

# **“Who’s that Girl?” The entrepreneur as a ‘super(wo)man’.**

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## **Abstract**

Gender and entrepreneurship research emphasise the masculine symbolic domain of entrepreneurial practices, but mostly neglects to analyse the gender complexity of doing entrepreneurship. This article examines entrepreneurial femininities as constructed and performed by Italian women. Theoretically, it employs postfeminism as a ‘globalised’ discourse to offer a nuanced reading of the relationship between gender inequalities, entrepreneurship and postfeminism. Through the analysis of 51 interviews with entrepreneurs, the paper explores how postfeminist ideals and discourses (the “super(wo)man” who is “free” to choose) are adapted to reflect the Italian cultural context. In doing so it discusses how these women manage the co-existence of feminist (i.e. autonomy, empowerment) and anti-feminist (i.e. traditional division of household labour) expectations concerning women’s place in work and society.

**Key words:** gender, entrepreneurship, postfeminism, self-employment, femininities.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Entrepreneurship is often portrayed as an opportunistic and inclusive economic activity leading to

personal and economic growth, innovation and venture creation (Gundry and Kickul, 2007). However, despite constructions of entrepreneurship as an inclusive and objective opportunity that can be identified by entrepreneurs through the actions they take, more critical analyses revealed the weaknesses of such argument (Calas, Smircich & Bourne, 2009). Scholars (e.g. Ahl, 2006; Ogbor, 2000) have highlighted how discourses underpinning entrepreneurship construct the entrepreneurial subject according to criteria associated with white masculinity (e.g. self-centred, competitive, resolute, energetic, decisive) that produce the exclusion of those individuals who do not fit with the stereotypical ways of doing entrepreneurship (Piacentini, 2013).

Despite the recent growing interest on gender and entrepreneurship, meta-analyses and systematic comprehensive reviews (e.g. Ahl, 2006; Jennings & Brush, 2013; McAdam, 2013) have highlighted two key issues in gender and entrepreneurship research: a lack of theoretical grounding (see also Hughes et al., 2012) and an empirical focus on comparisons of size and/or performance between men and women's enterprises. As highlighted by several scholars (e.g. Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Henry, Foss & Ahl, 2016), more research is needed that analyses the influences of wider social discourses and practices on the gendering of entrepreneurial actions.

In addressing the need to root a gendered analysis of entrepreneurship within social processes, this article offers a theoretically embedded analysis of postfeminism as contextualised within the Italian society. We refer to postfeminism as a social discourse attending the changed relations between feminism, contemporary culture and femininity. The Italian context is particularly interesting because it is characterised by an important feminist tradition, which coexists alongside a strong influence of the Catholic church that affects constructions of masculinity and femininity as rooted in nature and biology (Wanrooj, 2005) and entangled within the institution of the traditional family (Pecis & Priola, 2019). Social narratives are, thus, dominated by rigid gender binarism that contributes to the reiteration of restrictive patriarchal standards of motherhood and

femininity.

Empirically the article investigates how postfeminist as a critical discourse (Lewis, 2014) is drawn on and activated by Italian entrepreneurs to explain and navigate gendered practices in work, entrepreneurship and society. Focusing on data from 51 interviews with women entrepreneurs, the study addresses the following research questions: (a) what are the discursive strategies used by women to (re)interpret their experiences of entrepreneurship? And (b) how do Italian women mobilise postfeminist ideals to manage contradictory pressures emerging from work and private lives? In attending to these questions, we build on the work of critical entrepreneurship (e.g. Ahl & Marlow, 2012, 2018; Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015, 2016; Marlow, Greene & Coad, 2018) and gender studies scholars (e.g. Adamson, 2017; Gill, 2014; Gill et al., 2017; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2017, 2018; Sørensen, 2017) who have adopted a postfeminist lens to show how women entrepreneurs negotiate contradictory postfeminist pressures of empowerment and tradition to create a space for entrepreneurial action and make sense of their experiences.

While organisation studies (OS) scholars have started to explore the implications of postfeminist discourses to bring to light enduring inequalities in work and organisations (see Kelan, 2009; “Gender, Work and Organization”, vol. 24, No.3; Lewis, et al., 2017, 2018; Pecis & Priola, 2019; Adamson & Kelan, 2019), more empirical research is needed, in particular within the field of entrepreneurship where “a postfeminist perspective is most definitely a novelty” (Ahl & Marlow, 2018: 147)<sup>i</sup>. Furthermore, as Dosekun (2015), Sullivan & Delaney (2017) highlight, the literature on postfeminism has generally avoided transnational considerations, revealing the current gap in knowledge beyond the Anglo-Saxon cultural context/s.

Within the nascent OS literature that mobilises postfeminism, this article offers both theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically it contributes to further theorisations of (postfeminist) femininities in the workplace and in entrepreneurship. It does so by offering a more nuanced

interpretation of postfeminism, as a complex cultural phenomenon, emerged from the interconnections between discourses of entrepreneurial and empowered women, and the persistence of patriarchal traditions within Italian society and workplaces.

Empirically the article demonstrates how postfeminist ideals of the “super(wo)man” and “free choice” manifest themselves in participants’ discursive practices that attempt to resolve contradictory feminist (women’s independence, autonomy and choice) and anti-feminist (traditional division of house-hold labour, reliance on men’s career choices and women’s place in the labour market) tensions emerging from the entanglement of socio-cultural discourses and expectations concerning women’s work. We deliberately call her ‘super(wo)man’ because, while maintaining some feminine aspects, she also embraces, without challenging, traditionally masculine entrepreneurialism.

The analysis reveals how pressures for entrepreneurial success are paradoxical enmeshed with a renewed emphasis on patriarchal traditions, and reproduce postfeminism as a more nuanced cultural discourse. We intend postfeminism as a fluid, sometimes contradictory, set of ideas and ideals about femininity connected to individualist and neoliberal ideologies (Gill, 2007, 2016; Riley et al., 2017). Neoliberalism, with its libertarian ideal of free market, emphasis on individualism, limited government intervention and ownership, in fact, finds its gendered expression through postfeminism (Cairns & Johnston, 2015) and its ideals of self-empowerment, self-transformation and control over one’s body and career.

The article begins by introducing the literature on entrepreneurship as a gendered process embedded in tensions associated to masculine and feminine subject positions (Priola & Brannan, 2009). It continues by reviewing debates on postfeminism in cultural and OS before providing an overview of entrepreneurship in Italy. The methodology section is followed by the analysis of 51 interviews with women entrepreneurs. We conclude with a theorisation of postfeminism as a

'nuanced' concept characterised by globalised and transnational elements, and influenced by national cultures.

## **2 GENDERING ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

Gender is central to conceptualising and understanding entrepreneurship in view of two key facts. First, entrepreneurship activities tend to replicate the social order within which men and women interact and, second, entrepreneurship is a complex pursuit within which masculinities and femininities are entwined, performed and perceived differently by women and men (Lewis, 2014). While research (Bruni et al., 2004b) emphasises that entrepreneurship reflects the masculine symbolic domain of adventure, risk, courage, strong-will and heroic fortitude, it also shows how it is associated to attributes ascribed to femininity, such as patience, interpersonal sensitivity and connectedness (Lewis, 2014). This indicates that while the discourse of entrepreneurship is associated to masculinity, the doing of entrepreneurship involves a gender mobility between masculinities and femininities (Lewis, 2018).

Such gendered complexity, though, is mostly neglected by management research which tend to focus on the gender disadvantage, highlighting comparisons between men and women's enterprises (Federation of small businesses, 2016; Robb & Watson, 2012). More critical scholars emphasise a focus on the normative masculine discourse of entrepreneurship to which women and men tend to subscribe to (Bruni et al., 2004a; Ahl, 2006) or offer feminist conceptual contributions (Clark Muntean & Ozkazanc-Pan, 2015; Calas, Smircich & Bourne, 2009); however limited empirical research analyses the gender complexity of entrepreneurship in practice. Lewis (2013) shows how the doing of entrepreneurship by women business-owners is characterised by a tension between a feminised discourse of difference (doing business differently) and a contrasting masculine discourse of professionalism (being disciplined, doing more and setting high standards). She argues that the women in her study subverted gender boundaries by bringing together the

masculine and the feminine in developing their entrepreneurial identity.

In analysing the complexities of doing entrepreneurship, this study explores women entrepreneurs' accounts of their social and economic pressures as well as the intersection between their personal and work lives. We read the accounts through the lenses of postfeminism to embed these women's experiences within social and cultural discourses.

### **3 UNDERSTANDING POSTFEMINISM**

Postfeminism is a cultural phenomenon that has influenced reconfigurations of gender identities in contemporary western societies (Adkins, 2001); it refers to current views on the entanglement of feminism, femininity and contemporary culture. According to Gill et al. (2017: 230) postfeminism implies an affective set of ideas and ideals, used to “describe the empirical regularities observable in contemporary beliefs about gender”. They identify features of postfeminism as the focus on empowerment, choice and individualism; the repudiation of sexism; notions of make-over and transformation; an emphasis on self-discipline and a resurgence of gender essentialism. These are not definitive, nor beyond contestation but interpretations of patterns of social life. In acknowledging that the meaning, ideological and epistemological positioning, as well as the theoretical credentials of postfeminism continue to be debated and contested, we suggest that a perspective that views postfeminism as a social discourse (rather than as a theoretical position) allows the in-depth understanding of gendered practices as the entanglement of feminist with antifeminist ideas that are present within contemporary discourses (McRobbie, 2004; Lewis et al., 2018).

McRobbie (2009) and Dosekun (2015) argue that postfeminist ideals, and the limited forms of femininity they promote, tend to reinstate western whiteness as standard; however, they also dispute that women of colour are likewise affected by postfeminist discourses. Scholars such as Butler (2013), Turner & Simpson (2018) have shown how women of colour enact postfeminism

in their personal and professional lives, and argue that postfeminist ideals about femininity have been ‘globalised’ and ‘flogged’ across ethnic, racial, geographic and geopolitical contexts through media and consumption. Similarly, Chen (2012) and Gwynne (2013), contend that postfeminist ideals have also relevance for the global south and, in particular for its wealthy pockets. They suggest that influences of postfeminism are evident in how Chinese and Japanese young women, respectively, are represented as celebrating material pleasure and increased sexual agency in the context of global postfeminist rhetoric. Butler (2013: 45) argues that postfeminism is a versatile and pervasive discourse that travels through, and adapts to, ‘cultural, economic, and political shifts while maintaining its core characteristics’.

These studies contend that (middle and upper class) women in different cultures appear to embrace the postfeminist rhetoric of power femininity, self-transformation and agency. However, it is not clear how ‘their national or local feminist histories’ are managed ‘to make sense of their personal experience of pervasive sexism in critical feminist terms’ (Turner & Simpson, 2018: 48). We argue that further work is needed to understand how postfeminism adapts and is remodelled by specific social and cultural contexts.

### **3.1 Postfeminism and Entrepreneurship**

The entrepreneurship discourse runs parallel to the development of neoliberal policies in most western countries (Ahl & Marlow, 2018). It is noteworthy to observe that postfeminist reconfigurations of femininities in organisations tend to reproduce neoliberal and patriarchal practices (Liu, 2019). As Lewis (2014: 1851) suggests, many of the important features of postfeminism capture the neoliberal tensions between feminism (as women’s achievements in the masculine world of work) and femininity (as feminised behaviours and domestic responsibilities).

As Ahl and Marlow (2018) argue, recent discourse and policies concerning women’s entrepreneurship might be characterised as postfeminist in that they celebrate empowerment,

individual agency and choice. Women's entrepreneurship discourse "is built on the notion that a woman can build her own bright future by starting a business. It assumes that all structural barriers have been removed and that women are now free to actualise themselves and to make money through entrepreneurship" (p. 154). They contend, instead, that the promises of a postfeminist rhetoric and the few positive changes in women's entrepreneurship (i.e. the increase in number) have not corresponded to the erosion of gendered barriers, nor they have helped women to create more successful enterprises; instead, they are associated to the extortion of greater efforts from individual women to drive achievements through self-transformation rather than social transformation.

Within neoliberal capitalist systems, dominant representations of the feminine entrepreneurial subject are often based on the (manageable) balance between several aspects of women's lives. As revealed by Adamson (2017: 324), a balanced femininity is required to achieve success in organisations, as women "reclaim and embrace aspects of their femininity, [...] careful to not "overdo" each of these". In studying biographical accounts of women business leaders, she highlights that a particular way of balancing femininity -i.e. market-oriented, economically efficient and calculated- is constructed as more successful than others, and that this balancing act is underpinned by postfeminist discourses of choice, empowerment, self-discipline and personal responsibility. Similarly, Lewis (2018) argues that, in the world of work, the femininities that are valued the most embrace masculine and feminine elements simultaneously and that the working mother, who "does it all" "receive the most cultural validation within a postfeminist gender regime" (p. 39).

As a dominant discourse, postfeminism addresses gender inequality through self-transformation, by enticing women to empower and change themselves, thus leaving the current gendered status unchallenged. As Adamson and Kelan (2019) contend, successful women recognise the existing



gender difficulties at work but feel that by being confident, demonstrating courage and perseverance, and by being in control of all aspects of their lives (work, family, self), they can manage and overcome gendered barriers. Reflecting neoliberalism, postfeminism reframes gendered political and economic obstacles as personal difficulties, and places the responsibility for action on the individual.

Complicated and contradictory contemporary representations of gender identities, clearly and simultaneously, repudiate as well as reinforce traditional gender norms and subjectivities in work as well as in society. The empirical analysis that follows explores constructions of 'feminine' entrepreneurship within the Italian context in order to theorise postfeminism as a complex and nuanced concept, shaped by the specific socio-cultural national context.

#### **4 RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Women's position in the Italian society and labour market remains subordinate to that of men, as evidenced by the country's lowest gender equality index in the EU (EIGE, 2019, in Priola & Pecis, 2020), due to a low female labour participation (at 56.2% compared to the EU28 average of 68.3%) and high female unemployment, particularly among young women up to the age of 24 (34.8%). This is exacerbated by one of the lowest public spending on families in the EU, with scarce public children and dependent adults care services. The enduring patriarchal culture is associated to a highly imbalanced division of family work, with persistent expectations that continue to construct reproductive work as woman's work (De Simone & Priola, 2015).

In relation to entrepreneurship, in Italy in 2019 over 1.3 million enterprises were owned by women (1,340,580), equivalent to 21.95% of the total number of enterprises and contributing a third of the total small business economy. Female entrepreneurship is growing at a higher rate than the general enterprise growth (women entrepreneurs are approximately 17% of all women in the labour market), as women are attracted to self-employment due to the lack of other employment

opportunities as well as the greater flexibility that self-employment appears to offer (Osservatorio sull'imprenditoria femminile, 2020). The sectors where women entrepreneurs are mostly represented are: services (51.10%); health and social care (37.76%); education (30.76%); activities of accommodation and catering services (29.40%); agriculture (28.42%); business-to-business services (26.38%) and retail (23.43%). The less popular sectors for women entrepreneurs are: industry, transport, logistics and warehousing, metal engineering and construction. Women entrepreneurs in Italy are concentrated in the age group of 'under 40' and have an education level higher than men entrepreneurs (20.8% have higher education qualifications versus 16.1% of men). Geographically, the south of Italy (where this research was conducted) has the largest presence of women entrepreneurs, with 23.64% of women-owned businesses, compared to a national average of 21.95%.

## **5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **5.1 Data collection**

The study is based on the analysis of 51 biographical, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with women entrepreneurs and was conducted in the south of Italy between 2011 and 2015. Participants were recruited via the Association of Women Entrepreneurs and Company Leaders (AIDDA). The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The socio-demographic profile of participants was eclectic, their age ranged between 25 and 77 years; 90% were married or cohabiting and 86% had children (two on average) and 33% had a university degree. Most businesses were well established with an average female ownership lasting 20 years (minimum 2 and maximum 51 years). Organisation size varied, with 61% characterised as micro enterprises (employee number <10) and 39% as SMEs, reflecting the region's economy. They operated in a variety of sectors: 23.5% service sector; 21.6% retail; 13.7% tourism; 11.8% handicraft; 9.8% manufacturing; 7.8% farming; 5.9% health and social services and 5.9%

construction.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Interviews topics covered included: work and educational background, reasons for becoming self-employed, routes into and experiences of self-employment, personal and professional challenges, being a woman entrepreneur and work relationships.

## **5.2 Data Analysis**

The analysis favoured an understanding of entrepreneurship as embedded within specific discursive elements that entangle it to wider cultural and social practices. Through social discourse, women define and explain their roles, position themselves and give meaning to their practices. Discourse analysis (Gill, 1996) was used to reconnect the interpretative repertoires emerged in the data to wider postfeminist discourses and to socially and historically significant episteme<sup>ii</sup> characterising the national culture. Specifically, during the data analysis we progressed through different phases, first we worked independently in order to identify interpretative repertoires, describing specific patterns in the data. Interpretative repertoires are clusters of terms organized around a central metaphor, used with grammatical regularity (Wiggins & Potter, 2008), they are not defined by specific words or phrases, but by a textual constellation that refers to a specific theme (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). We considered these repertoires the patterns of explanations on which women entrepreneurs drew on to interpret their experiences, and which are embedded in broader discourses of gender and entrepreneurship. In the second phase we discussed together our individual repertoires and agreed their denomination as well as how they reconnected to wider discourses. The different stages of analysis were iterative, characterised by both individual analysis and comparisons between the authors.

We identified four interpretative repertoires: Maintaining control as a balancing act; Grandparents

as carers supporting the family and the enterprise; The ‘freedom’ to choose self-employment; ‘Personal’ choice as a family matter. These are reconnected to postfeminist discourses of the ‘superwoman’ and her ‘free choice’ (Adamson & Kelan, 2019; Gill et al., 2017; Ronen, 2018). These two discourses and the emerging repertoires are analysed and embedded within the broader socio-historical-institutional context in the two sections below.

## **6 THE WOMAN ENTREPRENEUR AS A “SUPER(WO)MAN”**

This section analyses two of the interpretive repertoires identified in the data: the first refers to the need for participants to keep under control all aspects of their life (work, house, dependants); while the second refers to the role of extended families in providing care support to help them surmount gendered barriers and prioritise business needs. The analysis shows how these repertoires are reconnected to the (post)feminist discourse of the super(wo)man. It also explores the contradictions of the super(wo)man discourse, showing how this archetype is remodelled by patriarchal pressures typical of the Italian society.

### **6.1 Maintaining control as a balancing act**

The need to balance the pressures of the business with the family demands was a recurrent theme emerged in the interviews. All interviewees emphasized that balancing family and work remains a barrier to the management and expansion of the business. While the work-family balance of women workers has been widely investigated in term of conflict and/or resource (e.g. Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014), the systemic and enduring barriers experienced by contemporary women entrepreneurs remains something to be managed by the individual. In echoing the postfeminist discourse of the businesswoman as a hero (Adamson & Kelan, 2019), many of the participants (approximately four-fifth) suggest that such barriers can be surmounted if women learn to effectively plan and manage the various family duties alongside their work commitments. The focus of such repertoire remains on the super(wo)man who ‘manages it all’ through good

organisation skills.

*“Women manage their various activities better than men because they reconcile work, house and all family problems, which are never ignored or undermined. Women manage all these aspects equally well”.* (Felce)

Felce proposes a good “postfeminist subject” (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009) able to successfully balance work, house and family. Like many of the participants, she reiterates a recent finding showing that 82% of Italian women and men believe that women are more capable of caring for children than men (Profeta & Ferrario, 2020). In doing so, she overlooks any opportunity to challenge the dominant gender order and the distribution of household labour (De Simone et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Felce reproduces the gender essentialist discourse widely recognised in the Italian society, whereby gender differences are constructed as naturally pertinent to biological sex. The emphasis on agency, individualism and gender essentialism reflects the features of a postfeminist discourse (Gill, 2007; Ronen, 2018), according to which (super)women manage to keep control over both work and family domains, as illustrated below:

*“It is a matter of mental organisation as well as organising the various tasks. Possibly it is necessary to believe that neither work, nor family have to absorb all your effort. You need balance, one does not exclude the other, though it is difficult, and you need to get the help needed. [...] I have a person who takes care of my house so that, in the afternoon, I have some time to spend with the children and help them with their school-work”* (Valeria).

*“This is a job that has no fixed hours. You just have to take care of your family commitments alongside work”* (Lucia).

These extracts reproduce a rhetoric of self-control according to which the businesswoman has control over all aspects of her life: work, house, children, partner. Valeria and Lucia (re)construct the “super(wo)man” as exceptional, with great organising skills that allow her to manage work or family, without being completely absorbed by one or the other. Valeria presents a picture in which she is in control of all her activities, including what type of specific childcare she focuses on (i.e. helping her kids with the homework). Simultaneously she also downplays the infrastructure (i.e. domestic help) that enables her to choose to ‘do’ work and childcare, almost taking for granted that anyone can make this type of choice (Negra, 2009). She also does not consider herself to be a privileged woman, as a white, middle-class entrepreneur, with the economic resources to pay for domestic help in order to maintain control over other activities (Adamson & Kelan, 2019).

Reproducing the super(wo)man ideal, the challenge of these entrepreneurs is mainly with themselves, with their own personal obstacles, rather than with the inequalities of the system. An interesting aspect associated to the discourse of the super(wo)man, as embedded within the Italian context, is her acceptance of the futility of an alternative gender order to patriarchy and the law of the father. In the Italian society the traditional division of household labour remains the basis for the participation of men and women to family life (Meisenbach, 2010). This is maintained by the essentialist discourse, alluded to in the extracts, of gender differences as ‘natural’, with women ‘naturally’ more caring than men and better at multi-tasking. This essentialist view of gender maintains specific constructions of ‘Italian’ masculinity(ies) and femininity(ies) (Pozzo, 2013). As a consequence, these women overburden themselves and miss the opportunity to challenge the dominant gender order to rebalance the distribution of housework.

Felce, Lucia and Valeria reproduce the link between patriarchal interpretations of life and interpretations of the role of women as in-between entrepreneurship and family. In doing so they exclude men from discourses concerning reproductive work, and prioritize motherhood as

‘natural’ (Sørensen, 2017). This rhetoric (re)positions a globalised view of women empowerment within Italian patriarchy; the added nuance to this postfeminist discourse of empowerment is the full exoneration of men from the responsibility of reproductive work, and the (re)valuing of their power outside the boundaries of the house. Public debates in the country have appealed to a ‘natural order’ of parenthood (Lasio et al., 2019), founded on dichotomous gender and restrictive standards of motherhood and parenting (Lasio & Serri, 2019). These dominant discourses, that broadly characterize Italian society, are strengthened by enduring influences of the Catholic Church on political processes that have repetitively prevented legal initiatives on sexual and gender equality from being implemented in the country (Priola et al., 2018). Cultural representations of conflicting discourses become part of a postfeminist common sense, which, according to Gill et al. (2017: 241), “simultaneously recognizes feminist insights yet repudiates the need for change, exculpating men and organisations and locating responsibility with women”.

## **6.2 Grandparents as carers supporting the family and the enterprise**

The women interviewed propose several arguments in support of a model entrepreneur who is autonomous and self-determined, consistent with the ideal neoliberal subject who values the market and sacrifices the family for the business (Gill, 2007, 2016; Riley et al, 2017). The super(wo)man, in fact, is first and foremost a business (wo)man who reiterates the business orientation of the entrepreneurial subject (feminine and or masculine), and for whom the care of the family remains a personal challenge:

*“We don’t spend much time together, in fact we don’t see each other much because I am always here at work. I have missed so much about my daughter’s life, I have missed the first time she walked, the first meals that my mother gave her. I miss all these things but that’s the reality, it happens. I just keep going with fatigue and sacrifices.” (Lina)*

The embedded assumptions of empowerment and personal responsibility shifts -in postfeminist

terms- attention from the responsibility of the system to the responsibilities of the individual woman. While most of these women challenge the concept of intensive mothering - which requires that most of the women's time is spent with children - they do not challenge the patriarchal organisation of the 'Italian' family, but share reproductive work with grandparents (i.e. childcare) and paid housekeepers (Sørensen, 2017). Within a capitalist logic in which the increase of female occupation is represented as an advancement of gender rights, Italian patriarchy remains evident in the lack of power that women have in the public sphere (see Priola & Pecis, 2020) and the misogynistic exploitation of women's labour (e.g. as precarious workers) masqueraded as feminist conquest (Casalini, 2011). According to a capitalist, neoliberal logic, participants accomplish a postfeminist entrepreneurial narration through the separation between the business (public) and the home/family (private). By emphasising the intrinsic work-family conflict as a personal (private) struggle, they are able to construct a (public) entrepreneurial narrative that leaves undisturbed any patriarchal consideration.

*“Grandparent had an important role in my life and my work because I had my father who used to go to pick up my son at kindergarten and school. Also, when there was a problem at school, he was always available, grandparents have been very important”*  
(Felce, 58)

*“Initially there were the grandparents and I have been lucky with that, they looked after one and then the other girl too”* (Giulia, 42)

*“Now grandmother is there, then he will go to pre-school”* (Laura)

The above extracts show that even when gender inequalities are difficult to deny, some women construct them as something easily handled (Gill et al., 2017). Felce, Giulia and Laura minimize the difficulty to reconcile work and family, focusing on seemingly accessible solutions (grandparents and pre-school) and accepting the burden of house and family care as a natural



occurrence (De Simone & Priola, 2015; Lyonette & Crompton, 2015). These solutions rely on individual actions, are depoliticised and follow gender conforming expectations. Men's position(ing) in relation to reproductive work is rarely questioned, reinforcing the traditional patriarchal organisation of the family as natural.

This is a crucial element that distinguishes the Italian context from north European cultures where constructions of 'natural femininities' remain contested and the wider family support might be less available. In Italy the provision of early years educations (up to three years of age) is limited, and grandparents are often 'implicit partners' in childcare (Giovannini, 2013). There are several factors, specific to the Italian context, that contribute to the reliance on the extended family for support. The institution of the family, also leveraged by the Catholic ideology, continues to maintain a key role in people's lives as many women (and men) workers seek support from grandparents: an easily available resource that strengthens the dominant morality and maintain the hegemonic gender order. Attempts to move on from a gender essentialist ideology have been delegitimised by the influence of the Vatican on the country's politics and, in particular, on right-wings parties, with their discursive emphasis on the traditional family<sup>iii</sup>, as a natural institution based on the heterosexual marriage (Bernini, 2008; Garbagnoli, 2014).

## **7 "FREE CHOICE" AS A POSTFEMINIST IDEAL**

This section analyses the last two interpretive repertoires identified in the data. Both are concerned with the notion of personal choice as independent from structural and social constraints. Typically postfeminist, the discourse of 'free choice' emphasises the fact that women can choose determined career paths and overcome barriers regardless of gender, race, class, age and economic forms of oppression. In the Italian context this discourse is heavily entangled with socio-economic aspects, patriarchalism and the institution of the family.

### **7.1 The 'freedom' to choose self-employment**

An interesting element that emerged from the interviews is concerned with the ways in which participants discuss their choice to become entrepreneurs. These women all share a strong drive to work independently, however the origin of this is placed in either a personal career project or in the socio-economic conditions. While for approximately three quarters of the interviewees, the enterprise was the result of a desire to be one's own boss, for some it was an alternative to employment, when this was not fulfilling or satisfactory. Even in such cases, however, self-employment was still presented as a free choice, as these women tended to avoid engaging with the socio-economic and cultural structures that affected their opportunities to have successful careers as employees.

*“I have always had a passion for art and craftwork, but I studied social work. [...] My passion for ceramic work started as a hobby. [...] I started doing small exhibitions and realised that there was a market for my ceramics. That pushed me to apply for funding [...] and for the first time I was the owner of my career [...] I had to set up the lab as well as the shop, [...] Yes I have the shop in this town, but I am an artisan and I can move my work. During the year I do several exhibitions in the region, I don't remain within the work premises. I am free to move as my enterprise is not a commercial venture, it's much more than that.” (Idra)*

Idra constructs 'free choice' as she transforms her hobby and passion into a personal career project, reading in the interests of early customers a possibility for enterprise. From someone for whom work was a means of sustenance, she became the owner of her own destiny, seeking funding and setting up her ceramic laboratory and shop. Idra presents herself as self-reliant, an agent who transform job insecurity into an opportunity for fulfilment and success. She is in charge of her enterprise and what it produces, but also of her movement between the laboratory and the shop. Her subject position as entrepreneur (and its stable life anchored to the shop) sustains her position

as artist (and its nomadic life of exhibitions) while she moves between these two ‘lives’. Idra’s choice is a free choice up to a point, as we wonder whether she would have had the determination to pursue her passion had she found employment as a social worker earlier in life. Embedding this analysis within the socio-economic context of the country, we believe that the high levels of unemployment and the sexist culture that limits women’s career opportunities and advancement (Pecis & Priola, 2019), can remodel self-employment as the choice for accomplishing one’s ambitions. This is also evident in the following extract.

*When I finished school I would have loved to be a beautician but with no experience or qualification I went into teaching dance as I was a good dancer. My family lent me some money to start a small dance school, but as it became profitable I started to do beauty courses. I left the dance school after two years and went to work in a beauty centre. I then decided to set up on my own and do what I have always wanted to do. My first beauty centre went very well and then I opened a second. [...] I have done courses such as in communication and marketing and these helped me to expand and become successful.” (Stella).*

Stella’s narrative reproduces the ideals of empowerment, individual agency and free choice. She positions herself at the centre of her career project, with an early vision and desire to work in the beauty sector. She is also realist and plans her achievements by exploiting what she is good at, at any given time (i.e. dance). Similarly to Idra, Stella claims her position of power within her social context, but does not acknowledge the constraints of her environment; she buys into a discourse in which women are empowered to choose their career (with the financial help of family) and make the most of their possibilities of success, as privileged subject of change (McRobbie, 2007). However, they reproduce an ideal which does not always correspond to the realities of many Italian women who, despite high level of education and skills, are confined to precarious positions,

generally subordinate to men (Murgia & Pulignano, 2016).

*“I decided to open a supermarket. I didn’t want to keep a small shop but wanted to grow it and now I have the biggest supermarket in the town where I live. But, I also wanted to move beyond the supermarket sector and took the initiative to travel and see what ideas I could bring back in order to progress; I wanted to create something bigger and decided to move into the hospitality sector and today I have three hotels as well as the shop.”* (Maria).

*“When this service began nobody knew it existed; I have invented and programmed every service; I have searched what the client needed. I had exchanges with others, I travelled, [...] so I proposed original and useful products in the marketplace”.* (Sabina).

Through language, Maria and Sabina construct their own subjectivities as in line with wider neoliberal imperatives of self-control and determination. The entrepreneurial woman is a good neoliberal subject because she can apply herself productively to the business (Adamson, 2017), balancing different values with a focus on growth, expansion (to have the biggest supermarket), differentiation (moving into the hospitality sector) and a logic of efficiency and originality (new and useful products). “The idea of women choosing on the basis of their own desires is present in most of the representations of exceptional women” (Sørensen, 2017: 306) and supports a postfeminist discourse that pushes women to take on agentic traits (Gill, 2007), as evident in the words of the interviewees: *“I realise [...] I decided [...] I have invented and programmed [...] I have searched [...] I had exchanges with others [...] I travelled [...] I proposed original and useful products [...]”*. While the discourse of free choice among Italian women entrepreneurs reproduces similar meanings to what identified in the Anglo-Saxon literature, what participants do not consider is that their choice is often motivated by the existent power imbalance between men and

women in the Italian job market and wider society. In a reality characterised by one of the highest gender gaps in the EU in relation to unemployment, earnings and leadership positions (Cutillo & Centra, 2017), representing themselves in positions of control allow participants to differentiate themselves from the many precarious women workers.

## 7.2 'Personal' choice as a family matter

Evidences of empowerment and personal choice are often repositioned by participants within specific Italian institutions. One's family is often presented as determinant in the self-employed's choice - whether it is the partner's unemployment or the need to join the family business. Personal choice and family needs are entwined in these women's language to produce a subject who is never passive, but empowered -albeit reliant on the family. Lucia says:

*"[...] I worked in an office for ten years, my husband used to work in the restaurant and hospitality industry and had to spend time away. I then decided to leave my job and follow him and his job. We emigrated and had new experiences that we decided to bring back to the local region [...] We wanted to bring innovation to the regional traditions, within the respect of the local products, so we opened a restaurant. I started to focus on the desserts, initially for the restaurant, then I set it up as a separate business". (Lucia)*

The rhetoric of choice is here reproduced in the image of a woman in transition from a passive to an active subject (Gill, 2007). Lucia assumes the role of active subject when she decides to leave her job; subsequently she moves to a passive position as the follower of her husband, before moving again to be an active subject setting up her separate business. This balancing act between active and passive femininities allows Lucia (and others as shown below) to reproduce a new vantage point, hovering between the traditional role of the good Italian wife and that of the empowered entrepreneur. It also reproduces a more nuanced postfeminist discourse as embedded

in the Italian family tradition, which remains at the heart of individual and social lives in the country, providing emotional and financial support to individuals and forming the basis of their social circle.

While several authors have discussed the multifaceted motivations of self-employment (e.g. Mallon & Cohen, 2001; Patterson & Mavin, 2009), what emerges from these women's motivations is the 'double entanglement' between empowerment and traditions (McRobbie, 2004). In Italy, female unemployment and the glass ceiling are harsh realities, in the private as well as the public sector (Pecis & Priola, 2019); the construction of self-employment as a free choice masks employment difficulties or the lack of career advancement. Furthermore, it obscures the specific problematic embedded in the historical and social relations that have made certain enterprises symbolically more acceptable for women than for men (see Broadbridge, 2010), or more acceptable for those women whose immediate family already owned a business (Gupta et al., 2009).

*"I've married very young and when my husband emigrated to another Italian region to try to make more money, I decided to open a supermarket." (Maria).*

*"In my family we are land-owners and I thought it was only right to appreciate the land and to develop it and make it into a work opportunity. Even if I come from a family of farmers, who have always worked the land, it was me who decided to start our enterprise and, with my husband, we bought more land and invested in oil and wine making" (Valeria)*

In these extracts, discourses of individualism, choice, determination and empowerment sit alongside the acceptance of traditional gender roles (e.g. I started the business when my husband emigrated, I followed my husband and his job). Through their language Lucia, Maria and Valeria position themselves as empowered and successful entrepreneurs; however they also link their

choices to the institution of the family and represent themselves as good wives, fitting within the cultural, social and economic conditions that characterise women's position within the Italian society. Postfeminism here reproduces new inequalities by redrafting gender hierarchies through the double entanglement of feminist pressures (financial independence and empowerment) with cultural traditions (family pressures) (McRobbie, 2009). The Italian postfeminist woman does not openly challenge the status quo, neither threatens to subvert the gender order. Instead, she attempts to overcome them within the boundaries of social expectations.

*One time I received a phone call from a man from a mountain village, he asked to talk with my husband about a budget for a floor; he didn't tolerate to talk with a woman. I slowly convinced him with my good ways, he didn't accept that a woman could give him advice about a floor. He wanted only men, but I have learned to deal with these men with good manners, talking about the products and slowly showing that I know my business very well" (Enrica).*

While many of the interviewees reproduce a rhetoric of confidence, it becomes clear that in their interactions with the business world they constantly need to reposition themselves as entrepreneurs and (gently) reject others' positioning of them as wives. To be recognised in their role of businesswomen, they regularly need to demonstrate their competencies and specialist knowledge. As shown in Enrica's words, they are also aware of the efforts needed to demonstrate their value, in particular, in more masculine sectors. These women recognise the existence of gender barriers, but try to overcome them from within the patriarchy. The Italian postfeminist subject is a self-empowered woman, who softens the strong influence of patriarchal structures and proposes a gentle criticism (McRobbie, 2009); she is not an argumentative radical, but softly and appropriately (i.e. with 'feminine good manners') addresses gender oppression.

## **8 CONCLUSIVE DISCUSSION**

This study has examined how women entrepreneurs (re)interpret their experiences through the mobilisation of postfeminist discourses as embedded in the Italian context. It advances current debates (e.g. Gill et al., 2017; Lewis, 2014; Sørensen, 2017) by showing how specific postfeminist ideals focusing on women's empowerment, agency and responsibility are renegotiated within the Italian context to reproduce a more nuanced postfeminist discourse. Additionally, the study shows how these ideals obfuscate inequalities and contribute to sustain patriarchy in Italy.

Our findings show that the postfeminist ideals of the “super(wo)man” and “free choice” are reproduced in the participants' discursive practices in contradictory ways and that such ways reflect the specificities of the Italian culture. The analysis shows that the tensions between feminist (empowerment, independence, choice) and anti-feminist (traditional division of household labour, job precarity, entrepreneurial choice dependent on men's careers) pressures are present in the narratives concerning women's career choices and the strategies women use to balance work and family. As also highlighted in the literature on postfeminism, these tensions reposition women entrepreneurs in line with neoliberal principles of individual freedom and work empowerment and contribute to maintain gender inequalities and social immobility. Confirming what already evidenced by research on women executives (Adamson & Kelan, 2019), this study shows how representations of the independent super(wo)man, who manages with success her business and her family, and is ‘free’ to choose her career, restrict women's (and men) possibilities to engage with more structural social and organisational changes.

However, in showing how postfeminist discourses of the super(wo)man and the rhetoric of choice are shaped by the socio-historical-institutional context, this study highlights the existence of an alternative space between postfeminist discourses and Italian patriarchal traditions. We argue that such space allows these women entrepreneurs to negotiate the conflicts and restrictions resulting from cultural traditions, and, as a consequence, to achieve personal gains in relation to work



satisfaction and entrepreneurial success. We argue that their reliance on the extended family, as a source of support, allows them to reinterpret empowerment and free choice in ways that leaves undisturbed the masculine trope of reproductive work as woman's work. Thus, familiar ties, patriarchal traditions and a precarious job market not only affect women's choices and opportunities, but also their positioning within conceptualisations of empowerment and social expectations. These cultural traditions, in fact, contribute to produce a more nuanced reconceptualization of postfeminism which, while maintaining its core features, it is remodelled to fit the Italian cultural and economic context. Demonstrating the entanglement of entrepreneurship practices with postfeminist ideals associated to the 'super(wo)man' and her 'free choices', the study shows how postfeminism is constructed as a nuanced discourse that facilitates the re-interpretation of the super(wo)man archetype through cultural traditions founded on patriarchy.

This study reveals how the postfeminist entrepreneur is represented as autonomous, agentic, and determined; nevertheless, her choices, in both work and personal domains, remained anchored to gendered traditions embedded in the local culture and lack any political or social motive for change (McRobbie, 2004). The lack of political determination, entwined with enduring patriarchal institutions, such as the traditional family, produce contradictory actions evident in the coexistence of feminist and antifeminist practices (Gill, 2007). In fact, while participants contribute by bringing the feminine into the entrepreneurial discourse, they also leave unquestioned the division of household labour typical of the Italian society, accepting the model of the male breadwinner as the basis for the participation of men and women to family life (Meisenbach, 2010). Despite women's economic successes, the hegemonic patriarchal culture of the Italian society continues to act undisturbed and, through a gender essentialist discourse that legitimises the power relationship between men and women (Ronen, 2018; Pecis & Priola, 2019), it maintains its core features. The deceptively empowering façade of the postfeminist ideals is evident in how our participants

positioned themselves in relation to their male partners. In fact, it is interesting to note that while they position their choices as independent, following cultural expectations, they paradoxically present their choices as subordinate to their partners' careers.

The archetype of the entrepreneur as a 'super(wo)man' differs from the postfeminist 'hero' reported in the literature (Morgan, 1992) because she does not excel at everything, rather she keeps everything under her control, feeling the burden while the kids are young and looking at a time when work can become, again, a priority. Our super(wo)man sacrifices the family for her entrepreneurial venture, as a good neoliberal subject; however, she also delegates the care of her children to the grandparents, in respect of Italian traditions, which view the extended family as the partner in childcare. Such institution allows women to embrace aspects of postfeminism as a globalised discourse, and to reproduce cultural patriarchal practices which exonerate men from reproductive responsibilities. In this way, these women access representations of empowerment and independence, while remaining reliant on the extended family as a source of support. The institution of the family, thus, permits these women to position themselves as independent neoliberal subjects, while, paradoxically, remaining dependent on traditional gender roles. It also serves the Italian postfeminist super(wo)man to fulfil entrepreneurial ambitions, while suppressing the need for radical political action.

Paradoxically, the traditional family informs the ideal of free choice because it allows women to frame their behaviours towards feminism *as well as* towards traditional gender roles, freeing men from household commitments (Sullivan & Delaney, 2017). In managing the balance between work and family, and in seeking support from the extended family (or paid help), these women depoliticise gender inequalities and free society from addressing the current gendered regime.

As suggested by other scholars (e.g. Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015), postfeminism is a cultural discourse that travels across nations and cultures and can easily incorporate socio-cultural

differences. The postfeminism that emerge in this study is, thus, moulded by the Italian context in specific ways. In fact, postfeminist ideals allow women to feel empowered in choosing to set up and manage their own business, while also permitting the accommodation of their partners and family's needs, in keeping with the institution of the traditional family, which remains dominant in Italy. This contributes to reify the concept of 'natural femininities', which is a founding pillar of the Catholic ideology, as well as a feature of postfeminism.

On a practical level, this study highlights the need to develop an infrastructure of coherent and comprehensive family-friendly policies, and the provision of diverse and affordable childcare services, to support women's labour market participation and advancement, as either employees or business-owners (and avoiding the overreliance on family members). This should be complemented by cultural changes that address the enduring patriarchal view of reproductive work as women's work, widely shared by Italian men and women alike (Profeta & Ferrario, 2020).

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**Table 1 Research Participants**

<b>Business Sector</b>	<b>N. of Interviewees</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Age</b>
<b>Services</b>	12	Mirtilla	46
		Viola	44
		Ilenia	43
		Lena	33
		Margherita	54
		Barbara	60
		Dalia	47
		Violetta	43
		Bigia	31
		Erica	64
		Stella	45
		Ginevra	38
<b>Retail</b>	11	Lara	32
		Pamela	67
		Angela	36
		Artemisa	61
		Lina	52
		Laura	32
		Michela	64
		Serena	46
		Enrica	53
		Gigliola	49
		Silvia	25
<b>Turism</b>	6	Gemma	45
		Maria	77
		Luna	49
		Ornella	30
		Orsola	71
		Rosa	46
<b>Handicraft</b>	7	Lucia	48
		Giulia	42
		Idra	42
		Anna	68
		Lira	47
		Virginia	67
		Felce	58
<b>Manufacture</b>	5	Alessia	64
		Carmela	73
		Gianna	30
		Pina	37
		Paola	45
<b>Farming</b>	4	Andromeda	51
		Altea	38
		Lilli	37
		Valeria	44
<b>Health and Social Services</b>	3	Carla	43
		Patrizia	51
		Delfina	62
<b>Construction</b>	3	Cecilia	67
		Manuela	67
		Sabina	61

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<sup>ii</sup> The concept of episteme refers to knowledge as ‘the justified true belief’, or ‘the historical a priori’, which ‘makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as ‘scientific’ Foucault (1980: 197).

<sup>iii</sup> Several rallies and protests called ‘Family Day’, have been organised since 2007 by catholic associations and groups, against legislation that proposed the extension of the rights of married couples to co-habiting heterosexual and homosexual couples.