

## **Female entrepreneurship and the management of business and domestic roles: Motivations, expectations and realities**

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Whilst some women are motivated to establish entrepreneurial ventures by factors which are similar to those of their male counterparts (including a desire for independence and financial gain), unlike the majority of men, a sizeable number choose entrepreneurship to balance work responsibilities and earning potential with domestic/familial commitments. Despite growing numbers of women citing flexibility and childcare obligations as strong motivations for starting a business relatively little attention has been paid to exploring their motivations, expectations and actual experiences of entrepreneurship, and the extent to which entrepreneurship really offers an improved work/family 'balance'. This paper presents findings of exploratory, qualitative research conducted in Northern Ireland, which focused upon the entrepreneurial journeys of 14 women as they established and managed their ventures, whilst balancing domestic/familial demands. Drawing upon information-rich evidence from in-depth interviews, insights are presented into their motivations and expectations of what entrepreneurship would offer, and the realities of their experience.

**Keywords:** female entrepreneurship; new venture creation; work–life balance; motivations; expectations

### **1. Introduction**

Despite gradual changes in society, as women's roles have altered to include improved access to higher education, employment, political empowerment and economic independence, there remains a persistent gender asymmetry (Schindehutte, Morris, and Brennan 2003). Although women may have made significant strides towards sexual equality, in areas such as education and the workplace, their position as the family mainstay, in terms of parenting and homemaking, remains relatively unchanged (Winn 2004).

The time and energy resources required for playing a domestic, caring role often conflict with the demands of developing an effective executive career (Marlow 1997). The corporate ladder, particularly to board of director level, typically, dictates working long hours, with an individual demonstration of personal ambition and a

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committed loyalty to the firm (Daily, Certo, and Dalton 1999). In the executive world, women have cited exclusion from male-dominated networks, a lack of appropriate role models and mentor figures and a paucity of management experience as major barriers to their advancement up the corporate ranks (Knouse and Webb 2001; Robinson and Stubberud 2009). Large companies may offer options in an attempt to offset many of the conflicts inherent in conventional nine-to-five office routines, with flexible hours or home-office being just two, but research shows that family life has a dramatic impact on the progress of female executives with young children: 'As guilt and stress outstrip the benefits of income and prestige, women with young children are increasingly leaving the workforce to become full-time mothers . . . as the demands of corporate life impinge on the quality and quantity of family time' (Winn 2004, 144). Some women choose not to return to corporate life preferring instead to establish their own business, in the expectation that it will offer a better balance between work and family.

Whilst women, whether from corporate or non-corporate backgrounds, enter the entrepreneurial forum with a range of expectations, Winn (2004, 151) considers that many of these are unrealistic: 'we need to understand the nature and address the factors that are critical for women to succeed in independent business and to present a more realistic picture of what starting a new business entails'.

Set against this background, the research reported here explores the motivations, expectations and realities which women experience with respect to the impact of business ownership on how they balance professional and domestic roles. Using a qualitative, two-stage, interview-based methodology, the work provides insights into the entrepreneurial journeys of 14 women in Northern Ireland as they established and managed their ventures, whilst balancing professional and personal demands. Rich insights are provided into their positive and negative motivations, their expectations and the realities of their experience. Findings of this research, in this relatively unexplored field, have implications for female entrepreneurs seeking to establish and grow new ventures, educators/trainers seeking to help women develop competencies and realistic expectations for successful venture creation and management, and for those in agencies working to support more women to view venturing as a viable/desirable career.

## **2. Female entrepreneurship: Motivations, expectations and realities**

### **2.1. *Levels and sectors of engagement***

Although men are more likely to start and run their own business, government agencies in many countries are increasing their efforts to encourage more women to engage in entrepreneurship (Reynolds et al. 2004). In the USA, there are now more than 6.2 million privately held, women-owned firms (Wilson, Marlino, and Kickul 2004), and the number and proportion of women-owned firms are increasing. In Northern Ireland, the location of this research, only 2.1% of women are entrepreneurs and they are four times less likely than men to engage in entrepreneurship (Hart 2007), a much lower proportion than in the UK and Ireland as a whole, where men are two to three times more likely to establish a new venture than women (O'Reilly and Hart 2003). Studies generally indicate that women are well-represented in areas seen as traditionally female, such as retail, but are still significantly underrepresented in others perceived as male-dominated, such as

science, engineering and technology (Allen et al. 2008; Anna et al. 2000; Hampton, Cooper, and McGowan 2009; Mayer 2006).

## **2.2. Motivations: Push and pull factors**

Davis and Long (1999) demonstrate that to start an entrepreneurial firm, women and men have, essentially, the same critical needs: innovative ideas, entrepreneurial personality characteristics, business plans and long-term strategies. While the motivations of some female entrepreneurs may be similar to their male counterparts, including a desire for independence and financial gain, there is an argument that large numbers of women, unlike men, choose to start a business to balance work responsibilities and earning potential with domestic and familial responsibilities (Marlow and Strange 1994; Mattis 2004).

Although more women are citing flexibility and childcare obligations as a strong motivation for taking the steps to establish and build a business (Mattis 2004), only limited research has explored the expectations which female entrepreneurs have for an improved work–family balance and reflected on their actual experiences (Carter and Shaw 2006; Dex and Scheible 2001; Lewis 2006; Rouse and Kitching 2006; Williams 2004). Research on work–life balance has focused more on the work–role/family conflict experiences of, particularly female, employees (Grönlund 2007; Shelton 2006) and, specifically, on the experiences of women and men within large private and public sector organizations (Desrochers and Sargent 2004; Guillaume and Pochic 2007; Mayrhofer et al. 2008; Saltzein, Ting, and Saltzein 2001).

Research focused on why women switch from employment to setting-up in business for themselves reveals a range of push and pull factors. Some women are attracted by opportunities to improve their circumstances and take action to exploit them: Bennett and Dann (2000) and Walker and Webster (2007) identify motivators such as the desire for self-fulfilment or independence, greater wealth or being one's own boss. Other women attracted by greater flexibility in use of one's time, and the ability to accommodate professional goals alongside personal responsibilities (de Martino, Barbato, and Jacques 2006; Marlow and Carter 2004; Walker and Webster 2007; Williams 2004). Mattis (2004, 159) suggests that 'Women business owners are not so much seeking reduced hours . . . Rather they are seeking more control over the hours they work'.

Whilst some women are attracted (or pulled) to starting their own venture, others find themselves 'pushed' towards start-up, because they feel squeezed out of employment by organizational systems and structures which stymie professional progression and/or thwart efforts to balance the range of roles which more women have compared with their male counterparts/partners (Fielden et al. 2003; Winn 2004). Negative factors include frustration with a lack of recognition and opportunities for promotion (Hisrich and Brush 1985) and tensions/stresses associated with balancing work–life roles.

A woman's decision to establish her own business is likely to be influenced by a combination of pull and push factors: which exerts the greatest influence is unclear. While some researchers suggest it may be the latter (Carter and Shaw 2006; Walker and Webster 2007), Winn (2004) remains concerned that there is poor understanding from existing research regarding the real balance between negative and positive work/family issues.

### **2.3. *Expectations, realities and judging success***

When making the decision to start a venture would-be entrepreneurs will have certain expectations regarding the outcome, for example, that they will be successful (Gatewood et al. 2002), and, in the case of women, that it may offer improved prospects for balancing work and family responsibilities than alternative forms of employment. Individuals often start ventures with unrealistic expectations and poor understanding of the inherent risks (Cromie 1987). Winn (2004, 151) suggests, therefore, that 'we need to understand the nature and address the factors that are critical for women to succeed in independent business and to present a more realistic picture of what starting a new business entails'.

Parasuraman and Simmers (2001) suggest that whilst women may enjoy greater autonomy and flexibility, many experience greater levels of work-family conflict as 'business ownership is not a panacea for balancing work and family role responsibilities' (551). Longstreth, Stafford, and Mauldin (1987) found that women's firms were at a commercial disadvantage due to pressures on women to combine family responsibilities with an entrepreneurial career: failure to achieve an appropriate balance created high levels of stress and held back economic growth of the enterprise.

This raises the question of how 'success' within female entrepreneurs' businesses might be understood (Buttner and Moore 1997). Marlow and Strange (1994) suggest that traditional financial and performance measures of success may not be appropriate, arguing that 'self-employment performs an important role for many women, which cannot be measured in these traditional terms' (180). Lee-Gosselin and Grise (1990) insist that not all entrepreneurial endeavours are about growing big businesses in economic terms so that, as is the case for many enterprises run by women, an equally legitimate measure of success is developing and maintaining a venture that is small and stable, which accommodates family, social and personal life aspects. Lifestyle preferences provide women seeking the 'best of both worlds' with the opportunity to make choices which suit their priorities, be they home-centred, work-centred or a balance of the two (Hakim 2003).

Desrochers and Sargent (2004) suggest that work and family are not separate spheres but are interdependent, with permeable boundaries, where roles and responsibilities can merge and clash. The 'working-from-home' trend and technologies which allow individuals to be always 'at work' are manifestations of these permeable boundaries. Eagle, Miles, and Icenogle (1997) identified how, for women and men, when it comes to 'balancing' family/work relationships it is work which more often intrudes into the family domain than the other way round, frustrating ambitions to 'have it all'.

Whether the motivation to start a new venture is prompted primarily by a positive or negative impulse and whether or not expectations are reinforced by experience are key factors in determining the likelihood of ongoing success: positive motivations appear more likely to lead to success in the medium-to-longer term (Robertson et al. 2003).

## **3. Research methodology**

### **3.1. *Research approach***

Research in the area of female entrepreneurship is increasingly leading to a better understanding of how women 'do business' through studying women in their own

right, rather than through constant comparisons of their business activities with those of men (Daily, Certo, and Dalton 1999; Morris 2002; Winn 2004).

A qualitative methodology was adopted for this research based upon semi-structured, in-depth, exploratory interviews with female entrepreneurs, which enabled them to give voice to their individual histories and experiences. This allowed details of their entrepreneurial motivations, expectations and realities to emerge, and provided rich insights. Prior to data collection, a series of themes was developed to guide the research. Probing respondents to elaborate upon their engagement in new venturing occurred during interviews to develop the discussion where appropriate, and to maintain a focus on key issues, the principal ones of which are discussed below.

**3.2. Data sample**

A total of 14 women participated in the research, all of whom lived and operated their business in Northern Ireland. The group constituted a convenience sample which provided information-rich, case studies of their entrepreneurial experience (Neuman 1997). Data relating to the entrepreneurs’ personal background and domestic context are presented in Table 1.

Participants ranged in age from 28 to 49 and at the time of interview one was single with no children, one was divorced and another had separated from her husband after starting her business. It was evident that all participants had some degree of familial responsibility or caring role. Of the women with children, most had two although three had four children; eight had children aged 10 or under. One of

Table 1. Personal background and domestic context.

ID	Age	Marital status	Family/dependents	Support in the home
AA	34	Married	Four children 10 years or under	Housekeeper; Mother-in-law (emergency)
BB	40	Married	Two children (ages not disclosed); spouse	None
CC	36	Married	Two children (5 years or under)	Husband; Cleaning lady
DD	28	Divorced/ separated	Two children (ages not disclosed)	Mother
EE	49	Married	Three children (15 years or under)	Father-in-law; Cleaning lady
FF	33	Married	Two children (5 years or under)	None
GG	49	Married	Two children (over 15 years)	None
HH	36	Married	Four children (10 years or under)	Full time childminder; housekeeper
JJ	49	Married	Two children (over 15 years)	Husband
KK	37	Married	Three children (15 years or under)	Husband; Neighbour
LL	43	Married	Four children (10 years or under)	Husband; Full-time childcare
MM	44	Married	Two children (over 15 years)	Husband
NN	35	Single	Range of family members	Family unit
PP	47	Divorced/ separated	1 child (10 years or under); parent	Husband (although separated)

the women also cared for her semi-invalid husband, whilst another cared for her 82-year-old mother who lived nearby. Some women had support in the home, with four identifying their husband as a source of assistance, including one participant, who, although separated received good support from her husband in terms of sharing childcare responsibilities.

Table 2 provides details of the respondents' current business and previous professional background and experience. All the businesses were at least 3 years old and four had been operating for 5 years. Most women had chosen to start their business in a field in which they had prior experience. The majority operated in typically 'female' business sectors, with 10 providing business or personal services. Two women were in retailing: one acted solely as a retailer while the other manufactured one-off pieces of jewellery to sell in her own premises. Another woman had designed an indoor thermal window shutter which she had patented with the intention of going into production. All but one woman had given up a permanent position to start her business. Annual turnover of the ventures widely varied, from £17,000 to £1.8 million, but around two-third of ventures had turnover of less than £100,000.

### **3.3. Data collection**

The research recognized that the key to broadening the understanding of the female entrepreneur and her business practices is to accept the need for a greater insight into the reality of the female experience, using these women's experiences as a crucial starting point (Stevenson 1990). In-depth interviews were conducted in a two-stage process over a 12-month period. Each participant was interviewed for an average of 90 min during each phase. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. As a result of the inductive analysis of interview data, crucial issues about the participants' approach to venture creation emerged. In Stage One, issues included motivations for engaging in venturing, flexibility, time-management, the challenge of balancing business and family demands, expectations on starting their venture and the meaning of success. Following analysis, data from the first-stage interviews were taken back to respondents so that issues behind the business formation decision and expectations at start-up could be explored further to deepen understanding. The second-stage interviews developed issues emerging from Stage One, allowing greater focus on factors such as work/family balance, the impact of children, managing business/family crises and whether 'things' had turned out as expected.

### **3.4. Data analysis**

Qualitative data can, by their nature, be fairly chaotic and messy to manage, so if analysis is to have value it requires to be methodical and systematic (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Lowe 1991; Miles and Huberman 1994). To address these issues Merriam (1988) suggests that qualitative data should be collected and analysed concurrently. This research adopted such an approach: interviews were conducted in a series of three sets, each consisting of five in the first two and four in the final set. Once the first set of interviews was completed, they were transcribed verbatim and analysed before commencing with the next set. The considerable amount of interview data led to adoption of a rigorous structure for analysis facilitated by the use of

Table 2. Overview of participants' business and previous experience.

ID	Entrepreneur's current business			Entrepreneur's work experience immediately prior to start-up			
	Industry type	Company type	Years in business	Work prior to start-up	Previous position	Tenure of position	Duration of last employment
AA	IT	S/C	3	IT	Manager	Secure contract	4 weeks
BB	Advertising	S	5	Civil service	Executive officer	Permanent	17 years
CC	Physiotherapy and alternative therapies	S	4	Physiotherapy	Senior physiotherapist	Permanent	10 years
DD	Health and beauty	S	3	Beauty therapy	Senior therapist	Permanent	10 years
EE	Training consultancy	S/C	3	NHS	Medical doctor/consultant psychiatrist	Permanent	22 years
FF	Training consultancy	S/C	2	Business development	Development officer	Permanent	9 years
GG	Chiroprody	S	5	Training and education, voluntary sector	Head of department	Permanent	2 years
HH	Business consultancy	C	5	City council management consultancy	Economic development manager	Permanent	6 years
JJ	Retailing	R	3	Education	Acting vice principal	Permanent	25 years
KK	Aquatic services	S/R	4	Administration	Senior PA	Permanent	3.5 years
LL	Recruitment consultancy	S/C	5	Recruitment service	Regional manager	Permanent	7 years
MM	Training consultancy	S/C	5	Training consultancy service	Training officer	Permanent	10 years
NN	Jewellery	R/M	3	Management consultancy	Management consultant	Permanent	10 years
PP	Interior design	S/M	3	NHS	Ward manager	Permanent	20 years

Note: Company type: S, service; C, consultancy; R, retail; M, manufacturing.

NVivo software, which facilitated the manipulation of textual data (Catterall and MacLaran 1996; Dey 1993; Richards and Richards 1994). The value of the research was further established by sourcing data from 14 cases, in two separate data gathering exercises. Data were also fed back to interviewees for comment, clarification, amplification, corroboration and amendment (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Hirschman 1986).

#### 4. Research findings

The findings are discussed under the following themes: motivations behind the decision to start a venture; expectations regarding what running a new venture would be like; and, the realities of running such a venture.

##### 4.1. *Motivations for pursuing entrepreneurship: Pull and push factors*

Data analysis revealed that these women were motivated to start their own venture by a range of positive and, for some, negative drivers. All 14 women had experienced a positive 'pull' towards entrepreneurship. For some, this arose from factors which included a desire for challenge in their professional lives and the wish for greater personal fulfilment. As MM puts it:

I felt I had reached a pinnacle in my career with training organisations and I couldn't really go any higher and I didn't see a future in it so I knew that if I wanted to do something outside the box I had to take that step, that challenge, myself.

The desire to take control over decision-making was important for 11 of the 14 women as they exhibited drive and ambition to be self-employed. Seven were motivated by the desire for greater flexibility over their professional and personal lives, to allow them more time with their children and the ability to manage their time and workload more effectively. For example, HH commented:

It was fine earlier on when it was just my husband and myself but I had two children at that time, I now have four children under the age of seven, so... really my motivation then was more flexibility, and while I work hard here at least I can choose my own hours.

The influence of other family members in business was cited by three women as an added motivation to start their own venture. HH noted:

...I always wanted to go into business. I'm from a family of business people. My father's in business, in fact there's seven children in the family and only two people who are not running their own business... my husband's family are the same.

None of the women referred to a solely financial motivation for starting their business. Instead, they tended to emphasize the intrinsic benefits of working for themselves and of seeing the benefits of hard work flow to themselves as opposed to someone else. LL's comment was typical:

I also understood that, I was actually earning a lot of money for some of these organizations, so I thought to myself why am I killing myself and I'm not getting very much out of it.

Ten women also reported negative, 'push' factors which contributed to their decision to start their venture; these fell broadly within the areas of 'employment



dissatisfaction' and 'personal circumstances'. Those who cited dissatisfaction with their previous job were particularly scathing in their descriptions of the lack of service quality, promotion prospects and recognition of efforts, as well as frustrations with excessive bureaucracy. CC commented:

So many demands were put on me. I was constantly being pulled away from treatment time and you had no option to change that.

Two women went as far as to describe their previous jobs as being a 'hateful' experience, whilst two more were strongly influenced by a clash of personalities in the workplace. Dissatisfaction with the achievable levels of flexibility was also a contributing factor: two women, for example, had been 'let down' by employers with regard to maternity leave and flexible working conditions, which prompted them to start their own venture as an alternative career move.

Having explored the principal motivations for start-up the discussion now focuses on the expectations of participants as they embarked on their venturing careers and, how far these were reflected in reality.

#### **4.2. Expectations regarding the entrepreneurial experience**

It was apparent that while most interviewees had positive expectations when setting up their business, a large number also harboured negative thoughts. With regard to positive expectations, 10 women anticipated enjoying greater flexibility to balance their own ambitions and those for their businesses with the needs of their family. FF anticipated being able to choose when to work and for how long:

I suppose I expected it to be easier, to be more flexible. I expected that it would be great to just to do so many days or hours, and that I would have a lot more time at home...

KK's expectations were centred more specifically around flexibility in being able to do the things that she as a mother felt she wanted to do:

...being flexible and being available to pick up the kids at 3.00 pm and being able to pick them up and not having to have a child minder or something. That was one of the things, and the other was the fact that we were our own bosses.

Some women considerably expected higher levels of job satisfaction, particularly the two who identified frustrations with their previous employment as the catalyst for starting their business. BB expected:

... basically more job satisfaction and control over my time and what we were doing.

Negative expectations associated with start-up and business ownership centred on the 'do or die' nature of venturing activity, and the sudden lack of a guaranteed salary, following the security of paid employment. Eight women referred to their initial doubts of ever successfully establishing and running a venture, and pessimism as to how their venture would fare. NN admitted:

My expectations were to go bust within a month! [Laughter] My expectations were to open up here and for nobody to come in! That was my expectation.

Some women expected to struggle, faced by the challenge of somehow keeping the business going and trying to survive the first year. If things did not work out there was always the option, mentioned by several women including HH, of returning to employment, which reduced some of the risk:

I suppose my thinking was, you know, I'd give it some time, you know, I'd give a year or two and see how it worked and if not I'd go back into the public sector.

A small number of women, including DD, started their entrepreneurial journey with no expectations and little idea of what they were letting themselves in for: 'I didn't really have any; I just thought 'If it works, it works'.

The next section considers aspects of what the women experienced when they launched their venture, some confirming their expectations but some which did not.

### **4.3. Realities of the female entrepreneurial experience**

Analysis of the entrepreneurial experiences of participants revealed both positive and negative aspects. Many issues mentioned related to aspects of time management, for example, the joy of greater flexibility in individuals' lives tempered by increased competition for that time to be spent on themselves, their families and their business. All participants found that striking and maintaining a balance was a challenge and source of continuous tension, but an opportunity for personal, familial and professional development. Positive and negative aspects of the experience are explored in greater detail below.

#### *4.3.1. Positive aspects of the experience*

While making money did not appear to be the key motivation for these women to behave entrepreneurially, the benefit of financial security was recognized by six interviewees, the more mature company owners in the sample, as it provided them and their families with a higher standard of living. Non-financial factors, however, proved more important. All the women pointed to a greater sense of well-being, personal fulfilment and satisfaction and joy in their various accomplishments in running their own venture. Interaction with customers and clients, and the feeling of achievement that came from providing a good quality service was mentioned by all of the women. For example, AA noted:

I get such a buzz every day coming to work, I love coming to work, doing my work. I could work the clock round, I could work seven days a week . . . because you get such a buzz out of it and you're meeting new people. Yeah, you get days when you're 'err, I can't be bothered facing this day', but generally there is hardly a day goes by when you don't get a lot of highs as well as the lows.

While previous business experience and knowledge gained through employment was recognized by interviewees as invaluable in providing a base upon which to build their venturing career, more than half of the women expressed relief at having thrown off the stresses they experienced as employees. HH commented:

If I was working for somebody they would probably be saying, 'Where are you? What days are you in?' By and large I can just plan my own diary and just let [secretary's name] know, keep [husband's name] up to date as to what's going on. . .

Thus, the reality for many including KK was that they now had greater control over their lives:

Oh yes, it makes it a lot more manageable and gives you that sense of being in control . . . we are in control - it's great! We're never going to be millionaires, but we just love the way we're in charge.

Eleven women noted the benefits arising from having greater flexibility to manage aspects of their domestic and work schedules. Those with young families in particular (children of school-going age or younger) identified the importance of controlling travelling and commuting as it provided the chance to manage time with their children and participate in the daily 'school run'. The opportunity to work around school holidays was another example of how the ability 'to be flexible' was highly beneficial for some respondents. One woman had been in the enviable position of taking time off for each entire holiday period, since starting her business, while others attempted to spend as much time as possible with their children. As DD reflected:

The independence is really the major thing, especially with having the girls. If I can work around the school holidays and things like that because I'm self-employed, then that's a bonus for me. It cuts out costs with them as well – there's a happy medium.

The move to self-employment also provided greater flexibility to cope with unexpected family crises as KK explained:

Well, there have been times when there have been family emergencies or one of the children has been sick, and it's basically a case of that job gets cancelled that day and gets rescheduled for another day and you have to be there for the kids, so there's that flexibility which is good.

#### 4.3.2. *Negative aspects of the venturing experience*

For many women, the enjoyment experienced from running their own venture resulting from increased freedom and flexibility was tempered by discontent, in terms of the time commitment, constant work demands and need to balance the interests of children and other dependents with demands of the business. Thus, the reality of the female entrepreneurial experience often had lodged within it much that was negative and a source of real tension.

Negative experiences arose from issues such as conflicting commitments, feelings of guilt and the tensions arising from their own and others' views on the traditional role of women in society, particularly *vis-à-vis* their role as mother and primary carer in the home. Other themes focused on problems arising from issues of personal health and emotional well-being, energy levels, feelings of isolation and stress within personal relationships. From a professional/business perspective, the women also identified difficulties arising from their lack of experience as entrepreneurs, fear of financial risk and of debt, a lack of role models and the poor level of assistance specifically for women in business within Northern Ireland. Some of these issues are discussed further in the following sections.

#### 4.4. *Traditional roles and support from partners*

Thirteen interviewees reflected on the traditional role of women in the home as primary carers and were discontented with, and for some frustrated by, how they were expected to play those roles. Parenting was the key issue for the sample, with only one of the group not having the duties of motherhood in addition to the demands of business ownership. The major weight of parental responsibility fell to these women, with most receiving relatively little and sometimes no support from

their husbands/partners. Balancing the time needed to spend on their work whilst also providing good parental support and a physical presence in the home or elsewhere, which most wanted to do, was a key area of tension, particularly as children got older. AA's comment was echoed to varying degrees by others:

Husbands don't... it's not in their make up to prioritise family or prioritise home, or to see that the children need to be cared for. If you pushed him there would be times where he would definitely help out, but it would be a favour to you. You would feel so grateful that he managed to do that, but yet really it takes two people to bring the family together you know.

Only four of the women acknowledged their husband's, or in one case an estranged-husband's, assistance with parenting and childcare responsibilities. One woman (LL) with expanding business interests relied upon her husband for full-time child minding and housekeeping during the initial period of start-up and development as he had returned to full-time education:

I couldn't have done it without him – I would have been out at meetings and stuff like that. [husband's name] was there, otherwise I would have had to have someone in the house.

She described her own time management as 'constantly fire fighting', and confessed to sneaking into the office in the early morning of Saturdays and Sundays, which were officially designated as 'children's days'. A common perception, however, was that husbands did not prioritize sufficiently the needs of the family: one woman referred to occasional conflict with her husband resulting from his lack of support or input, which was a 'wee bone of contention'. For the two single mothers, one of whom was PP, the difficulties of balancing work and home life seemed even more intense:

I think it's coming, but there has been no balance to be honest. Absolutely no balance. And then you try at times to pretend to [name of son] that there is a balance, you have to do that!.

#### **4.5. Time management and working hours**

Time management played a crucial role in the lives of each of the women as they coordinated various roles: business owner; wife; mother; carer; in addition to the desire for individual personal time and space. The major caring role for all but one woman related to their children and all participants, to a greater or lesser degree, played the central domestic role requiring them routinely to juggle day-to-day home or family tasks alongside those of their business. The reality about achieving greater 'flexibility' in the use of time often proved illusory, as KK noted:

In that respect everything gets crammed into 24 hours and there are big chunks of 24 hours that all blend into one. It is just work the whole time, and the kids and the house. It never stops. Whereas there was a time when you could have just switched off. ...

One woman gave thanks for Tesco on-line which enabled her to avoid the ordeal of the weekly grocery-buying trip; another joked that she needed a 'wife' to do all the small jobs that she did not have time to manage anymore. All of the women with younger, school-aged children felt the need to be as supportive as possible to their children, in terms of providing meals, helping to prepare homework and attending

important events, particularly school events, whenever feasible. Having a physical presence was important as AA indicated:

For example, tomorrow my kids will get off early, there's a Harvest Festival . . . 'Oh Mummy, come, come, come!' I know I will have to go to that and I'm more than happy to go, but then I have to juggle everything around it, and then it means you are working to whatever time at night or you're trying to slot in an appointment at night to cover for the work you haven't done during the day.

The business hours which the women worked were recognized by all but one of the entrepreneurs as being very different from the standard 'nine-to-five'. Rather than work fewer hours than expected most considered that they worked more hours, although for some, including HH, there was some flexibility as to when they were worked:

I tend not to come in the rush hour, I get the kids to school and then I come in, so I come in between quarter to ten and ten every morning and I leave at six and I don't take lunch and I work in the evenings as well. So when I'm physically in the office four days I would do a lot of work at home even on the Friday, first two hours Friday morning it would be dealing with work.

Working evenings and weekends was a standard practice for all except one of the women, as it was recognized that the very success of their businesses rested on their own efforts. As JJ put it: '...the onus falls to you for everything'. The common experience amongst the women was that if the work needed doing, then they had to get it done:

Managing the time, I try to set it out but really it doesn't always work out; if you have to work until 11 o'clock on a Saturday to get your invoicing done, then you have to do it. (BB)

In addition, the need to be flexible to accommodate the requirements of clients and customers was a consequence of their new life as an entrepreneur. Typically, CC commented:

So the hours are probably longer than I was doing and within that you probably have to add in a little bit of flexibility, you may have somebody phone up and say that they won't be able to make it until 6 pm.

Two women found that they had actually been able to work shorter weeks through the flexibility that their business ventures had brought; however, both admitted to working considerable amounts in the evenings and at weekends, despite their best intentions.

A view which emerged, however cliched, was that women are better at multi-tasking and coping with the demands of a career and home than men, although four women commented that they would not have been able to start up and run their business had their children been pre-school age. The general view was that once children were in school and required less hands-on parental supervision, working around their needs became easier. Two women, however, considered that as their children grew up their needs changed, there were more after-school activities and a growing awareness of what their parents were doing and of their absences.

HH, who ran a sizeable business, had a daily commute, four young children and a husband who was also an entrepreneur, captured the mood of the group with her wish for more 'me-time' to recharge batteries and pursue new interests:

For me as a person I suppose just continuing to be able to manage the work-life thing and maybe having a wee bit more time for me as an individual because at the moment it's just purely work and home. Well in the last few weeks I've started taking tennis lessons one night a week but up until then I have had no time out for myself, you know it's just so busy.

#### **4.6. Isolation, fear of failure and guilt**

Twelve of the women had experienced feelings of guilt resulting from conflict between their need to give significant time and energy to their business, particularly at periods of peak activity, and the demands of their domestic roles. KK's experience was not uncommon:

We had a couple of really big jobs last summer, but we thought we would be able to work around it. Wrong! It really was a lot of pressure, and we were having to fit family in and the "guilts" and all that sort of thing. It was summer and the kids were getting brought to "auntie's" all the time. So I felt bad as I wanted to take them up to Carrick-a-Rede and all that sort of thing.

Several participants, however, reflected on how their situation was not so different from that of other working mothers. For example, HH commented:

This year, I didn't get to any of the school plays; my husband did it... you feel you're missing out and you don't feel like a great mother... I suppose that's probably the worst bit of it, but then I think anybody working, whether it's in business or in work, it's the same.

Feelings of guilt also arose from the interviewees' sense that they lacked sufficient and appropriate business experience, amplifying the risks to which they exposed their families in building their businesses. The majority of women had little or no previous start-up experience, but most had started in a sector with which they were familiar. Two of the women had provided business advice to others and three others had some experience in business development, supporting their husbands in their business activities. CC acknowledged.

I had no idea when I wanted to go into business, and to practice, but that whole side of things I hadn't even thought about. So that's been completely new for me and daunting in some respects.

A minority of women spoke of their concerns stemming from their lack of experience and the additional bookkeeping and administrative roles required, in addition to the actual 'business' in hand. The time impact of these responsibilities had been greater than expected, leading two of the sample to delegate book-keeping to others while another admitted to only having taken off 4 days in 1 year, with Sunday evening given over to paperwork.

Whilst many of the women saw running their own business as a very positive experience, the risk of financial loss was a persistent source of anxiety for 12 of the women, colouring their venturing experience. For these respondents, the lack of a regular monthly salary and the possibility that their business might fail, risking exposure of their families to potential debt as a consequence, were linked with their anxiety about generating an adequate stream of clients and customers. DD explained:

A guaranteed salary, a job description, to know what is required of you, annual leave, sick leave, where the benefits are known. There is no safeguard when you are working for yourself – no sales; no dinner! There are serious consequences if you fail.

One participant, prompted by her sense of anxiety and guilt at having to let a staff member go, told how she bore the expense of that staff member over the Christmas period only finally letting her go in the New Year.

Improved personal well-being had been an important influence for some on their decision to engage in entrepreneurship. Indeed, all the women acknowledged a heightened sense of well-being in general, but nearly half mentioned aspects which had negatively affected that overall sense of well-being, such as personal illness, low energy, a sense of isolation and tensions within marital/familial relationships. The women recognized that there was no 'sick leave' and no one to take over if they were unavailable, as GG highlighted:

Things turn up that you don't expect and trip you up sometimes. I suppose the one thing that I wasn't expecting was that you can't be sick . . . that's the main thing with being self-employed.

Four women spoke of their sense of personal isolation as a business owner, reflecting on the long hours of work required, the sense of guilt at holiday times, the opportunity costs should they take time away from their business, the lack of social contact with others within a work environment and the lack of role models or 'significant others' who really understood what they were experiencing. EE explained:

What I miss is teamwork, I miss that, and I miss being with the same people and getting to know people on an ongoing basis. I mean, over the couple of years, there are people who have invited me back several times, and I have gotten to know them, but it's not the same . . . It's not the camaraderie and the craic of being with other people all the time. I miss that!

A final comment from AA, who with four small children, a successful and forward-looking business and a self-employed husband, reflected on how women thinking of going into business for themselves ought to be prepared for the demands ahead:

. . . you really need to think smart nowadays, if you're a woman, before you even start up your business, and almost work it like a wee jigsaw around your family in the hope that it will all blend in.

## **5. Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to report on the journeys of a group of Northern Irish women who set up their own businesses, reflecting on key motivations behind their decisions to do so, their expectations on setting out, and the realities of their experiences. Previous researchers have explored many of these aspects but have rarely explored all aspects within one qualitative study of this type. The research has provided detailed insights into how this group of women established and managed their ventures whilst balancing demands on them beyond the specific challenges of their business. Consistent with work by Mattis (2004) what emerged was that a key motivation for engaging in venturing was a desire to balance familial responsibilities, in many cases as parents with dependent children, with running their own business and, thus, fulfil an ambition to be their own boss. Increased flexibility was expected to help them to realize that ambition. The research also confirmed findings of work by Walker and Webster (2007) and Marlow and Carter (2004) regarding the desire

for personal independence as a pull factor, motivating women to engage in entrepreneurship.

Whilst these women were motivated to set up their businesses with the expectation of building a better balance between their professional life and their lives as parents/guardians/carers, consistent with the work by Brush, de Bruin, and Welter (2009) and Winn (2004), there was evidence that many were prompted by push factors to move away from employment by the frustrations and lack of professional development they experienced. Entrepreneurship offered a partial answer to both a desire for greater flexibility and control over personal time and the need to take control over personal and professional ambitions. While both push and pull factors were at work what is less clear is which exercised the greatest influence; in a number of cases a negative push factor acted as the trigger for women to take a positive step they had been contemplating for some time.

What emerged from the research was strong evidence regarding the positive experience of entrepreneurship: however, what was of note was the strength of the evidence regarding the negative realities of business ownership which posed serious challenges for these women. For most women obtaining and maintaining an appropriate balance between the domestic and business spheres of their lives remained a constant challenge and source of tension and stress. As Desrochers and Sargent (2004) and Eagle, Miles, and Icenogle (1997) identified, too often the permeability of the boundaries between the work and family spheres meant constant breaches between the two with the demands of the business most often taking precedence. Yet, evidence suggested that they continued to play the leading carer role in the family where they enjoyed variable support from husbands or partners. An aspect which was surprising, and might perhaps help to explain the low start-up rates amongst women in Northern Ireland, was the sense amongst many interviewees that the enduring message from their socio-cultural context was that a women's place was in the home looking after her family. Rather than fighting for an equal role within the home, many women had embraced both roles, as homemaker and business owner, with all the energy that they could muster, but the experience left some with significant guilt that they were 'short-changing' their family.

Despite this, for all the women, the move into business ownership was something they had enjoyed and found personally and professionally rewarding, delivering a sense of achievement and control over their career. What was apparent, however, was that while they had thought that they could balance competing business and family pressures some had not fully appreciated the impact on their non-work life. Thus, some demonstrated a somewhat unrealistic, perhaps naïve, starting position on their entrepreneurial journey. Despite the tensions and stresses of seeking to obtain and maintain a balance between the competing spheres of their lives all participants valued the potentially greater flexibility and control over their own time, and their new freedom to make their decisions and choices.

Consistent with this discussion, is the recognition that participants had made important legitimate lifestyle choices, an idea posited by Hakim (2003). As was suggested earlier, the women had made choices that best suited their priorities, whether those were home-centred, work-centred or a mixture of both. None said that they had started a business because they wanted to make money or be exceedingly



wealthy, an interesting outcome in itself, although all wanted to be comfortable or at least not in debt or a financial burden.

Interviewees were motivated by more intrinsically grounded prompts (Lee-Gosselin and Grise 1990). To many of the women 'success' was the establishment of a small but stable enterprise, measured in more than purely financial terms, with recognition that being independent and being one's own boss brought its rewards. Evidence also suggests that these were pragmatic, positively motivated women who recognized that their actions would have consequences, the joy of greater flexibility and independence through starting and developing one's own business was often tempered by feelings of guilt and a need to compromise. They dealt with those consequences, which often sapped their energy and pulled them every-which-way, but also experienced the personal and professional upside. There was recognition that obtaining and maintaining a balance between the competing spheres of their lives would be an on-going challenge and source of tension; that having the best of both worlds might not be possible but that trying to achieve it was all part of the journey. The need to balance roles, as a partner/mother/carer and as an entrepreneur remained the female entrepreneur's equivalent of the search for the 'holy-grail', as each sought to strike a balance between conflicting commitments and expectations demanded by professional and personal constituencies.

## **6. Conclusions**

Important lessons may be drawn from these entrepreneurial women for those seeking to establish their own ventures and for those who support women looking to set up in business, in particular the divergence between expectation and reality, and the need for realism in the early planning stage. There is no denying that aspects of the entrepreneurial experience prove highly rewarding, whilst others render the journey somewhat trickier for women to travel than for the majority of men, given their tendency to fulfil the majority of caring and home-making roles and associated duties. As Parasuraman and Simmers (2001) suggest, starting a business should not be viewed as an easy alternative to employment with ample time for long lunches or a 'long lie' and late start to the day. Rather, it should be seen as characterized by the long hours and constant demands, with a steady stream of tasks and responsibilities, as noted by LL:

I think the ones that get the big shock are the ones that don't expect to be working in the evening or to have to do things later on... there are loads of people who don't expect to be putting the hours in. If you're a nine-to-five it won't work; it really won't work. Well, not that the business won't work, but it will be a different type of business.

Thus, it is important that female entrepreneurs recognize the advantages and disadvantages of having control of one's venture but also approach entrepreneurship with a realistic and unclouded view and awareness of the commitment required to be a success, however that success might be defined. Training and development programmes need to address the need for careful planning and realism.

For policymakers and support agencies looking at ways in which to encourage women to move into entrepreneurial roles or considering how best to support those women who are already in business, evidence emerges which might help them to understand better the position of women as would-be and actual entrepreneurs. A number of positive aspects, such as flexibility and autonomy, emerge from this

analysis which point to some of the ways in which entrepreneurial venturing may meet the employment and career needs of many women. Other aspects such as guilt towards time not spent with family, issues of childcare and the general challenge of being the entrepreneur and homemaker may deter would-be female entrepreneurs from taking the step into a venture of their own. Social and economic policy issues intersect as policies aimed at encouraging more women into entrepreneurship or supporting those already in business need to be considered alongside, for example, suitable childcare provision.

Profiling local business women who have succeeded in striking a workable balance between the domestic/business spheres of their lives, and are able to talk about both the highs and lows of business venturing, is likely to attract more women into business and encourage those who are in business and struggling, to persevere and overcome the challenges which might otherwise defeat them so that they go back to a regular nine-to-five job. If such women are 'lost' to the system, the diversity and innovative thinking which women bring to the business environment will be lost and the economy risks being less dynamic, vibrant and poorer as a result.

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