

Stimulating women's entrepreneurship in contexts of oppression

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Applying insights from a recent article published in the Academy of Management Perspectives, Dr Jennifer Jennings discusses critical precursors to entrepreneurship for women living under oppressive conditions

In two prior Open Access Government articles, Professor Jennifer Jennings from the University of Alberta shared findings from empirical studies of women entrepreneurs living in environments characterized by high levels of oppression; specifically, the [violent conflict zone of Libya](#), and, [impoverished communities in Northern Ghana](#). In this article, she summarizes key insights from a scholarly article, recently published in the Academy of Management (AOM) Perspectives, which possesses important implications for women's entrepreneurial activity within oppressive contexts in general. The insights are highly relevant for policy and practitioner initiatives aiming to foster women's entrepreneurship in such settings.

Impetus for the AOM Perspectives article

Dr Jennifer Jennings co-authored the AOM Perspectives article with Dr Muhammad Muhammad (first author) and Dr Hans Hansen (second author) from Texas Tech University, as well as Dr Zahid Rahman (fourth author) from the University of Lethbridge. The article is entitled 'Entrepreneurship through (cognitive) emancipation: Implications for research, policy, and practice in contexts of oppression.' A full version can be accessed [here](#).

The researchers were motivated to write their AOM Perspectives piece in light of the vigour with which entrepreneurship continues to be promulgated as a key means of addressing the 'grand challenge' of systemic oppression. More precisely, they were concerned that initiatives aiming to stimulate entrepreneurial activity by people living in oppressive contexts may fail to meet this well-intentioned goal. This is because prior research has indicated that the success of such initiatives is likely to be limited if based upon the predominant model of entrepreneurship originating in environments within the Global West/North that would not be characterized as oppressed.

The predominant model tends to delimit entrepreneurship to the discovery/creation and exploitation of new business opportunities with wealth-creating potential. Although this conceptualization is relevant to much (but not all) entrepreneurial activity within well-resourced Western/ Northern contexts, it overlooks two important considerations that are arguably especially salient within oppressed environments. One is that entrepreneurship in such settings is likely to be motivated primarily by a desire to create change (for oneself

or others) rather than by a desire to create wealth. Another is that individuals who have been subjected to systemic oppression are unlikely to possess sufficient levels of not only the tangible resources (e.g., financial capital and raw materials) required to successfully create/exploit an entrepreneurial opportunity, but also the intangible resources (e.g., a strong sense of personal agency and self-efficacy) to launch a business venture.

Overarching aim and foundational literature for the AOM Perspectives article

In light of the above, Professor Jennings and her co-authors developed a conceptual framework to help enhance understanding of the psychological dynamics that are likely to act as key cognitive precursors to the decision to engage in entrepreneurial activity within oppressed contexts. They sought to address the following perplexing question: How is it possible for individuals who have been subjected to persistent oppressive forces to pursue entrepreneurship, given that such an undertaking is widely recognized as highly challenging even for those who have not been oppressed?

To tackle this question, Dr Jennings and her co-authors drew upon three established lines of scholarship. The first was work on the entrepreneurship-as-emancipation perspective. This perspective views entrepreneurial activity as a quest for liberation from constraints and an improvement in one's standing within the established social order. The second was research on personal autonomy, which has shown that individuals tend to engage in efforts to re-attain this fundamental desire when it has been lost or threatened. The third was work on stress coping. A central tenet within this research stream is that individuals in stressful situations tend to prefer cognitive and behavioural options that attenuate (if not eliminate) their stressors.

Proposed process model featured within the AOM Perspectives article

Synthesizing the above-noted foundational literatures, Professor Jennings and her co-authors developed a conceptual model delineating the process by which individuals who have been living in oppressive conditions can make the transition to entrepreneurship. Their proposed process model consists of three distinct stages punctuated by two critical transitions, with each transition enabled by a crucial cognitive trigger.

In Stage I, the researchers suggest that individuals subjected to persistent oppressive forces are likely to be in a state of 'cognitive oppression', exhibiting the stress coping mechanism known as learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is characterized by a state of mindlessness (i.e., attention directed away from the present) as well as a submissive worldview (i.e., the belief that one is powerless to effect change). In order to transition out of this stage, Dr Jennings and her co-authors therefore posited that oppressed individuals must experience a sufficient gain in their perceived control vis-à-vis external forces.

Stage II corresponds to a state of what the researchers refer to as 'psychological liberation'. In this stage, individuals start to exhibit mindfulness (i.e., active engagement in the present) and an autonomous worldview (i.e., the belief in personal control over life

outcomes). Individuals in this state of mind are thus likely to start making active efforts to restore their threatened or lost freedom. This stress coping mechanism is known as reactance coping.

In Stage III of the proposed model, some individuals who have achieved psychological liberation decide to engage in entrepreneurial activity; motivated primarily by the desire for emancipation from constraint and an improvement in one's standing within the existing social order. Whether an individual opts for this form of entrepreneurship over another type of emancipation-focused activity (e.g., joining/initiating a social movement), however, depends upon whether they have constructed and validated a new identity for themselves as an emancipation-seeking entrepreneur.

Implications for efforts to stimulate women's entrepreneurship in oppressed contexts

Overall, the process model proposed by Dr Jennings and her co-authors implies the need for greater attention to cognitive interventions – beyond the traditional focus upon financial literacy, technical knowledge, and/or microfinancing – in efforts to stimulate entrepreneurial activity by women living in oppressed contexts. More specific illustrative implications include:

- Designing interventions cognizant of the likelihood that women in oppressed contexts will have adopted learned helplessness as a stress coping mechanism
- Developing programs to increase perceptions of women's personal control vis-à-vis oppressive external forces
- Implementing initiatives that help women in oppressed contexts embrace the identity of an emancipation-seeking entrepreneur
- Prioritizing the provision of psychological support to women who have validated their new identity as an emancipation-motivated entrepreneur
- Channeling financial support primarily to women who have achieved psychological liberation from the prior state of cognitive oppression

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