

# Women-only business groups marginalize and fail to empower members

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Women-only business networks fail to boost female entrepreneurship and instead serve to marginalise further the very people they seek to help.

New research from the University of Edinburgh Business School, Lancaster University Management School and Dublin City University Business School, published in the *Journal of Economic Geography*, found the networks are unable to overcome bigger societal issues that prevent more women from pursuing their own businesses.

Policy makers see the drive to increase female [entrepreneurship](#) as key to helping foster national and regional economic growth. However, women lag behind men in terms of business ownership, growth and access to resources.

The research, carried out in Northern Ireland, a region where female entrepreneurship is low in comparison to the rest of the UK, looked at efforts by regional development agency Invest NI to address the issues.

Regional economic policy has focused on stimulating and supporting women's entrepreneurship through the establishment of formal women-only networks to provide support, role models and access to networks.

The researchers spoke with members and managers of women-only business networks, which have been at the heart of policies in Northern Ireland for nearly two decades, as well as members of mixed networks, and of both.

Policy-makers justify the promotion of women-only networks as providing [network](#) opportunities to support women's entrepreneurship and, as a result, boost the economy, but the research, supported by British Academy funding, shows a disconnect between intent and actual impact, as the networks perpetuate women's marginalisation and place them in a niche rather than empowering and encouraging them.

"Entrepreneurship policies targeted at women are contributing little or nothing to their equality, well-being or independence," said co-author

Professor Richard Harrison, of the University of Edinburgh. "The outcomes of policy are often limited or contrary to intentions.

"Entrepreneurship is shaped for men, and successful entrepreneurs are male. Women are only deemed successful if they launch businesses in the 'right' (male-dominated) industries and match male-owned businesses for growth. Thus, women-only networks perpetuate the masculinity of entrepreneurship, by reinforcing women as being in the margins."

The research shows policy design ignores inherent structural issues within society and entrepreneurship, where there is still a clear and continuing division of labour between 'men's work' and 'women's work'.

The researchers found that there is a lack of knowledge and information around the sectors women entrepreneurs tend to predominate in. This leads to a shortfall in well-connected and credible contacts and role models to provide information or introductions to suppliers or gatekeepers.

The networks tend to be more geographically restricted and focus more on [social support](#) over business development, failing to provide a platform to address issues of gender inequality in entrepreneurship.

The interviews revealed a perception among the network members of having to battle against a male-dominated society, where they had to overcome stereotypes of women as mothers or homemakers, which can affect entrepreneurship being seen as a viable option.

"Strategies and policies focus on addressing failings or limitations unique to women, rather than on systemic, industry or institutional issues, perceiving a deficiency of perceived female underperformance," said co-author Professor Maura McAdam, of Dublin City University.

"By treating women differently to men, treating them a problem that needs to be fixed, and by creating women-only targeted initiatives, women continue to be marginalised. Many business structures are shaped for men, with women restricted in their entrepreneurial ambitions in the lower echelons of the retails and service sector, often referred to as 'pink ghettos'.

"The network managers saw themselves as empowering women, but this was not a sentiment shared by the women entrepreneurs, with the networks instead tending to reaffirm women's secondary place in society and [business](#). The members found it difficult to see themselves as entrepreneurs, undermining their ability and underselling themselves."

The researchers say more needs to be done to combat wider issues around male dominance if female entrepreneurship is to grow.

"Women-only networks have not empowered women entrepreneurs," said co-author Professor Claire Leitch, of Lancaster University. "They do not have the power to overcome issues of male dominance in the area, and it is not a given that other policies would have that ability to achieve the goals of increasing women's entrepreneurial activity, well-being and financial independence either.

"Supporting women-only networks merely pays lip service to women's unequal position and power without addressing the structural issues and inequalities at the heart of the issue. These networks reinforce the masculinity of entrepreneurship and, unfortunately, there is no quick fix for [policy](#) design in this area.

"All parties need to identify, address and eliminate the various means by which cultural bias is perpetuated, restructuring the ways social institutions are conceived. If [women](#)'s entrepreneurship continues to be seen as a gendered niche, aspirations for its impact will never be met."

**More information:** Richard T Harrison et al, Woman's entrepreneurship as a gendered niche: the implications for regional development policy, *Journal of Economic Geography* (2019). [DOI: 10.1093/jeg/lbz035](https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbz035)

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