

Challenging the entrepreneurial discourse around women home-based workers' empowerment

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Abstract

This article explores dominant entrepreneurship discourse and practice surrounding informal women home-based workers, and their relationship to goals of individual empowerment. We argue that conventional neoliberal entrepreneurship discourse conflates empowerment and performativity, linking the capacity of women to develop greater agency with their incorporation into an economic regime with predetermined roles, labelled 'empowerment'. Applying a critical lens, we analyse the development discourse on entrepreneurship and economic performativity in these terms – looking to understand the characteristics of empowerment concerning home-based workers in Bangladesh working for a fair-trade organisation and a domestic garment supply chain. We argue that the conflation of empowerment and performativity serves the convenience of neoliberal ideology rather than the empowerment needs of those to whom such discourses are applied. To complement our critique, based on the empowerment literature, we develop a conceptual framework of empowerment and agency encompassing individual and collective agency, considering these in light of the relationship between performativity and social reproduction. Coupling a more nuanced understanding of empowerment to the critique of the entrepreneurial discourse, as applied to women home-based workers, provides a theoretical contribution to the empowerment and entrepreneurial discourse literature.

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Introduction

Within conventional neoliberal entrepreneurship discourse in development studies, empowerment is often measured by economic conditions alone – neglecting questions of social, political and power relations, and their bearing on women home workers' empowerment, entirely. Scholarly critiques of the neoliberal framing of empowerment note a reductionistic mentality at play, one failing to account for the impact of broader social relations on working and living conditions for women home workers, and collective forms of social injustice rooted in class divisions requiring collective redress. This appears particularly true where issues of social reproduction and care work in raising new members of society, as facets of these broader, collective social relations, are concerned. These are understood as critical issues, not only based on their value to those who benefit from that work, once new members of society reach working age, but also due to the devaluing and invisibility of those who provide it.

Conventional entrepreneurship discourse freely conflates 'empowerment' with economic performativity – the incorporation of the homemaker into an economic regime with predetermined roles in the name of promoting individual agency is labelled 'empowerment' (Bergeron, 2011). The question becomes the extent to which the 'entrepreneurship' involved even exists in any meaningful sense in a context where shifts in the global capital and neoliberal models of development have contributed to privatisation of government services, reduction in public services like education, social services and health care, and access to essential services like affordable power and water (Harvey, 2007: 87–119).

These problems only become more pressing in considering that women homeworkers are already enterprising in the face of neoliberal policies destructive of their rights and wellbeing, irrespective of their status as entrepreneurs – energies consistent with dynamics of social reproduction forced on women historically through the imposition of capitalist and patriarchal social relations (Mies, 2014). The fact that women are primarily responsible for socially reproductive labour within society raises the question as to how advocates of neoliberal empowerment can meaningfully claim social reproduction as evidence of their essential veracity. Critical perspectives might conceive of this as intrinsically circular. If this proves an appropriate way to characterise the logic of entrepreneurial discourse, then approaches to empowerment discourse that claim to value the work of women homeworkers while doing more or less the exact opposite are patently redundant.

In light of these issues, this paper looks to innovate on the critical literature on entrepreneurship and empowerment in a number of ways. Our key foci are:

1. Critiquing and expanding on neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse and expanding discussion on making of the (performative) gendered entrepreneurial subject in relation to two types of home-based workers, one of the main goals of this study is to extend on the work of Bergeron (2011) and Boeri (2018).

2. Examine how the notion of a ‘gendered entrepreneurial subject’ (Boeri, 2018) applies to two types of home-based workers in Bangladesh through the conceptual framework of empowerment and agency.
3. Investigating the context for performative entrepreneurial discourse by examining if, and to what extent, (a) the entrepreneurial experience creates positive impacts for women home-based workers’ empowerment; and (b) if agency resulting from neoliberal empowerment presents any challenge to the performativity of the gendered entrepreneurial subject.

The paper then looks to examine the context for the claims of conventional entrepreneurial discourse, following Bergeron (2011) not merely to critique entrepreneurial performativity, but to use this as the rationale for informing a conceptual framework of empowerment with our empirical source material of garment homeworkers in Bangladesh. In this we look to build, in particular, on references by Bergeron to the role of neoliberal performativity in appropriating grassroots struggles for gender and social equality to the project of ‘transforming social institutions and social practises to achieve neoliberal goals’ (Bergeron, 2011: 152), and ‘attempting to transform subjectivities towards neoliberal aims’ (Bergeron, 2011: 154), with a view to reclaiming what was most powerful and meaningful about empowerment as originally conceived.

To this end, we take up the questions of agency featuring prominently in the way feminist economic scholars have conceptualised empowerment – how women exercise strategic forms of agency concerning their own lives, as well as in relation to the larger structures of constraint that subordinate them (Gammage et al., 2016; Kabeer, 1999, 2001, 2016, 2017; Nussbaum, 2001).

Seeking to understand the characteristics of empowerment concerning two types of garment home workers in Bangladesh, we study the lived experience of homeworkers working for a fair-trade global garment supply chain and the other group work for a domestic garment supply chain. We argue that garment employers, fair-trade non-government organisation (NGO) providers of empowerment programmes foster the making of the gendered entrepreneurial subject based on a self-serving interpretation of empowerment adopted by the entrepreneurial discourse (Bergeron, 2011; Boeri, 2018).

This paper aims then to contribute to the economic labour literature in two special ways; first, it expands on the critique of performative entrepreneurial discourse and the gendered entrepreneurial subject by adding an empowerment framework. Second, it conceptualises meaningful empowerment as the strategic form of agency to challenge the gendered entrepreneurial subject, adding nuance to our understanding of neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse as means of imposing performative constraints – and, no less importantly, ways of challenging such constraints.

Assessing empowerment within a context of social reproduction and home-based work

Feminist scholarship increasingly recognises the centrality of social reproduction to issues of worker empowerment (Bhattacharya, 2017; Boeri, 2018; Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2017;

Kabeer, 2016, 2017; Mezzadri, 2019). Noting substantial ongoing demand for care work alongside its invisibility within conventional economic discourse, Boeri (2018) argues that women are subject to ‘gendered constructs of care’, manifest as cycles of pauperisation and continuums of dependence, through which neoliberal ideology conceals and relies on power dynamics in the economy and family. Consequently, women experience a profoundly unequal balance of power within the economy and family.

Fraser (2017) argues while social reproductive activities represent part of the ‘background conditions of possibility’ for capitalist development, capitalism splits reproductive labour from the broader universe of human activities, creating ‘boundary struggles’ in which care work leads to ‘housewifisation’ (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2017; Mezzadri, 2019). As women are consequently forced to choose between wage work and care, capitalist social relations become the institutional basis for new forms of women’s subordination (Fraser, 2017).

Through privatisation, marketisation and atomisation, neoliberal policies further entrench and intensify women’s unpaid care and caretaking work (Acosta-Belén and Bose, 1990). Simultaneously, women are pushed to enter the paid workforce, as circumstances necessitate them to access any paid ‘productive’ work, often precarious, informal and low paid, (Mies, 2014). Women’s unpaid reproductive work subsidises the state, and local and global corporations, while employers, fair-trade and NGO providers of empowerment programmes foster the ‘neoliberal performativity’ of the entrepreneur, based on a self-serving interpretation of empowerment (Bergeron, 2011; Boeri, 2018); In expanding on this point below, we note for now that feminist scholars have used social reproduction to explain the commodification and embeddedness of care work and broader economic relations of reproductive labour concerning the state, the market and the household (Mezzadri, 2019). Accounting for the relationship between social reproduction and production; as a crucial factor in social relations, but one suppressed by neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse, this feminist critique also represents a robust foundation to critique entrepreneurialism-as-empowerment.

Critiques of social reproduction build upon early feminist writings that challenge the ways reproductive work have been socially constructed and devalued (Federici, 2012; Mies, 2014). We use here the definition of social reproductive labour to encompass work that occurs in the home, reproduction and care of children, relatives and others, domestic labour for family members, and subsistence and voluntary activities carried out in the local community. As home-based work challenges the separation between reproduction and production, the invisibilisation of home-based work can be attributed to the undervaluing of social reproductive labour and so to the devaluation of women’s both paid and unpaid work (Delaney et al., 2019; Mies, 2014). Value-creating for capital at the same moment, however, is evident through the integration of informal home-based work into local and global supply chains (Mezzadri, 2019).

In looking to contribute to the scholarly critique of performative entrepreneurship discourses, on this basis, we encourage recognition for the value of research into social reproduction, to help make room for approaches to homeworker empowerment that are, in fact, empowering. The tensions between social relations for capital accumulation, and the contradictions between the productive and reproductive spheres, we contend, are critical to understanding the value of women’s productive and reproductive labour.

Neoliberal empowerment discourse and performativity

The existence of these issues within neoliberal empowerment discourse contrasts markedly with empowerment as initially conceived. Originating with the founding of the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era network (DAWN) in Bangalore in 1984, 'empowerment' was understood to require the breaking down of gender subordination and associated oppressive structures by prioritising points of view from the oppressed themselves (Sen and Grown, 1987: 22; Calvès, 2009). By contrast, neoliberal-aligned institutions and organisations envision empowerment in terms far more consistent with its own ideological priorities than those associated with the breaking down of gender subordination, while invoking the prior assumption that the informal economy exists as a spontaneous response to state regulation (Boeri, 2018).

In neoliberal empowerment discourse, informal workers embracing 'entrepreneurship' are said to be rational actors choosing to work outside of constraints on the formal labour market, as noted. In reality, systemic power imbalances, coupled with the result of the failure of the same neoliberal 'development' policies to produce outcomes recognisable as personal empowerment, force women into informal work (Boeri, 2018; Webb et al., 2013). Neoliberal empowerment discourse thus abandons social transformation in favour of upholding the status quo, focusing on efficiency, productivity and market-based activities (Calvès, 2009). Such abandonment reflects broader tendencies within neoliberalism, not least being the propensity to conflate class privilege and individual freedom (Boldeman, 2007; Harvey, 2007).

The failure to distinguish between power over and power to, critical scholarship argues, results in an 'economic performativity', or 'role-playing' (Boeri, 2018; Emmerij et al., 2005). This reflects an 'entrepreneurial turn' – one characterised by a shift away from collective forms of empowerment, rooted in social solidarity, towards an individualistic, neoliberal entrepreneurial ideal (Bergeron, 2011; Dey, 2010). Rather than the union or community group, the individual seeking their financial advantage is seen as the ideal means for women to lift themselves, their families and communities out of poverty. Mauksch (2018) argues that neoliberal discourses construct empowerment conceptually to subvert state regulation, prioritise efficiency and productivity over empowerment, and conflate class privilege and individual freedom for ideological purposes.

Such practises encapsulating performativity sit very sharply at odds with the purposes of empowerment in breaking down of gender subordination (Mauksch, 2018: 142). Prefabrication of points of view for the oppressed by entrepreneurship discourse thus 'subtly changes the space of possibilities for personhood', not so much bringing opportunities for empowerment to women homeworkers as bringing 'certain types of people into existence as experts developed a language to speak of them' (Dey, 2010: 4). Since there is no performer before the performed, those falling within the purview of entrepreneurship-as-empowerment discourse perform it into being through 'acts of identification' in which they 'simultaneously co-produce the very discourse they engage in' (Mauksch, 2018: 144).

Performative entrepreneurial discourse is thus adjudged a failure in light of its actual outcomes (Mauksch, 2018). First, it generates a 'symbolic language of violence' by excluding options not serviceable to neoliberal ideology (Dey, 2010: 4). Second, this

symbolic language of violence produces, not empowered women homeworkers, but a 'gendered entrepreneurial subject' – the product of 'development industry discourse emphasising neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency through the market' (Boeri, 2018: 2). Women's actual experiences with the informal economy, Boeri (2018) argues, profoundly contradicts the abstracted representation of the gendered entrepreneurial subject – reflecting the well understood function of social reproduction in perpetuating oppressive gender and class hierarchies. The practical application of empowerment goals in this context is adjudged to result in their 'extraordinary shrinkage to a set of instrumentalist goals' (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015: 397).

Thanks to these instrumentalist goals, women then are encouraged to work for development rather than on development of their rights for empowerment (Kabeer, 2005). Neoliberal performativity is defined with goals, targets and indicators that do little to address structural issues, but that enable top-down application by a handful of officials far from the affected homeworkers (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). Supporting these assessments, a 2001 report from the Institute of Development Studies found that aid agencies continued to rely on the identical models of 'top-down hierarchical control with conditionalities', though this time justifying them using the language and forms of empowerment (Moore, 2001: 1). Aid agencies in being often 'unwilling or unable to abdicate authority over the poor' tend to 'unconsciously undervalue local knowledge and capacities' (Parpart et al., 2002: 48). Success in performative terms, then, can be achieved without any improvement in women's economic or social status; they often function to paper over neoliberal attacks on welfare systems and other social supports designed to protect women from the ravages of neoliberalism, now also including neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Dey, 2010; Kabeer, 2005).

Without and within broader relational contexts, entrepreneurial discourse loses its meaning as a form of empowerment. The difference is captured in comparing a 2002 World Bank development report against two subsequent publications on empowerment that adopted a more grassroots approach (Calvès, 2009). The World Bank report (2001: 39) frames empowerment in terms of contributions to economic growth, describing its empowerment goals in terms of building 'the assets of poor people to enable them to engage effectively in markets'. Despite this rhetoric, the main effect of this approach is adjudged to contribute to an instrumentalist view of women's empowerment as directly joined to their economic role – captured in the condescending portrayal of Bangladeshi women as 'poor Bangladeshi women' in need of saving (Nazreen et al., 2011; Siddiqui, 2009).

Following further discussion at the World Bank, however, two later works reflect a shift from individual to collective responses, defining empowerment instead as 'the process of enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes' (Calvès, 2009; Narayan, 2005). These refer to the 'capabilities' approach of Amartya Sen, defining it as 'the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives' (Narayan, 2002: xviii; Calvès, 2009).

Ideological shifts at the World Bank notwithstanding, performative discourse prevails elsewhere, reflecting the severe limitations of neoliberal entrepreneurialism in light of the

concomitant lack of empowerment. Informed by the above discussion concerning forms of empowerment that can contribute to shifts in systemic injustices, we explore the characteristics of an empowerment framework as it applies to homeworkers in the following section.

Framing empowerment: Introducing a framework of empowerment and agency

Calvès (2009) describes the work of Sen and Grown (1987) as a turning point in the development of empowerment discourse – the empowerment movement advocated being one inclined towards radical social change. In this respect, grassroots women’s organisations were seen to be the ‘catalysts of women’s visions and perspectives’ (Sen and Grown, 1987: 15) spearheading the movements geared to producing structural changes required to enable meaningful empowerment. In addition to legislative changes, Sen and Grown (1987: 21) argue, ‘political mobilisation, conscientisation and education for the people’ are at the heart of strategies for ‘the promotion of development, free of all forms of oppression based on sex, class, race or nationality’.

Nussbaum (2001: 10) describes the first principle of her capabilities approach in terms of women being ends in themselves – able to exercise workers’ control of the bakery, not just having a more significant share of its output of pies. Cornwall and Rivas (2015) further stress the fact that empowerment is not just about upskilling the capacity of women to cope with oppression and injustice, so that they can achieve as much exercise of their capabilities as circumstances will allow, but fundamentally transforming power relations. Empowerment, they argue, is about enabling women to question otherwise normalised power relations, and to develop the collective self-confidence to change them; meaningful empowerment is (1) relational and (2) a process, not an end-point, let alone a measurable outcome to which targets can be attached (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015).

Consistent with the notion of challenging the power relations thwarting women’s empowerment opportunities, Kabeer (2008) suggests a three-dimensional model including resources, agency and achievements. The conceptualisation of empowerment underscores the close relationship of these dimensions; each dimension builds on the other. Kabeer’s (1999: 438) understanding of empowerment encompasses changes in consciousness, or a ‘sense of agency’, including their sense of self-worth and social identity, their capacity to exercise strategic control over their own lives and renegotiate their relationships with others; and their ability to participate on more equal terms with men in reshaping the societies in which they live more democratically (Kabeer, 2008: 27). Consciousness, voice and action are thus all facets of agency and encompass both the individual and collective exercise of agency (Gammage et al., 2016).

Kabeer (2016) further emphasises that the process of empowerment involves women gaining access to meaningful choices in their lives that were previously not available to them. Kabeer states, ‘Agency rather than a purely income effect ... is associated with an apparent transformation in values and attitudes in the larger society’ (2016: 313). Empowerment, therefore, functions as opportunities for women to exercise their agency and shift unequal power relations (Kabeer, 2016, 2017).

Friedmann (1992) argues that meaningful approaches to empowerment enable autonomy as a characteristic feature of local self-reliance, direct or participatory forms of democracy, and the capacity to learn through direct involvement and experience. Manifest in these areas, Friedmann (1992) adds, empowerment involves psychological, social and political facets that need to be accounted for in ensuring that autonomy is fully realised in overcoming poverty and promoting genuine empowerment. Touwen-van Der Kooij (1996) discusses autonomy in terms of the contrast between the 'power over' of traditional development models and the 'power to' of empowerment discourse – the latter being a relational concept in presupposing conditions enabling exercise of collective autonomy. Individual and collective forms of autonomy contrast with conventional neoliberal forms, adding the critical collective elements. To this, we add that the conceptual framework of empowerment and agency, as described below in Figure one, is depicted as a process rather than a hierarchy of events (Figure 1).

- **Power-over:** involves women entering the economic market activities but facing controlling relationships of domination and subordination based on the notion that amounts of power and power exchanges are fixed. These types of relationships exist within the controlling relationships of social institutions, employers and the family with a zero-sum game for the women. Empowerment may include individual gains such as access to income, awareness of social entitlements and some improvement in economic circumstances but offer limited capacity to negotiate and change anything (Friedmann, 1992; Touwen-van Der Kooij, 1996).
- **Power within:** involves self-awareness based in self-acceptance, self-respect, self-esteem, psychological self-awareness, consciousness-raising, self-confidence and assertiveness. Improvement in economic livelihood through earning an income improves the individual's sense of self and respect by others. Self-respect is extended to respect for and acceptance of others as equals (Friedmann, 1992; Touwen-van Der Kooij, 1996).
- **Power-to:** is creative, productive and enabling, and considered the essence of individual empowerment. It involves capacity building, decision-making authority, leadership, the power to understand how things work, and problem-solving skills. Acquisition of knowledge, skills and information and expanded income opportunities can contribute to women being in control of their earnings, having meaningful choices available to them and individual voice and agency (Gammage et al., 2016; Nussbaum, 2001).
- **Power with:** this is a form of bottom-up empowerment. Women working together with other women can find tempering acts through cooperating, networking and organising together to support and encourage women's, social, economic and political empowerment. Combining the political with socio-economic elements forms a critical process of meaningful empowerment. The potential to enact collective agency enables women to join together to solve problems collectively, to have a voice in payments, markets, and gain a sense of common purpose as workers. This may also translate to community, cooperative, union and social dialogue participation, (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Kabeer, 2016, 2017; Sen and Grown, 1987; Touwen-van Der Kooij, 1996).

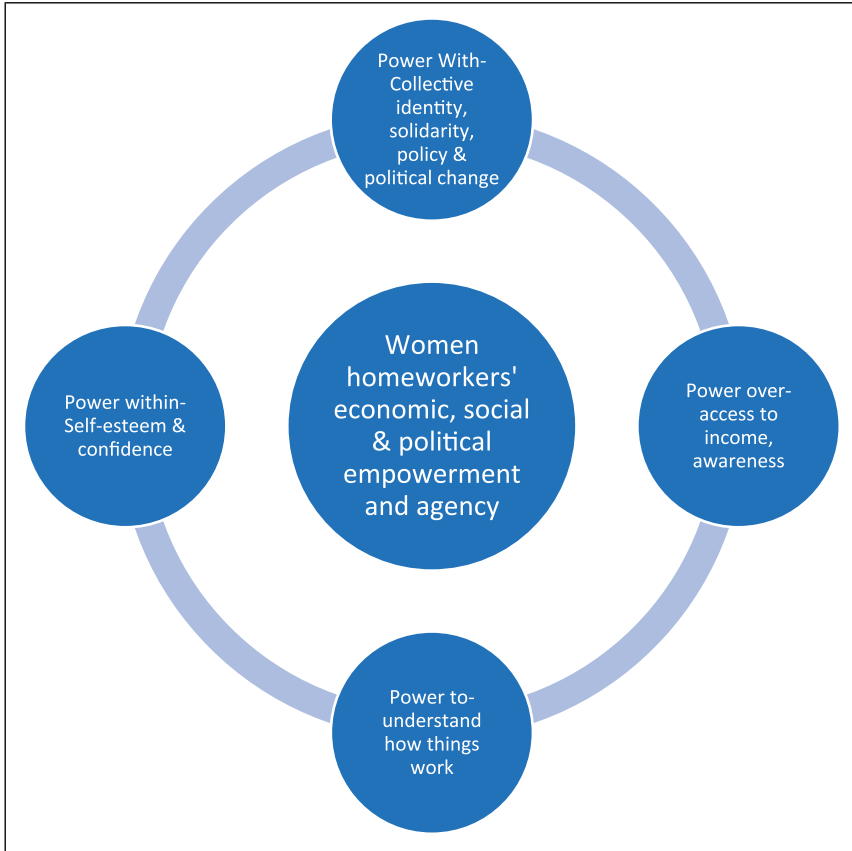


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for home-based workers' empowerment and agency.

In the following section, we describe our methodology, followed by a discussion of our findings where we build on the empowerment and agency framework we have constructed. A critical lens on the gendered entrepreneurial subject (GES) guides our critique of performative entrepreneurship as we look to develop emancipatory notions of empowerment (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Dey, 2010; Kabeer, 2016, 2017).

Method

We selected qualitative phenomenology as the research design for this study which helps the researcher to gain deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences (Goulding, 2005). This qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as phenomenology seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it – both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced, when little is known about the phenomenon or where 'the topic needs to be explored'

(Creswell, 1998: 17). For this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with women homeworkers and senior personnel of two NGOs, two social enterprises and a local garment manufacturer in Dhaka, Bangladesh in both English and Bangla languages depending upon the convenience of the participants.

Using snowball sampling techniques, we contacted a total of four NGOs and social enterprises and one garment manufacturer supplying the local market in Bangladesh to identify our potential participants, since homeworkers are difficult to locate and isolated in their home. A total of 32 women homeworkers were interviewed; initially they were notified by the NGO social enterprise and the local garment manufacturer to provide information and invited to be involved in the research. Initial interviews were conducted with a small number of homeworkers which then led to others contacting the researcher. Homeworkers contacted the researcher by phone to arrange interviews, the interviews were conducted in participants' homes to observe the intersection of their work, family and social context to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. The interviews were based on a list of predetermined questions informed by our literature review (for example, Touwen-van Der Kooij, 1996; Nussbaum, 2001; Bergeron, 2011; Kabeer, 2016; and Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). Themes we touched on included characteristics and requirements of the work, income and perception about the quality of life, women workers' view of work, their relationship with the social enterprise/NGO, perception of fairness and negotiation power intra-household, and with regard to price, sense of agency and demographic information. In addition to the garment homeworkers, we interviewed four senior personnel from four social enterprises to understand the NGO social enterprises' programme approach regarding entrepreneurship, empowerment and development discourses and also one garment factory owner as a key informant. Each interview of between 60 to 90 minutes was recorded and then translated and transcribed.

We then analysed empirical data of two types of garment home workers and senior personnel from social enterprises and the local garment factory for evidence of empowerment for home-based workers. In our analysis, we looked for evidence pertaining to the relationship between social reproduction and entrepreneurship, along with the four constructs of the empowerment and agency framework developed in this paper. We looked for ways that this evidence might speak to issues associated with the conflict between home workers' empowerment and their ideological subjection under conditions of performativity. From this, we sought to ascertain the extent to which 'entrepreneurship' can be said to exist in any meaningful sense under practical conditions dominated by a state of performativity.

Findings: The relationship between social reproduction, the entrepreneurial discourse and empowerment

For all study participants, socio-cultural norms and economic need shaped their decision to take on home-based work; reflecting the 'gendered constructs of care,' noted above, manifesting as power imbalances within the economy, employers and family (Boeri, 2018). Power imbalances between the economy and the family were evident, for example, in the

attitudes of husbands not being supportive; a mother-in-law telling a woman to wait till her child is older to work, and mothers telling daughters they would not be able to do the work. The homeworkers' experiences, in exemplifying the intimate nature of the relationship between social reproduction and production, demonstrate the embeddedness of unpaid care within neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012). In this context of power imbalance, gender constructs of care and dependence, and the construction of the gendered entrepreneurial subject, women are forced to choose paid work that allows them to combine reproductive work, care of children and family members and domestic labour.

As participant (P)15 explained,

I have a lot of responsibilities at home. What else could I do? This is good for me and easy. I don't think of doing any other work.

Home-based work allows these women to be economically active, but it is because the work does not defy social norms. As explained by P9,

Our family and relatives think that because we will have to take work from different Mahajans (contractor/middleman), we are likely to have flings with these men. When we explained to them how much household work we do along with our paid work, they realised that we actually do not have any time or motive to engage in anything other than to look after our family and children and household work.

Further, in communities where women's mobility is restricted, home-based work is the only opportunity women have to participate in paid work. As explained by P11,

My mother was initially supportive, but my brothers say it does not suit a woman to run a business. They want to marry me off, but I don't want to get married just yet. So, I have convinced them that I will only do this work from home, and my women clients will bring their orders to me.

In the following section, our analysis examines the tensions between gendered constructs of care and empowerment, and the extent to which 'entrepreneurship' can be said to exist in any meaningful sense while such tensions prevail. We discuss the four constructs of empowerment and agency in turn.

The four constructs of empowerment and agency for women home workers

Evidence in relation to empowerment framework: Power over. Our findings show little evidence of our participants' 'power over' the controlling relationship of domination and subordination within their family and work structures, as an outcome of their paid home-based work. It is evident that home-based work not only generates income for these women, which significantly subsidises the combined household income, but this income has also enabled greater financial independence and a sense of self-worth to them.

In this context, neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse fails to explain how these outcomes can be attributed to its performative interpretations of that concept, as opposed to simply being outcomes of everyday economic life. It would appear in fact that the latter is true. Neither does neoliberal entrepreneurialism explain how individual responses solve common problems of women home workers as a class. The lack of any meaningful answer on this count, coupled with evidence to the contrary, points, by contrast, to the construction of the gendered entrepreneurial subject

P24 explained how she was able to make some meaningful choices in their household expenditure and were able to have a voice and renegotiate her relationship with her husband because of her income.

I have to bear the education expenses of my daughter, who is a candidate for the school final examination (SSC), and my son, who is doing a master's degree. Earlier, when I felt like buying a household item that was so important, I had to depend on my husband's limited income. With this type of work, I can buy a gift for my friends and relatives without putting a dent in my husband's pocket. This is a big power I have now. We go places with our children on weekends. We go to parks, restaurants and markets, etc. Earlier I had to ask for permission, and now I don't even have to tell him. My husband cannot dictate me anymore.

P27 described her sense of self-worth as: 'I am happy with whatever respect I receive from my family members. I am happy if my siblings and my mother are happy. They are my world, and I have no one else.' P16 explained her sense self-worth as: 'My dream is to make my daughter a doctor. I not only pay her school fees but also pay her private tuition fees. Without my income this would not have been possible. It is a great feeling.' This provides evidence of women building their capacity but lacks evidence of entrepreneurship.

Consistent with the idea of the gendered entrepreneurial subject, the views expressed by senior personnel of the social enterprise and garment factory consider employment of homeworkers congruent with women's reproductive role, as they emphasise the family benefits from the women's work.

The women workers in our supply chain spend a large part of their income in day-to-day living expenses, but they also save for the future and use their savings to buy livestock or invest in other businesses. They almost always spend money on their children's education. When they had no money, they struggled in their day to day life, and their family relationships also suffered as a result. Now they have economic stability, which helps improve their family bonding. (Social Enterprise (SE)2)

Whether factory work or the home-based work, they have revolutionised women's position in Bangladesh. The purchasing capability or financial power is something that these women did not have before. Now, with whatever small wages they earn, they feel liberated and have the freedom of helping their families while fulfilling their interests or engaging in entertainment/leisure activities. These types of changes were unthinkable in a country like Bangladesh before. (SE3)

However, despite the improvement in financial independence of the home workers, it is less likely that the income they earn translates into a more democratic distribution of intra-household power or greater meaningful agency. Even though these women think they have better strategic control over their income and negotiation power, it is not enough to constitute empowerment. The following comments from homeworkers support this contention:

I do not get consulted yet for any big decision made in the family. Perhaps my in-laws think I am still not mature enough. I also accept that whatever they decide is good for everyone. (P5)

Our analysis also reveals little evidence of negotiation power over the terms and conditions of employment by the home workers, indicating the limited capacity to exercise their agency to shift unequal power relations. These women see themselves as 'workers' as opposed to 'entrepreneurs' and prefer to do paid work until they will have no option but to turn to livelihood centric entrepreneurship. Kusum who makes handwoven baskets for another social enterprise exporter expressed her frustration as,

I keep asking for a wage increase, but nothing has changed since the last six years. I ask for the rise through the 'Mahajan' (sub-contractor), who brings the work to us. He keeps saying wages will change when the buyers increase their rates and orders, but there has been no result yet. (P23)

P23's further comments about alternative work options reflect little awareness or consciousness and appreciation for entrepreneurship as a meaningful form of empowerment to home workers,

What else could I do? This is the only way I can make money. I don't know what other work I can do.

However, an interesting contrast about the sense of agency and empowerment outcomes of home workers is noted in the comments of the senior personnel of a social enterprise relating to the 'power to' construct of empowerment,

We trained these women and wanted to engage them for the full year, but I can only utilise them for 6 - 7 months in a calendar year. They could earn more and save more if I could employ them for the full year. The other thing I noticed is that, while we train them on a specific product in my social enterprise, they create their own idea to make something else and sell them using the techniques that they learn here. For example, some of them are selling traditional cakes and cookies to generate additional income. (SE4)

The social enterprise staff aim to improve the women's lives, yet, because it is essential for women home-based workers to work, the women's survivalist skills are portrayed as an example of entrepreneurial empowerment. Further, their capacity to earn money is viewed uncritically in terms of their social reproductive role to support the family, and so

the generation of any income by home workers is construed as empowerment – even if they are grossly exploited in the process. Having wages to spend might give home workers more freedom of mobility and self-worth than if they had none, but it is not the same thing as enjoying a sense of individual or collective agency as social actors. On this count, it is not the same thing as empowerment as initially conceived.

Evidence of the empowerment construct: Power within. The ‘power-within’ construct of empowerment is most commonly evident in our data. There is ample evidence of strength based in self-acceptance, self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence and assertiveness among the homeworkers, as depicted in their words below. The women homeworkers appear to have gained access to some meaningful, albeit limited, choices in their lives that were previously not available to them:

I don't want my kids to do this work. I am sending them to school for a better education and a better job. When my son and daughter will be educated, they will have a better spouse, and their offspring will continue to be better educated. Their generation will be in a better position than us. We are less fortunate, that is why we are doing this work. (P30)

The ultimate goal is to have my own tailoring business where 5 or 7 other girls can work, learn and support their families. Then each of them may create opportunities for other women, and so on. I am hopeful about my idea. (P18)

Social reproduction as a facet of the gendered entrepreneurial subject, particularly in the form of care of family members and community, surfaces strongly in this construct of empowerment as expressed below,

When I visit my village once a year, people around our house visit me and ask for my advice about working in the garments sector. In the past, there was a stigma about women working in the garments sector. This view has now changed as they understand the benefits these women are bringing to their family and community. (P10)

Further, the sense of self-worth and respect by others for the home workers is also available and supported in the analysis of data from the senior personnel of social enterprises as below.

Recently we were invited to a wedding of the brother of one of our women workers. We found her quite visible and empowered as the family's leader during the entire event. When a woman comes out of the barrier of her house, she learns very quickly and contribute meaningfully to her own family. (SE3)

Evidence of the empowerment construct: Power to. We found some evidence of the ‘Power to’ construct of empowerment in the lived experience of the women home workers. Our findings provide some evidence of capacity building, decision-making authority, leadership, the power to understand how things work and problem-solving skills among our participants. It also

demonstrates, to a limited extent, their ‘entrepreneurship’ in some meaningful sense of performativity. This is depicted in the words of P27 as she discusses her future:

I spend some of my income for my pocket expenses, the rest I try to save for rainy days. The future is unpredictable, so I am very keen to save as much as possible. I want to use this as my investment for starting something new and perhaps growing it.

P21, a worker in a local garment factory further explained,

This job gives me a fixed monthly salary, which is great because it pays for my living. But I also tailor clothes for my friends and neighbors. This is more like my hobby/interest, from which I may or may not always make enough money. But it pays for my pocket expenses, so I don't have to borrow from anyone. That's why I like my own business too.

This slowly emerging capacity of home workers in leadership, decision-making and problem-solving skills, and consciousness to act entrepreneurially in some meaningful sense is also evident in the comments of the senior personnel of social enterprises and local garment factories who share their measure of the women's success via narratives around the entrepreneur, self-sufficiency, empowerment and inclusion in the free market.

One of my clients asked me to prove that our social enterprise does not employ any child labour. When I got their e-mail, I was not sure how I could prove that the workers are not under-aged. So, I called a worker named Seema. When I asked her how she could prove her age, she immediately told me that she had a national identity card, where her date of birth is displayed. This proves how switched on and confident these workers are. (SE4)

These women have now become empowered and highly entrepreneurial. Many of them have their own sewing machine, and they do tailoring/stitching work from their home base. Others find ways to create and sell products which they are good at making. I have not seen any of them going back to their previous state of life. (SE1)

The way the social enterprise measures women homeworkers' success is framed, linking ultimately to the market, and economic performativity as an entrepreneurial discourse (Boeri, 2018). We observe the attitudes of the social enterprise personnel toward the homeworkers are about the economic performativity that confirms the gendered entrepreneurial subject.

Evidence of the empowerment construct: Power with. Little evidence is available in our data about the ‘power with’ construct of empowerment. Perception of work rights by the homeworkers we spoke to focuses on breaking their social isolation, but none mentioned collective agency or rights. Here we contrast individual and collective forms of autonomy with political and socio-cultural bottom-up empowerment. The following quotes explain how the ‘power with’ construct has limited application to the women home workers in any meaningful way:

We became better at what we do, and we love what we do, we built a good rapport amongst us by doing this work. (P7)

We are in touch with our peers and friends who work elsewhere, so we exchange information about working condition, environment, owners' behaviour and salary, etc. (P26)

In contrast, the notion of 'power with' within the home workers as expressed by the garment employer is based on the construct of gendered entrepreneurial subject.

The way women home workers are moving forward; they will be unstoppable. Some elements of religious fundamentalism can disturb some pockets, but I believe it is negligible. The combined workforce of women home workers is so strong that they can easily outnumber the negative forces.

The lack of evidence of empowerment outcomes amongst homeworkers in this research indicates that entrepreneurial activities remain focused on a narrow set of perceptions generated by and linked to entrepreneurial discourses. Garment employers and social enterprise staff alike are consistent in their application of performativity and empowerment concepts that shape the homeworkers as gendered entrepreneurial subjects, having been facilitated by the 'opportunities' provided by their employment.

Discussion

The testimonials of two sets of home-based workers in this study undermine the fundamental error of conventional neoliberal entrepreneurship discourse in conflating empowerment and performativity. On the contrary, evidence from the home-based worker testimonials working for the social enterprise and the garment factory supports the conclusion that neoliberal entrepreneurialism functions more to incorporate home-based workers into an economic regime with predetermined roles, labelled 'empowerment,' these testimonials indicate that such performativity serves neoliberal ideology rather than the empowerment needs of those reduced to the level of gendered entrepreneurial subjects thereby.

Our study focused on the central theme of the relationship between economic performativity, manifest as the gendered entrepreneurial subject, and empowerment. Our empirical research indicates that performative entrepreneurialism as a method of empowerment failed to produce entrepreneurs and, in most instances, simply produced exploited workers instead. The experiences of our interviewees contradicted the grand rhetoric of entrepreneurship, most notably in the general lack amongst home workers of negotiating power over the terms and conditions of employment.

While women home workers valued both instrumental features of work, having an income and improving their skills, confidence and recognition, their experience also explains why they saw themselves as 'workers' rather than 'entrepreneurs'. This fact is particularly significant insofar as it sits squarely at odds with the performative processes of neoliberal entrepreneur identity formation (Dey, 2010; Mauksch, 2018). Women

home-based workers resoundingly rejected the performative role allotted under entrepreneurial discourse, opting instead for conventional wage labour which, while exploitative, lacked pretenses to being anything else.

Our research inquiry examines the extent the entrepreneurial experience creates positive experiences for home-based workers' empowerment. We observe a failure to consider women's social reproductive role, and women's broader priorities associated with addressing issues around unpaid care work, to measure, and to deliver empowerment outcomes — as opposed to purely economic outcomes. This is evident in the way social enterprises and the garment manufacturer focus on examples of homeworkers' survivalist strategies as an indication of individual entrepreneurial empowerment. Looking to exploit social reproduction rather than account for it dooms the individualist, neoliberal approach to empowerment from the outset (Bergeron, 2011).

The empirical findings indicate social enterprise development programmes and private business prioritise efficiency and productivity over empowerment, thus conflating class and individual freedom for ideological purposes (Bergeron, 2011; Mauksch, 2018). This is, we conclude, a characteristic feature of the economic performativity at the core of entrepreneurial development approaches to empowerment. The hyper-focusing on a 'small set of instrumentalist goals', as in this case the making of entrepreneurs as measured by women homeworkers' uptake of income generation activities, can thus be considered the antithesis to women's rights and empowerment (Kabeer, 1999, 2016; Mauksch, 2018). As noted, we argue that this reflects a fundamental conflation at the ideological level under neoliberalism between freedom and class privilege; the whole of the performative discourse serves to underline the mythology of neoliberal empowerment and mask its general oppressiveness.

Our research also examines the potential for agency to challenge the performativity of the gendered entrepreneurial subject. Concerning the agency of homeworkers, we observe under conditions of entrepreneurial performativity, a general lack of agency. With no evidence of the 'power with' level of empowerment, the empirical findings indicate homeworkers are not able to draw on strategic forms of agency to address concerns in their own lives or challenge the greater structural constraints that subordinate them (Kabeer, 2001; Nussbaum, 2001). Without access to individual and collective agency homeworkers cannot subvert the gendered entrepreneurial subject.

The exploration of the neoliberal entrepreneurial discourse and empowerment in this study of garment homeworkers suggests the various ways the entrepreneurial discourse conflates empowerment and performativity to construct the gendered entrepreneurial subject. Coupling a more nuanced understanding of empowerment to the critique of the entrepreneurial discourse as applied to garment homeworkers, provides a theoretical contribution to the empowerment and entrepreneurial discourse literature. This contribution indicates the importance of the reshaping of entrepreneurial discourse across the strategic forms of agency that can lead to the emancipatory practice of empowerment.

While development donors embrace the entrepreneurial discourse, – potential remains for a local organisation to subvert the process away from the instrumentalist goals to more meaningful outcomes shaped by the women homeworkers themselves (Calvès, 2009; Nazreen et al., 2011). Social enterprises (businesses that trade for the purpose of tacking

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of the participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Educational qualification	Marital status	Number of children	Family set-up	Monthly income (AUD)
P1	50	No formal schooling	Married	3	Nuclear	\$80–150
P2	24	Primary school	Married	1	Nuclear	\$80–\$160
P3	33	Primary school	Married	2	Nuclear	\$80–\$200
P4	38	Secondary school	Married	2	Nuclear	\$100–\$200
P5	19	Secondary school	Single	—	Nuclear	\$90–\$150
P6	22	Primary school	Married	1	Joint family	\$120
P7	18	Primary school	Single	—	Nuclear	\$100
P8	27	Primary school	Married	2	Joint family	\$135
P9	42	No formal schooling	Married	2	Nuclear family	\$160
P10	18	Secondary school	Single	—	Joint family	\$140–\$160
P11	45	No formal schooling	Married	3	Nuclear	\$120–\$180
P12	29	Primary school	Married	1	Nuclear	\$80–\$160
P13	32	Primary school	Married	2	Nuclear	\$80–\$200
P14	45	Primary school	Married	3	Nuclear	\$150–\$200
P15	33	Secondary school	Divorced	—	Nuclear	\$120–\$170
P16	26	Secondary school	Married	1	Joint family	\$120
P17	21	Secondary school	Single	—	Nuclear	\$160
P18	28	Primary school	Married	1	Joint family	\$135
P19	46	No formal schooling	Widowed	2	Nuclear family	\$180–\$200
P20	28	Secondary school	Married	1	Nuclear family	\$140–\$160
P21	31	Primary school	Married	2	Nuclear	\$80–\$160
P22	35	Primary school	Married	2	Nuclear	\$80–\$200
P23	46	No formal schooling	Married	3	Nuclear	\$150–\$200
P24	23	Primary school	Separated	—	Nuclear	\$120–\$170
P25	36	Primary school	Married	2	Joint family	\$120
P26	21	Secondary school	Single	—	Nuclear	\$160
P27	23	Primary school	Married	1	Joint family	\$135
P28	18	Primary school	Single	—	Nuclear	\$100
P29	27	Primary school	Married	2	Joint family	\$135
P30	42	No formal schooling	Married	2	Nuclear family	\$160
P31	18	Secondary school	Single	—	Joint family	\$140–\$160
P32	43	No formal schooling	Married	3	Nuclear	\$120–\$180

social problems) and local organisations could divert the entrepreneurial discourse to the benefit of the commons approach to improve women's sense of agency ultimately towards means for them to engage in collective struggles for broader social change (Kabeer, 2017). Creating more community and collective agency focused empowerment outcomes is critical. An emphasis toward collective benefits could open up the possibility of strategies inclusive of women's reproductive role, placing economic priorities at the centre of substantive improvements that can support and develop women's sense of agency, as a means to implement emancipatory empowerment and transformative change.

Conclusion

We note lastly the separation between the personal and the political, and the separation of political activism from the reproduction of everyday life through entrepreneurial performativity and individualist rather than collective responses. This, we conclude, is not just a question of individual identity, but, more importantly, a question of power with women's paid and unpaid labour as a critical issue – one swept under the rug for the purposes of subverting and gutting the movement for women's empowerment and reducing it to a 'set of instrumentalist goals'. These critical aspects need to be present to contribute to women homeworkers' individual, and collective forms of empowerment to address power imbalances. Their absence within entrepreneurial discourse, and the harmful outcomes generated as a result, only serves to underline this fact further.

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