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# **Can they really have it all? Women and the Myth of Female Entrepreneurship**

## **Abstract**

There are a number of myths associated with entrepreneurship. One myth prevalent in modern society is that women undertake entrepreneurial new venturing in order to 'have it all', and that entrepreneurship gives them the capability to achieve a perfect balance between work and family life. In examining whether the reality of entrepreneurship matched initial hopes and expectations, this paper seeks to explore this and associated areas that may themselves have been fuelled by myth and speculation, including motives, family support, discrimination, stereotypes and societal attitudes. Insights into the reality of entrepreneurial life were derived through a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 32 female entrepreneurs. NVivo was used to analyse the wealth of detailed data that emerged, enabling conclusions to be drawn. Although mostly drawn towards entrepreneurship seeking independence, respondents with and without caring responsibilities faced enormous difficulties achieving a satisfactory balance between work and family responsibilities. In many cases, difficulties were exacerbated by lack of family support, further increasing isolation and frustration. Findings show that, for many of the women, something has had to give, most frequently their personal relationships and that, for many, 'having it all' remains a myth.

## **Introduction**

An initial review of extant literature on entrepreneurship might suggest that female entrepreneurs are themselves one of the greatest myths of entrepreneurship. Historically, the majority of research on the subject has been largely 'gender blind', with gender rarely considered an issue that might influence business ownership or the new venturing experience. This approach therefore perceives entrepreneurship as occurring within a male-dominated arena, with much of what is known about entrepreneurs thus being based upon studies of men (DeMartino et al 2006; Walker and Webster 2006; Mattis 2004).

Although a growing body of literature encompasses an exploration of entrepreneurship from a gendered perspective, the under-representation of women within both academic literature and entrepreneurial new venturing – particularly when combined with the tendency of the media to portray male entrepreneurs and business tycoons as successful role models – may substantiate this myth and reduce the likelihood of greater engagement by women in entrepreneurship. This suggests that aspirant women entrepreneurs may be particularly disadvantaged, with public and cultural attitudes regarding gender-appropriate careers shaped by myths arising from age and/or gender discrimination and stereotypical fashioning.

In outlining some of the myths that have developed around women entrepreneurs, this paper seeks to shed light upon the low level of participation of women within new venturing. The context in this instance is Northern Ireland. By exploring the entrepreneurial journeys of a sample of 32 women entrepreneurs from the region, this paper hopes to offer a more accurate appreciation of the potential contribution offered by this cohort within new venturing. In particular, this paper focuses on the widely held myth that women can 'have it all' – that they are as capable of achieving perfect balance between work and family life as their male counterparts, and examines whether the reality of entrepreneurship matched the initial hopes and expectations which were themselves fuelled by myth and speculation.

## **Theoretical background**

An examination of myths associated with entrepreneurship in general is considered important simply because many in society do not view myths as being tales or fiction or invention.

Rather, myths are often considered as possessing true and real qualities, leading individuals to accept and believe in the myth without question or challenge (Zahra and Schulte 1994). Blind devotion thus plays an active role in the dissemination and perpetuation of such myths, with the resultant enthusiasm and fervour potentially creating problems for those aspirant and nascent entrepreneurs who fall outside the realms of the mythical 'typical entrepreneur'. For instance, entrepreneurs whose attributes, characteristics or experiences do not match the dogma created by 'heroic visions of entrepreneurship' (Zahra and Schulte 1994: 86) may experience reduced levels of cultural and social support, potentially impacting on the success and longevity of their business. This may be particularly damaging for groups already under-represented within new venturing. For instance, would-be women entrepreneurs may be deterred from pursuing their entrepreneurial ambitions by a range of barriers, discriminatory and stereotypical attitudes that have been fashioned by anecdotal and pseudoscientific myths.

Women are a significant force within new venturing, with growing numbers embarking on an entrepreneurial career. Despite this, women entrepreneurs remain under-represented within academic literature, the majority of which historically perceives it as occurring within a male-dominated arena. The result of this is that much of what is known about entrepreneurs is based on studies of men (DeMartino et al 2006; Walker and Webster 2006; Mattis 2004; Bird and Brush 2002), an approach which assumes that women act from similar motivations and seek similar rewards from their entrepreneurial activities as men. A further body of literature compares the experiences of women entrepreneurs with those of their male counterparts, with the masculine experience being used as a benchmark for performance and success. This is far from ideal, particularly given suggestions that gender has a significant bearing on the experiences of women entrepreneurs (Greene and Storey 2004; Baker et al 1997) and indications that comparative literature has contributed little to our understanding of how societal and cultural factors impinge on the entrepreneurial experiences of men and women (Arenius and Kovalainen 2006).

Even within the body of academic literature exploring entrepreneurship from a female perspective that does exist, women entrepreneurs are frequently portrayed as a homogenous (Walker and Webster 2006) or monolithic (McKay 2001) entity rather than as a heterogeneous group (Harding 2006). Therefore, just as it is considered unlikely that male-focused literature adequately or accurately reflects the motivations, aspirations and experiences of women entrepreneurs, published studies which fails to acknowledge the homogeneous nature of female entrepreneurship are considered unlikely to apply equally to all groups of women entrepreneurs. For instance, although stemming from a gendered perspective, literature on women who have gone into business following long periods of paid employment or after raising a family will fail to reflect accurately the experiences of young women entrepreneurs as a specific cohort, who have perhaps started their business with reduced levels of human and social capital as a result of their limited life and work experience. For this specific constituency of woman entrepreneur, a failure to see themselves within literature at all may deter them from pursuing their entrepreneurial ambitions.

Further, there are a number of gender issues which may be founded on, or arise from, speculation and myth, and which frequently act as barriers to entrepreneurial success. According to Manning (2009), women's difficulties succeeding in business arise as much from biology as from stereotyping and discrimination, although the two are often inter-linked: women entrepreneurs must weigh up their ambitions against the requirements and responsibilities of potential motherhood and are then criticized by different sections of society for whichever decision they take. Similarly, the issue of 'fertility', defined by researchers as having young children, is believed to be particularly pertinent for women entrepreneurs, having a "...*differentially strong impact upon women's propensity to switch from wage employment to self-employment*" (Boden 1996: p680). Others go further, suggesting that a

woman's own personal life cycle and those of her business are intricately entwined, requiring complex negotiation according to which stage of the life or business lifecycle is pre-eminent (Still and Timms 2000). The lifestyle preference theory (Hakim 2003) suggests that women categorise their personal and labour market preferences as being either home-centred, work-centred or adaptive, with the vast majority falling into the adaptive category: women are either motivated by economic necessity to undertake labour market activities alongside having a family or those simply wanting "...to enjoy the best of both worlds" (Hakim 2003: p357). Applying this theory to entrepreneurship suggests that women are motivated to pursue new venturing in order to achieve flexibility and balance between work and family responsibilities whilst simultaneously achieving an acceptable level of economic stability and independence, (Mueller and Data-On 2008; Arenius and Kovalainen 2006; Walker and Webster 2004; Williams 2004; McKay 2001).

The question is whether these women, having made the shift from education or paid employment to entrepreneurship, find that they were reacting to perceived fact or fiction? According to Williams (2004): "*self-employment is perceived as providing flexibility in the timing of work, the quantity of work, and the amount of effort at work, all of which might provide the ability to spend more time caring for children*" (p468). This would tend to support high levels of expectation within certain section of society regarding the ability of women to 'have it all', in terms of a family, a satisfying career and a full social life. Certainly, the feminist stance would be a resounding 'yes': if men can achieve this without problems or question then why not a woman? For many aspirant entrepreneurs, this may also be their reality. However, for others, the decision to embark on an entrepreneurial career in order to alleviate time pressures by setting their own hours (Carter and Shaw 2006; Mattis 2004; Small Business Service 2004; Williams 2004), thus offering more flexibility in managing childcare arrangements than paid employment can allow (Arenius and Kovalainen 2006; Taylor and Newcomer 2005; Walker and Webster 2004; Weiler and Bernasek 2001) may be tempered by a number of challenges, leaving them to believe that they have simply bought into a myth that entrepreneurship allows them to 'have it all'. Lundstrom (1999) summarized this reality check, saying: "*welcome to the big illusion: that women who start their businesses have more time for their families*" (p175).

There are, for instance, inherent tensions and incompatibilities involved in managing conflict arising from competing entrepreneurial and domestic roles. Key amongst the tensions that create and exacerbate role conflict is the number and age of children, family size and the demands of looking after children (O'Reilly 2004). For instance, childcare and solving logistical problems associated with older children who cannot be left to their own devices have a much greater impact on women entrepreneurs than men (DeMartino et al 2006; Fielden and Dawe 2004; Winn 2004; Davidsson and Honig 2003).

Further pressures on time appear to question whether 'having it all' is realistic or merely a mythical aspiration for women entrepreneurs. For instance, although both men and women in business experience 'time poverty' (Still and Timms 2000), literature indicates that women – be they employed, unemployed or self-employed – have more complex demands on their time because of their multiple social roles, taking on the heavy burden of childcare, adult care and household responsibilities, doing much more and spending more time on these unpaid activities than non-working men (O'Reilly 2004; Verheul et al 2004). Even those who can afford to pay for childcare and domestic services remain responsible for the lion's share of domestic responsibilities (Loughlin and Barling 2001). This contrasts with literature suggesting that women gravitate towards entrepreneurship in order to find the flexibility they need to reconcile their multiple responsibilities and implies that the reality of entrepreneurship is somewhat different. It has been found, for instance, that reduced hours for the female entrepreneur, originally cited as a major motivating factor, tends not to become a reality until

the business is established with employees hired to reduce the burden (Mattis 2004). Further, the guilt arising from role conflict, difficulties in reconciling work and family commitments and believing they are neglecting their family have also been cited as impediments (Ljunggren and Kolvereid 1996; Carter 1993). Many women entrepreneurs report finding it impossible to run their business solely within the confines of school hours, and resort to working long into the night to catch up (Fielden et al 2003).

Time pressures associated with entrepreneurial ventures may conflict with multiple and competing demands on women entrepreneurs' time, resulting in further negative implications. For instance, combining their businesses with childcare and the resultant need to work fewer hours or on a part-time basis (Weiler and Bernasek 2001) is believed to restrict business performance, success and ambitions. Further, there is a greater tendency for women to operate their businesses from home in order to reduce costs and achieve some flexibility. However practical this decision may be, it is often devalued and deemed to be less credible and legitimate by investors, customers and family members (Davidsson and Honig 2003). Such businesses may be viewed as nothing more than a hobby (Tighe 2006), fuelling the myth that women are not as serious or genuine about business as men (Walker and Webster 2004; Carter et al 2001) and potentially impacting on their ability to secure necessary financial capital (Carter and Shaw 2006). There is also the potential for the business to become integrated with different aspects of day-to-day life, such as childcare responsibilities impinging on the entrepreneur (Carter and Shaw 2006; Marlow 1997).

Likewise, the degree of family support for a woman and her entrepreneurial venture may impact on the level of tension experienced, and have either a positive or a negative impact on role conflict. Support from family is seen as crucially important for individuals starting their own business, regardless of age or gender, increasing the potential for success by giving the entrepreneur access to additional sources of financial and emotional support, as well as loyal and/or unpaid family workers (Brüderl and Preisendörfer 1998). Family support is believed to be particularly important for female entrepreneurs, especially those battling persistent traditional gender roles (Carter et al 2001) and attempting to reconcile the dual roles of family and business, a balancing act which could prove problematic without the active support of a spouse or family who can help with household responsibilities (Winn 2004) and childcare (Fielden et al, 2003). Indeed, literature suggests that lack of spousal support results in a female entrepreneur being significantly less likely to continue running her own business (Winn, 2004). It is believed that, in many cases, the lack of support and cynicism frequently encountered by women entrepreneurs are primarily influenced by unsupportive societal and media attitudes (Eureka Strategic Research 2003). For instance, it has been shown that many negative social and cultural attitudes towards entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship have been informed and shaped by narrow-minded, discriminatory and stereotypical attitudes regarding appropriate careers for men and women (Carter and Allen 2007); women's traditional place in the home as primary caregiver and a male-dominated society. Women may be more disadvantaged by cultural factors than their male counterparts: female entrepreneurs have been shown to have less confidence in their entrepreneurial skills and abilities, impacting on their ability to succeed long-term in business (Small Business Service 2005). These factors are often combined and reinforced by negative attitudes of those in society, parents and others with influence on career choices, advising them to secure paid employment in preference to the perceived risk attached to an entrepreneurial career (Chigunta 2002).

The theoretical background demonstrates that women are attracted to entrepreneurial new venturing because of the perceived flexibility it offers to balance multiple social responsibilities. The empirical study seeks to explore whether this perceived flexibility, in reality, counteracts the constraints family responsibilities put on women entrepreneurs, or

whether interviewees believe they have been conned by a myth promising the capability to overcome difficulties associated with their multiple roles.

### **Methodological approach**

The research was guided by the qualitative research tradition, because of the relative infancy of the topic, the need to ‘get under the surface’ and flexibly examine how respondents perceive, interpret or experience the phenomena being studied (Silverman 2006). Furthermore the research team sought to gain greater insights and new knowledge (Krauss 2005) on the experiences of female entrepreneurs operating in the entrepreneurial arena which is traditionally perceived as being male-dominated (Mattis 2004).

The study comprised an in-depth interview process with 32 young female entrepreneurs, who had collectively established 30 businesses across a range of sectors in Northern Ireland. Interviewees constituted a convenience sample, with participants ranging from 19 to 49 years of age. Data relating to the participants’ personal background are presented in Table 1, appended. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which generally lasted around one-and-a-half hours, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted “in confidence”: as a result the names of interviewees have been withheld by mutual agreement with identifiable codes instead assigned to them.

The empirical study generated a wealth of detailed information. Unlike quantitative methods, which rely upon statistical tools for analysis purposes, there are few fixed formulae for analysing qualitative data. The non-standardised and complex nature of qualitative data requires it to be grouped into categories before being meaningfully analysed. In order to identify key themes and events that related to the concepts underpinning the research study, a manual coding protocol was initially developed, involving the line-by-line analysis of transcripts, identifying ideas and text to code and labelling key issues, statements and references in order to explore common themes, patterns and relationships and to identify outlying and emergent issues. Subsequent analysis was facilitated through the use of Nvivo. To ensure credibility through respondent validation, interviewees were offered for comment, confirmation or amendment, a copy of the interview recording and/or transcript (Bryman and Bell 2003; Guba and Lincoln 1994).

### **Empirical results**

#### **Motives for participation**

The review of extant literature provided insights into entrepreneurial motivations, without which a business will not be founded. Interviewees were questioned on the combination of factors motivating their decision to start their own business.

With regard to the impact of Hakim’s (2003) lifestyle preference theory, only one interviewee, F18, identified a motive for starting her own business that could be described as being ‘work-centred’. This interviewee recalled, *“I was working for a leading recruitment company and I suppose that I got frustrated as I was at Board level with them and I was not going to go any further”*.

Six interviewees fell solely into Hakim’s most-cited category of ‘adaptive’ motives, whereby they are driven by economic necessity to undertake their chosen labour market activities alongside having a family. For F3, the realization that she didn’t get to spend time with her young children because of the long hours she was previously working in the food industry, directly influenced her decision to resign and start her own business. F3 confided, however, that the reality of entrepreneurship was far-removed from her initial expectations, describing how *“...the reality of starting my own business hit me with a bang. I didn’t sleep with worry and I still had a baby who didn’t sleep so I was getting up each morning exhausted and trying to be professional”*. F29 described the imminent birth of her second

child as a defining moment: “... *that made me think about what I was doing. I didn’t want to work 9-5, Monday to Friday and evenings and things*”. Despite her children being older and, in theory, being able to care for themselves, F27 decided to start her own business when she found the demands of balancing full-time employment with teenagers “... *challenging*”. F13 resigned from the paid job she had been holding down whilst running her own business after becoming pregnant and coming to the conclusion that focusing on her own business would enable her to “*control my own working hours, control everything and if I have a family then I could control rather than being forced to work a certain number of hours*”. For F17, the decision to start her own business was driven by two factors: expensive childcare meant she could no longer afford to work but an ill husband who could not work himself drove her to consider self-employment as a means of bringing in money whilst having the flexibility to work when her children were in school.

The remainder of interviewees, whilst still citing a desire for greater balance, offered insights into many other motivating factors, ranging from having no other option available to them, the long-standing desire to be their own boss and personality clashes in previous jobs. For instance, F19 both believed she “... *could set my own timetable*” whilst “... *always wanting to work for myself*”.

#### Work/life balance issues

The research also attempted to ascertain if, and how, interviewees managed to achieve a satisfactory balance between home life and running their own business. Only three interviewees within the sample reported experiencing no difficulties in achieving a satisfactory balance between their work and personal life. Work/life balance was an important issue for the remaining interviewees, mainly but not exclusively for those with caring responsibilities.

*Interviewees with caring responsibilities:* Of the 16 interviewees who had children, only F4, reported no difficulties balancing her work and family life. Elaborating on her childcare arrangements, F4 described how her son attended a nursery three days a week and then spent a day with either her husband or herself, both of whom worked four days a week in order to have a day with him. F4, did however, acknowledge one downside to running her own business: “... *I haven’t had a proper holiday since my honeymoon, four years ago*”.

The remaining interviewees with caring responsibilities experienced and recounted a range of difficulties achieving an acceptable balance between their work and family life. For instance, one of the young women within F1, a single mother, relied heavily on her mother in order to reconcile her work and family responsibilities: “... *this job gives me the freedom to get out to pick him up from school, leave him off with my mum and then come back. I couldn’t do that with an ordinary job*”. This flexibility came at a price, however, as this interviewee was required to work longer hours at night to match the efforts of her colleagues.

F29 described her difficulties achieving any real balance between her work and young family: “*it has just taken up a lot more time than I imagined and I never really switch off. I’m going home and I’m doing stuff at home on the computer, it’s nearly a constant thing*”. She continued, “*I suppose I expected it to be easier, to be more flexible. I expected that it would be great to just do so many days, or hours, and that I would have a lot more time at home ... it did not work out quite like that*”. Similarly, F26, a mother of four children under the age of seven, initially tried working from home when she started her own business but “...*found that very difficult ... I was constantly working, there was no break between work and home and anytime I had a spare moment I was in the study working ... it put a lot of pressure on the family scenario*”. In order to have a distinct separation between her work/family responsibilities, F26 eventually secured office accommodation but stated: “... *it*

*just takes one child to get sick or your childminder to go off and it's almost like your equilibrium just changes all over again".*

F3 relayed a catalogue of problems she had encountered in attempting to balance her business with childcare, family holidays and her second pregnancy. F3 had two young children and an intricate web of childcare arrangements, including her husband, other family members and the *'lady next door'*. Given that her business involved her working with young children, F3 was understandably reluctant to put her own children into formal daycare: *"I think I would find it hard if I had to put the children into day nursery for me to go off, doing this dream of mine. You know, I would think that was wrong"*. F3 also reported how holidays had been spoilt by her *"...phoning in to see if anybody's leaving messages, just in case I might miss a booking"* and spoke of how she went into her home-based office every night once her children were in bed. She half-joked, *"...my husband's left sitting with his wine and by the time I get out he's maybe drunk the bottle of wine. So I work and he drinks"*. F3 admitted that she worked six days a week but had taken active steps to alleviate pressures associated with achieving a satisfactory balance between work and family, including moving her business from home to a dedicated office setting.

Another interviewee with a young child, F7 had the longest standard working hours of all interviewees, starting work in her cattery at 6.30am and locking up for the night at 11.30pm, seven days a week. F7 believed that being based at the family home created many problems when attempting to balance her work and domestic responsibilities, describing how housework frequently encroached on her business. As the mother of a young baby, F7 admitted that she was only able to combine her business with her parental role because her mother-in-law purposefully took early retirement to help her out.

F18, who had four children under the age of ten, likened herself to *"... a hamster on a treadmill"*, despite acknowledging that her husband had taken over the childcare role within the family. She felt that running her own business had afforded her a better lifestyle though admitted that she did not take advantage of that fact, continuing to work seven days a week and sneaking into work for a few hours at weekends before her children woke up and realized she was away. Unlike other interviewees, the guilt F18 experienced did not arise from missing out on time with her children but instead was directed at leaving the office before her employees, acknowledging that she always wanted to be the last to leave: *"... quite frequently, the business does come before my family ... it's an addictive thing"*.

Even those interviewees with older children reported difficulties achieving work/life balance. For instance, F26 found considering the needs of her 8 year old daughter much more problematic than her infant children: *"... with the after-school activities, you want ... to be a mother and you want to make sure you're not shortchanging them but you also want to do the work"*. She continued: *"... a stay-at-home mummy can do a lot more with their children ... because I'm at work, there's times that you really feel, not even guilty, but you feel you're missing out and you don't feel like a great mother and I suppose that's the worst bit of it"*. For F17, who had three children aged 15+, conflict arose from trying to keep up with their changing schools, friends and hobbies, with guilt driving her to make sure they would not *"... lose out just because you are pursuing a hobby or career"*. F17 described her life as being *"... just work the whole time, and the kids and the house. It never stops"*, continuing *"... the months of May, June, July and August, a lot of our business comes in then, so we have to delay, put off or take very, very short holidays. ... We will never be able to have a two-week holiday again ... as a family"*. F27, who had two teenagers, recalled her pre-entrepreneurial job: *"I was leaving the house in the morning before they were up and coming back when they were already home and I felt with them it was nearly as important to be at home when they are doing their GCSE's and their A-levels as it is when they are small children"*. Similarly, F20 who had two children described herself as *"... constantly trying to think and plan six*



*months ahead ... it just means you have to juggle your work, your life, your family. You have to be all things to everybody”.*

Despite the difficulties recounted here, interviewees did acknowledge that new venturing had brought with it advantages, including financial independence, being able to pick children up from school (even if just to drop them off at childminders), working hours when it suits the individual and flexibility around school holidays.

*Interviewees without caring responsibilities:* The majority of interviewees without caring responsibilities encountered difficulties achieving satisfactory work/life balance. Fear of debt and failure led both F10 and F21 to accept more commissions than they had time to complete during standard working hours. For F10, this meant she routinely had to work over weekends and long into the night to complete commissions, after spending all day in her workshop. This, in turn, obviously restricted her ability to enjoy a social life outside her business or join her friends on holiday: “...because I can’t close for two weeks. If I was closed for two weeks that’s two weeks of no income”. Similarly, F6 believed “... the long hours really eat up into your weekend and social life”, recounting how a short holiday had been spoilt because she “...couldn’t really switch off ... I was constantly checking the answering machine and emails to see if orders had come in”. She concluded, “... my husband was really cross with me”. F15 recalled how, “... at the start, I promised myself that I’d treat myself every year, that I’d go skiing and try to get the odd weekend away. But I don’t get weekends never mind holidays. ... It gets tiring, I’m running on empty”.

Five interviewees had additional complications and demands on their time by holding down a permanent job at the same time as running their business. One, F16, had gone part-time with her employer to give more time for her own business, which she ran from home. She acknowledged that this was taking a toll on her personal and family life, saying: “... sometimes the phone rings and I’m all booked up but if I have half an hour free for dinner I say, ‘I’ll squeeze you in there’ so it means I don’t get dinner or get to spend any time with my husband.” She also described how her husband had been in hospital for a few days but that she had hardly time to visit him, stating, “I don’t have time for family life”.

Perhaps most distressing was the dilemma facing one of the young women within F1, who confided that the prospect of having children with her partner was “on the horizon” and thus acknowledged that difficulties loomed large. This young woman was concerned about being able to strike a balance between having a baby and working the number of hours required by her colleagues, saying: “it’s going to be difficult to try and keep working around having a young baby and doing the hours that you have to do. And I don’t have much choice in doing them, I don’t have the option of going part-time because if you don’t do the fulltime hours here you’re not going to bring in enough money to ... keep the business going”. Further, with no family support, the reality of accessing fulltime childcare raised further concerns: for instance, regarding her ability to pay (“...we don’t actually earn enough money to pay for childcare” ... if I have to spend all my money on childminding from the money we pay ourselves then it’s not worth my while doing this”); potentially spoiling the business for her colleagues (“ but if I don’t do this I don’t know if the business could continue for the other two”); and not being able to bond with her baby before returning to work (“And even if I could afford childcare, maternity leave would be a problem. I’d end up not bringing anything in and I couldn’t afford that for long, but then you have to have a few months with your baby before you can send it to a childminder”). Distraught at the decisions facing her, this interviewee had come to the conclusion that “...either I don’t have a family or I don’t have a job. What a way to strike a balance. And the way I’m thinking now is that, yeah, the business is important but I wouldn’t say that it’s too important for me not to have a family, to make that sacrifice”.

### Family support

The youngest interviewees within the sample were keen to discuss the issue of family support, perhaps because they were starting their business with little in the way of prior life and work experience and so often had to call upon family members to address shortfalls in their own human, social and financial capital. Two broad groups within this cohort reported positive levels of support from family: those who had undertaken entrepreneurial activity through necessity, and those who had brought their parents on board as co-directors or employees. They were, however, in the minority, with the majority describing how close relatives had reacted with disbelief, negativity and even outright hostility.

For instance, F9 was one young woman who recalled the reaction of her parents to her decision to start her own business: *"... they were horrified ... they would rather I wasn't doing it. My mother was like, 'you shouldn't be doing it' and my daddy was going, 'you're going to have a nervous breakdown by the time you're 30'"*. F6 had a similar experience, speaking of how her mum *"...really didn't want me to start up the business. She was horrified and like 'don't be silly, you can't, you're young, you're a woman'. ... My mum thought I was bit too green, too naïve to do it"*. F7 spoke of her parents' anger and disappointment when she gave up her law scholarship to start her business, saying that even though *"... they knew my heart wasn't really in law ... my mum was really happy, she thought it was a safe option and steady income"*. F16 explained that whilst her parents were supportive in practical ways, they did not offer any moral or emotional support. She said, *"... My mum and dad go, 'did you see this programme on TV?' and I go 'have you any idea how busy I am'? And they just say, 'well, too bad, you brought all this on yourself'"*.

Seventeen women in the sample were married, with a further three engaged and/or living with their partner. Whilst the majority had the unwavering support of their partner, two (F3 and F16) had established their business against the wishes of their respective husbands. These women spoke of the frustration and disappointment they felt at the lack of support, apathy and, at times, resentment their husbands harboured against their entrepreneurial endeavours. For instance, F3 spoke of how when times were tough with the business or when she was experiencing problems reconciling her work and family life she would turn to her husband: *"...all I wanted was a shoulder to cry on and he'd say 'well, you started it, you got yourself into it'"*. F3, whose parents were bitterly disappointed at her decision to quit paid employment to start her business, recalled her husband's ongoing combative attitude: *"...my husband still doesn't appreciate that I'm bringing in money from this, he thinks I'm going out for a jolly"*. F3 was especially upset that her husband's negativity had influenced her son, who at 6½ years old had taken to saying, *"... 'daddy earns all the money, daddy works harder than you'".* She was particularly disappointed in her son's attitude, given that he had grown up with her running her business, concluding *"...he must be listening to his daddy and then think too that it's not work, not a proper job"*. F3 firmly believed her husband's disapproval stemmed from him feeling threatened by her success and self-confidence, and disallowed his protestations that he was only acting as devil's advocate in pointing out what could go wrong, concluding, *"...he hates it, hates the business and hates me doing it and hates the amount of time it takes up"*. The husband of F16 made life equally difficult for her: she believed that he made her feel like she had to justify using her own savings to cover start-up costs and described how he refused to offer emotional support: *"he said when I was going to do this that he'd be supportive but I don't know what kind of support he had in mind. He doesn't help me, he complains that I'm working too much and he just gives me a hard time"*. One interviewee, F22, admitted that her marriage had broken up, with her entrepreneurial decision a contributory factor: *"I think, yes, me going into business put added pressure on what was already a pressurised situation"*. Now a single parent of an eight-year-old child, F22 admitted: *"I certainly have very little 'self' time"*.

## **Discussion**

This paper attempted to examine the myth that women entrepreneurs can really ‘have it all’. Certainly, in an ideal world, the reality of entrepreneurship would match the expectations of women embarking on an entrepreneurial career in terms of them being able to achieve a perfect balance between work and family life. Unfortunately, empirical findings reveal that the reality of entrepreneurship was far from their initial expectations.

### Motives for participation

With regard to motives for participating in entrepreneurial new venturing, and with specific reference to the ‘lifestyle preference theory’ (Hakim 2003), empirical findings contradict the author’s assertion that the vast majority of working-age women are forced by economic necessity to strike a balance between their domestic and work responsibilities. Applying this theory to entrepreneurship, and specifically to the women entrepreneurs in the sample, only six interviewees cited a specific need for flexibility to suit their individual family circumstances as a motive for starting their own businesses. However, the fact that the ‘lifestyle preference theory’ appears to have had little influence when the majority of interviewees were starting their business does not mean that it remained unimportant as time in business progressed. As shall be seen, work/life assumed greater priority over time as the interviewees experienced continuing difficulties in balancing the competing demands of business ownership and family life. Further, many interviewees cited ‘flexibility’ as a secondary motive alongside other factors such as a desire to escape unsatisfactory situation, or to fulfill a longstanding ambition for self-employment.

### Work/life balance

Reconciling their business with their personal life was an issue for the majority of interviewees, with only three interviewees believing themselves to be exempt from the pressures of achieving a satisfactory work/life balance.

One interviewee, for instance, relayed a complicated web of childcare arrangements to help balance her family responsibilities with her business. A mother of two young children, she described steps she had taken to improve imbalances in her work/life situation including moving her business base from home to a dedicated office and cutting back on the number of classes she offered. Despite this, she confided to working six days a week, often late into the night, and reported feeling overwhelmed by the weight of her dual responsibilities. Another interviewee, who was home-based and had the longest working hours of all respondents, confided her initial concerns upon finding out she was pregnant regarding how the baby would affect her business. Reporting that her worst fears had not come to fruition, she admitted that this was the case only because her mother-in-law had taken early retirement to assist her with both the business and childcare. She admitted, however, that she was no longer as enthusiastic about her business, viewing it merely as a source of income rather than with the passion and fervor she had initially experienced. Others reported how exorbitant childcare costs and the lack of quality childcare stymied their ambitions to either work more or less hours: part-time entrepreneurs who wanted to work more hours with their business could not afford to pay extra childcare costs whilst those who wanted to reduce their hours at work to spend more time with their family were afraid their full-time childminders would themselves not accept reduced hours.

A number of interviewees admitted that they were keen to start a family: whilst one believed her self-employed status would make it easier for her to strike a balance in terms of choosing to work when it suited family life, this was not the case for two other interviewees who believed their work/life balance would suffer if they became pregnant. One young

woman in particular expressed real concerns about how she would be able to work the required number of hours her colleagues demanded if she had a baby. She confessed that she did not earn enough to pay for childcare but similarly knew that the business would not be able to continue without her input if she left or took a break in order to bond with her baby.

The remaining interviewees were childless and reported no plans to start a family, but nonetheless reported difficulties, at times severe, in resolving work/life balance issues. This was despite initial expectations that the situation would improve, and difficulties lessen, as the business became more established, with interviewees admitting that they believed they would have become more adept at balancing the competing demands on their time, with the passing of time. For instance, there were admissions of having to work late into the night to complete orders, not being able to take holidays or weekend breaks and not being able to enjoy a social life. For two interviewees, both jewelers, their finances and fear of failure led them to accept more commissions than they had time to complete during standard working hours, meaning they often had to work through the night and over weekends to complete them. Another felt her situation had deteriorated even though she had left her permanent job in the period between interviews taking place in order to focus on her business. There were also reports of many interviewees assuming the burden of childcare and domestic responsibilities, despite working long hours with their own businesses, and in most cases, spending more time at work than their spouse/partner.

Findings emerging from the research appear to suggest that the socialisation of the young women interviewed contributed to many of the difficulties they encountered in achieving balance between their business, family and social lives, whether they had children or not. The situation was particularly difficult for five interviewees who were running their own business alongside holding down permanent jobs, with many describing how they had no option but to work late into the night and at weekends, and not being able to take holidays, in order to cope with the competing demands on their time. These findings suggest that work/life balance was as much an issue for the interviewees as it is believed to be for working women in general, despite the apparent flexibility and freedom self-employment is believed to bring (Carter and Shaw 2006; Mattis 2004; Small Business Service 2004; Williams 2004).

### Family support

Lack of support from family was also an ongoing problem for many interviewees, particularly the youngest. Whilst the majority reported that they had the unequivocal support of family members, this was not the standard response. For instance, some of these interviewees described how their parents and/or spouse/partner failed to appreciate the pressures they were under and therefore did not offer practical or moral support. There were reports of apathy, negativity and even hostility from parents and/or partner/spouse, based primarily on the misguided belief that they were too young and/or too naïve to run their own business, on concerns around work/life balance and on misguided perceptions that business ownership was not an appropriate career for a young woman, especially for those with or contemplating a family. One interviewee continued to operate her business in the face of opposition from all those within her immediate circle – her parents remained disappointed at her decision to leave paid employment to start her business whilst her husband's initially apathetic attitude had turned hostile. Another described her continuing distress and upset at having to run her business in the face of resentment, hostility and lack of interest from her husband, parents and in-laws, who all believed she was using her business as a deliberate ploy to postpone having children and pressurised her to give up on an almost continual basis. This was also a continuing barrier for certain interviewees, with some describing how those closest to them continued to use the belief that they were too young and immature as an ongoing excuse not to support them. This demonstrates that entrepreneurs who fall outside the mythical ideal of

what society perceives an entrepreneur should look like may be viewed with suspicion, hostility or reduced levels of support.

In two key instances, interviewees had no option but to do everything themselves simply because support was not forthcoming from their partner/ spouse. A further six interviewees, however, appear to have assumed the burden of domestic and/or childcare tasks whilst running their business in order to prove their capability. Specifically, three interviewees wanted to prove their competency to their detractors, with a further three admitting to being 'control freaks' – portraying themselves as latter-day superwomen who could not, or would not, accept help. The situation appears to be different again for those who still encountered work/life balance issues despite having the support of family and spouse/partner. For instance, those whose businesses were home-based described how they had 'assumed' responsibility for domestic responsibilities – it may be, therefore, that their own socialisation experiences had caused them to unquestionably accept caring and domestic responsibilities even though they ultimately resented having to do so.

### **Implications**

Women are under-represented both within extant literature and entrepreneurial activity. Therefore, by providing valuable insights into barriers encountered by a sample of female entrepreneurs in Northern Ireland, the research made important contributions to both theory and practice.

Desk research revealed that much of the growing body of literature existing on female entrepreneurs fails to portray them as a heterogeneous entity but considers them a homogeneous group. For instance, literature may fail to reflect the different experiences of women starting their own business either straight from school/university, following long periods of employment, or after raising a family. The study therefore sought to close gaps in knowledge around the experiences of women within new venturing, in particular looking at the myth that entrepreneurship allowed them to achieve a greater level of balance between their multiple responsibilities.

The research is also important for practical reasons. Empirical findings demonstrated that work/life balance was particularly problematic for those interviewees with children, and was one key area those interviewees could see remaining difficult, even worsening, as their personal and domestic situation changed over time. To remedy this, policymakers could, for instance, review existing policies and practices in order to help female entrepreneurs address problems arising from work/life balance issues, looking at the working family tax credit system, government subsidies for childcare and an extension to free or subsidized childcare for pre-school children. By profiling the experiences of these women, and identifying the barriers they encounter, it is hoped that future generations of women will engage in new venturing, that the longevity of their start-ups will improve and that advance knowledge of barriers will assist them in overcoming obstacles that may otherwise overwhelm them. In this way too, some of the myths surrounding female entrepreneurship in practice might finally be laid to rest.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of interviewees

	Industry type	Years in business	Age	Marital status and no. of children (if any) at first interview
F1	Craft	3	30	Single (1) Co-habiting Co-habiting
F2	Animal services	1	20	Single
F3	Children's services	3	30	Married (2)
F4	Recruitment	3	30	Married (1)
F5	Travel & tourism	1	30	Co-habiting
F6	Craft	3	29	Married
F7	Animal services	< 1	24	Co-habiting
F8	Children's services	3	28	Married
F9	Leisure services	< 1	28	Single
F10	Craft	< 1	23	Single
F11	Leisure services	< 1	26	Single
F12	Health products	< 1	19	Single
F13	Dietitian	1	28	Married
F14	Craft	2	27	Single
F15	Food & drink	1	23	Single
F16	Animal services	1	26	Married
F17	Aquatic services	4	37	Married (3)
F18	Recruitment	5	43	Married (4)
F19	Physiotherapy	4	36	Married (2)
F20	Training consultancy	5	55	Married (2)
F21	Jeweler	3	35	Single
F22	Interior design	3	47	Divorced (1)
F23	Beautician	3	28	Divorced (2)
F24	Training consultancy	3	49	Married (3)
F25	Advertising	5	40	Married (2)
F26	Business consultancy	5	36	Married (4)
F27	Chiropody	5	49	Married (2)
F28	Retail	3	49	Married (2)
F29	Training consultancy	2	33	Married (2)
F30	IT	3	34	Married (4)

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