. "Whenever I and my husband used to go to meet new clients, the clients just used to talk about my husband and I was considered just as his wife only.....my relationship with my husband was given more importance than as his professional colleague. Due to this every time my profession and my work was diminished". (Case 69)

He started treating her not as a professional or at least as a colleague but would always introduce himself first and then her to clients as his wife. As she herself says in her own words, "such an experience was really painful for me as slowly my own self and my identity as a professional lost to my identity as a wife.....really intolerable"..

Yet another account of a similar experience is even more poignant (Case 28). "My husband and I were classmates and we started our career almost at the same time. But over a course of time we could see how our careers were shaping differently despite being and working together. There were times when on surface we might have thought that we have a choice over the projects we handle as

a principal architect but deep down there's a segregation happening. He used to get mainstream projects whereas I used to work on kitchen like designs said to be feminine. This implicit segregation made me second to my husband at work which originally was ours..... and now his.....".

Socially determined constructions are reproduced even in self-employment initiatives of women and when male spouses join such enterprises, women get submerged in the same culture of deep rooted male imperialism based on prejudice informed falsification of reality. "My husband joined me in my work to which I happily agreed but after sometime he started treating me as his wife at work and my identity of a colleague got suppressed with my identity of a wife. Wherever we used to go for meetings, he used to introduce himself first and then I used to be introduced as his wife." (Case 69)

Self-Employment Experiences & Staff Prejudices

If the subjects of this study are to be believed, even the behavior of staff members in an enterprise initiated by the woman professional reveals a similar deeply ingrained bias: "It happens quite frequently like, though for our office staff I am also an architect working there, but I have always felt that for our staff I am

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working with my husband.....see there is a difference like they don't consider both I and my husband as partners rather for them I am working with my husband. There is a difference between the two. Sometimes I react also to such statements from them...like whenever any call comes, the staff picks it up by my husband's name...then I jokingly replies back saying hello even I am here... see such things are there and will be there, I won't fight but of course I make it a point to tell them what is right". (Case 31)

Self-Employment Experiences and Client Proclivities

Given the embeddedness of this biased reality, can client behavior be far behind? The experiences of one of the subjects of this study suggest that client orientations reflect a similar prejudice: "It happens even when both my husband and I sit together in the same office - then also whenever new clients approach us it has to be for my husband only. Hardly any client would have come and ask for me....it is considered as his [her husband's] office only".

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Patriarchal dominance is an ever present construction even in a self-employed enterprise initiated by women. The basis of such a dominance-submission relationship is a socially sanctioned culture of segregation reinforced by the

colonization of the woman's capability and the curtailment of her autonomy in deploying the capability. As recounted by another subject (Case 31), even when recognition of her talents and conferment of a partner status in a joint self-employment enterprise does happen, it is through the mediation of the male spouse. "Due to this if others like contractors, carpenters, masons, and plumbers try to overrule my decisions, he makes it a point to see that they are considered."

It is evident that there is an undercurrent of what one can term as a capability deficit prejudice when it comes to the woman partner even among business associates like contractors, carpenters, masons and plumbers in this instance and this is again offset only by the constant intervention of the male partner. While this approach certainly changes the situation for the woman professional and gives her a better environment to demonstrate her potential, this is possible only because of patriarchal validation by the male intermediary to secure recognition of that potential by stakeholders immersed in the pervasive cultural myopia. "What is the need for me to fight for my position when I know my husband ensures that all crucial decisions and projects move through me. He takes special care to ensure that my professional skills are appreciated by others and I am recognized as his partner at work rather than his wife. Due to this if others like contractors, carpenters masons, and plumbers try to overrule my decisions, he makes it a point to see that they are considered giving me my position at work with due importance to my career". (Case 31)

In certain contexts, even in a woman dominated medical domain practice like gynaecology, patients have more faith in male gynaecologists. And initial attempts to connect to the gynaecology community to get support met with discouraging skepticism from fellow practitioners dominated by male gynaecologists and also from uneasy patients who were more comfortable with male doctors. "It was really very difficult for me to establish my practice that too when I am there in the field which is usually considered to be women dominated. I am a gynaecologist then also I have to continuously compete with male gynecologists as patients really find it difficult to believe in a woman gynecologist especially here [referring to Gujarat]. And it takes double the time for a fresher woman gynecologist to establish her practice here than any fresher male gynecologist. If not everywhere it is at least prevalent in Gujarat". (Case 17).

The cultural undercurrents of prejudice against women gynaecologists permeated even through women patients and their social constructions of the professional capabilities of women as is evident from a self-employment seeking subject's account given above. As a respondent concludes from her experiences in this context: "I think men have their own complexes and they are just not able to handle a strong professional woman by competing with her on the basis of her work. I have seen how my clients and even competitors are unable to compete with my talents and instead attack me by bringing my womanhood into the professional engagement". (Case 56).

What is evident in the interface and interactions in the self-employment quest of women professionals is the latent male insecurities.

What is evident in the interface and interactions in the self-employment quest of women professionals is the latent male insecurities even as social and organizational structures reinforce patriarchies and the attendant hegemonies.

Discussion

Research depictions of women in self-employment yielded three frames – the "pragmatic-accepting" (self-employment as an arrangement at the person level in tune with social space-workspace ground realities), the organizational-managerial (self-employment as flight from insensate managerialism), and the structural-contradictory (self-employment as a fission triggered by resentful distress and strident protest against deeply embedded heedlessness).

The analysis and interpretation of narratives of women in self-employment shows evidence of the "pragmatic-accepting" mode of responding to social space-work space dilemmas. There is evidence of "pragmatism" in the sense of acceptance of the primacy of the family centeredness of even the self-employed women professional with emphasis on the woman as the primary care provider. Long years of socialization have led to the internalization of the cultural value of shouldering the responsibilities

of the “woman-as-family-centric-care-provider” with almost tacit acceptance not only at the personal level but also in societal and organizational parlance. Expectations of support from spouse, peers, staff and even clients to pursue self-employed working does not appear to be immune from the distortions brought on by the gender constructions of the capability of women opting for self-employment. Even in the case of spousal support, giving credit to the spouse goes along with a self-deprecatory tone and tenor even when the evidence points towards achievement attributable to the initiative taken by the self-employed woman subject. Socialization into patriarchal hierarchies ensures that even success is due to the “patriarch” associated with the subject.

The acceptance-rejection undercurrent is even more visible when it comes to self-employment as a response to resentment against organizational-managerial stratagems on the gender constructions front. The “acceptance” in this frame is the conclusion that continuing in wage employment is not conducive to dealing with social-work space conundrums given managerial myopia. Moving over to self-employment is seen as an escape from despotic organizational-managerial regimes. Self-employment is also positioned as a form of rejection of the temporal and spatial life constraints imposed by organizational-managerial regimes in dealing with dilemmas. Self-employment then becomes a form of “release” from constrictions induced social space-workspace pressures and tensions, which goes along with the attendant hope

of experiencing relative autonomy in crafting one’s own time and space life dimensions by freeing oneself from the shackles of wage employment linked managerial hegemonies.

Evidence of the third frame - structural-contradictory (self-employment as fission triggered by resentful distress and strident protest against deeply embedded heedlessness) - is even more revealing when it comes to why self-employment is preferred over wage employment. Three meanings of self-employment emerge as undercurrents from the perspective of the structural-contradictory frame of reference –self-employment as social emancipation from the bondage of organizational-managerial and societal-cultural prejudices and prescriptions; as a restless quest for personal and professional freedom to choose instead of being subjected to the draining suffocation of heedlessness; and self-employment as a voyage of self-discovery and self- fulfillment.

Conclusion

Cadenau (2008:7) in her articulation of the rationale behind choosing self-employment over wage employment has pointed towards a very significant dimension which is relevant as a concluding observation - self-employment helps women subjects to engage in economic activity free of “subordination”. Evidence from this study shows that self-employment is a rejection of “subordination” to societal and organizational-managerial regimes of hegemonic heedlessness and is envisioned as a voyage of self-discovery and self- fulfillment towards achiev-

ing humanizing freedom in order to enable self-employed women subjects to deal with social space-work space dilemmas and contradictions as free and freeing agents.

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