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Enterprise and Inequality: A Study of Avon in South Africa

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Avon's apparent success in using entrepreneurship to help women escape poverty, as well as its staying power in circumstances where similar efforts have failed, has captured the attention of the international development community. This study, the first independent empirical investigation, reports that in South Africa, Avon helps some impoverished women earn a better income and inspires empowerment among them. The authors introduce a new theory, pragmatist feminism, to integrate past work on women's entrepreneurship and argue that feminist scholars should reexamine the histories of the market democracies for replicable innovations that may have empowered women.

Introduction

The terms “developed” and “developing” are often used to describe a pervasive inequality that divides nations. Around the world, local inequalities linked to race, religion, ethnicity, and caste are articulated in specific customs. Unlike the global inequality that divides the world into camps or the various differences within local contexts, however, gender marks a systemic inequality that exists in all nations and can be traced through a consistent set of markers across borders and through time.

Today, global institutions devote substantial resources to tracking the progress of nations toward eliminating gender inequality, despite its deep roots in tradition. One reason is the payoff that results from closing the gender gap: increased national productivity, better nutrition, lower disease transmission, reduced fertility, lower child mortality, better education, and reduced violence (Kristof & WuDunn, 2009; Sen, 2000; United Nations Children's Fund, 2007). So, empowering women, especially economically, has become a prominent strategy for fighting poverty. Programs focus on positive interventions: school retention emphasizes girls, health programs aim at female reproductive issues, and financial programs attempt to increase banking among women.

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Public leaders also increasingly look to the private domain for women's programs that build skills, provide incomes, and instill agency—all goals that make entrepreneurship of particular interest. Training programs, such as those offered by Goldman Sachs and Exxon Mobil, focus on skills building. Some organizations build distribution systems through networks of female entrepreneurs, such as the CARE Bangladesh Rural Sales Programme and Coca-Cola's women's entrepreneurship commitment in Africa. Some high-profile entrepreneurship systems, including Hindustan Lever's Project Shakti and Grameen's "village phone ladies," have now stalled or failed, however. So, policy observers are keen to understand women's programs and initiatives that are successful and have staying power. Here, we focus on Avon, a multinational company that distributes its products by building networks of female entrepreneurs.

Founded in the United States more than 100 years ago, Avon now draws half its sales from the developing world (Klepacki, 2005). The company sets up systems in countries from Brazil to Bulgaria, appearing to take root and scale quickly, providing income to the poorest women (Byrd, 1994; *Perfuming the Amazon*, 1994). Our study, funded by the Department for International Development and the Economic and Social Science Research Council in the United Kingdom, is the first attempt at an independent, multi-method study of Avon. The purpose of the research, conducted over 3 years among poor black women in South Africa, was to determine whether Avon helps lift women out of poverty or empowers them in identifiable ways, such as acquiring portable job skills or building credit records or simply becoming more confident.

In effect, we were examining the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship (Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009; Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009), as might be delivered under the Avon network, in a situation of impoverishment and inequality. Such a project, while in step with the market-based approaches embraced by many in the development community, contradicts much established feminist theory, which has been consistently anticapitalist in the past. Here, we build on pragmatist feminism, a new theory emerging from the changing events of the late 1990s and now commanding increasing attention from scholars, as an alternative and corrective (Whipps, 2010). We turn now to the theoretical crossroads from which the pragmatist feminist perspective—and our project—emerged.

Theoretical Crossroads

Feminist theory has many faces, but one common objective: the empowerment of women. From its earliest days, feminist theory has been a work in progress, a radically different way of thinking that must continually adapt to fresh data and changes in world history (Jaggar, 1983). The past 15 years have demanded such adaptations in thought, particularly about market economies, thus potentially creating a new space for business disciplines in feminist research. In particular, the new pragmatist feminism we introduce here provides an integrated and updated rubric that may be welcomed by those studying women's entrepreneurship.

An anticapitalist attitude typified feminist discourse in the last 30 years of the twentieth century, a result of the Marxist influence that lingered from the New Left origins of the Second Wave, making it difficult for feminists to develop theory or praxis that engaged in a positive way with market activity (Scott, 2000). Liberal feminism's consonance with market systems was a political liability, but its epistemological underpinnings were also out of step with evolving thought (Jaggar, 1983). By the mid-1990s, the hostility between liberal feminists and the rest of the movement was bitter (see Hoff-Sommers, 1995).

At that time, several theories competed for primacy, none friendly to market frameworks, and the paths for action seemed blocked: Each approach presented theoretical impossibilities or required total revolution. For instance, from a Marxist/socialist perspective, the way forward was a revolution that would overturn the capitalist system, though even theorists in this camp admitted that the benefits to women in such a scenario were uncertain (Hartmann, 1979). A belief that women had been better off prior to industrialization, because of their importance to agricultural labor, was often implicit, sometimes explicit, in socialist-inspired works (see, for instance, Jaggar, 1983, pp. 3–4). An evidentiary vacuum left room for such open speculation: Historians had only begun in the 1970s to document the past for women in Western nations, and comparative information about women in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba was not available during the Cold War. Evidence from anthropology, which suggested women were oppressed in preindustrial societies, was often ignored in the rush to discredit industrial capitalism (Rubin, 1975).

Radical feminism, in contrast, asserted that women were oppressed throughout history in all societies, but this premise was difficult to prove. Radicals emphasized the biological basis for gender inequality and the use of sexual violence to maintain it (Jaggar, 1983). As praxis, radical feminism often advocated separatism or envisioned an “end-state utopia” toward which there was no clear path, other than to wipe the human slate completely clean and start over (McKenna, 2002). Other schools, like standpoint and psychoanalytical feminism, focused on how the social construction of gender produced a distinctive worldview (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982). This argument was used to discredit the notions of objectivity upon which positivistic science is based, creating new feminist epistemologies and methodologies (Harding, 1987), but was criticized for essentializing a single “woman’s standpoint.” Poststructuralist feminism, as well as postcolonial and black feminisms, brought a needed adjustment to this tendency to build general theory from white, Western, middle class experiences. However, oppositions were often emphasized to a degree that seemed immobilizing, as the apparent “impossibility” of bridging difference undercut the sense of women as a collective (Tripp, 2000; Weedon, 1998).

World events and new information near the turn of the twenty-first century upended this situation, reversing some hardened assumptions while opening unforeseen avenues. The Marxist/socialist position now has been substantially questioned. The insistence on class as a template for all oppression was eventually acknowledged to be insurmountable (Ferguson, 1998; Hartmann, 1979), while the fall of the Soviet Union and the revelation of female suffering under both Russian and Chinese regimes made adherence to a socialist vision difficult (Funk, 1993). Some of the most extreme postulates of radical feminism, on the other hand, have now become common wisdom. Of key importance has been independent documentation of the worldwide presence of gender oppression, especially in agricultural societies, as well as the role of violence in maintaining it.

New nation-level gender databases brought this important information to light: The United Nations began documenting their Gender Gap rubric in 1995, while the World Economic Forum (WEF) started collecting gender data in 2005. Today, analysts can, for the first time, use these sources to compare levels of inequality across market-based democracies, the former communist countries, and less industrialized, more traditional cultures (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2010; WEF, 2010). Contrary to conventional wisdom in late twentieth century feminism, the industrialized Western-style democracies—where global capitalism is most established and longest lived—show the best conditions for women. The traditional arrangements typical of less industrialized nations are associated with greater gender inequality, even where women dominate in agricultural labor, and the former communist countries, despite early revolutionary rhetoric, did not produce better conditions for women.

As these new data emerged, whole subdisciplines were being born, such as feminist economics (beginning roughly with Ferber & Nelson, 1993, and recently appearing in works like Folbre, 2009) and economic sociology (see Zelizer, 2010). Scholars in these areas focused empirically on the interface between gender equality and capitalism and sometimes reached conclusions that departed from past feminist thinking (for instance, Inglehart & Norris, 2003, using the global data, locate two watersheds in the advancement of women, the move from agriculture to industrialization and then the shift into postindustrial society).

We believe it is now incumbent upon feminist scholars to reexamine the histories of the market democracies, looking for replicable innovations that may have empowered women. Practical interventions should then be constructed to determine transferability, efficacy, and sustainability. However, a new feminist theory is needed to accommodate this trajectory of inquiry, because of the outdated Enlightenment epistemology of liberalism and the market-unfriendly politics of the established alternatives. We nominate a theory emerging from the new milieu, pragmatist feminism.

Pragmatist feminism is an explicit philosophical perspective, not the uncritical approach to practice that common usage of the word “pragmatic” would imply. This new theoretical orientation has emerged in the academy over the past 15 years, becoming both an updated adaptation of classical American Pragmatism and a reinterpretation of that school of thought from a feminist viewpoint (Whipps, 2010). The theory presently has three identifiable but related streams that might be broadly characterized as historical, philosophical, and methodological. Charlotte Haddock Seigfried (1998) has led an effort to reclaim from history the women scholars who studied under or influenced American Pragmatists, such as John Dewey, William James, and Charles Sanders Peirce, during the early twentieth century. Other feminist scholars are adapting the philosophy of the pragmatists, who were not always cognizant of gender issues, toward a distinctly twenty-first century pragmatist feminist theory (Duran, 1993; Mahowald, 1997; Miller, 1992; Mottier, 2004). The third stream works directly with questions of knowledge, research practice, and evidence (Nelson, 1990; Shuford, 2010).

As a philosophical doctrine, pragmatism emphasizes the purposive and contextual nature of thought and reality. So, unlike liberalism, pragmatism does not hold to a single objective reality or a universal reason, but is antifoundationalist, like poststructuralist and radical feminist theory. Pragmatism is not ideologically bound, therefore, to any political system, including capitalism; pragmatist feminism would charge patriarchy wherever it exists. Pragmatism emphasizes that human existence is always evolving, though not necessarily in a positive teleology. Pragmatists do not posit grand metanarratives the way Marxists did, but instead focus on how communities can carefully apply collective intelligence, gained from experience and sharing, to guide future events toward positive goals. Theory, in classical pragmatism, is simply the way past observations are selectively appropriated, reformulated, and applied toward the desired “ends-in-view.”

The special term, “ends-in-view,” denotes an achievable outcome, as specifically contrasted with an attractive dream toward which there is no accessible path. Seigfried cautions that: “Such ends-in-view must be consistent with the means at our disposal if situations are to be actually and not just imaginatively transformed for the better” (Seigfried, 1998, p. 53). A pragmatist agenda, therefore, does aim toward social justice, but in a way described as “process utopianism,” as opposed to the “end-state utopias” favored by radical and socialist feminism (McKenna, 2002).

Pragmatism sees knowledge as formed by experience and therefore fundamentally embodied. Since each of us has a different body and a different experience, there are many possibilities for what is known. Any one experientially grounded way of knowing would

be necessarily partial. Therefore, pragmatism holds that it is essential, not impossible, to form communities to support conversations in which knowledge can be shared. While rejecting claims to objectivity, pragmatist feminism values data as a guide to action and adjustment to theory.

Feminist theory was introduced to the entrepreneurship literature in the mid-1990s (Fischer, Reuber, & Dyke, 1993), before the new global gender data were available, before knowledge about women's situation in the former Soviet Union had appeared, before the emergence of feminist economics, and before the global push on women's entrepreneurship began. Between 1993 and the end of the twentieth century, Mirchandani (1999) and Hurley (1999) both argued for an emancipatory feminist approach to entrepreneurship, but did not stipulate theory at all. The socialist inclination in feminist thinking was not reflected or acknowledged in any work until Calás, Smircich, and Bourne (2007, 2009). These authors compellingly allude to the potential damage of global capitalism, particularly for women in less industrialized nations, but do not admit the possibility for a market-based approach to have positive impact. Other feminists working in the entrepreneurship literature have used groupings of theory taken from the early 1990s—radical, socialist, liberal, poststructuralist, postcolonial feminism—with adaptations, such as transnational feminism, but none address the paradox of researching entrepreneurship with theories that are, at base, anti-enterprise (Ahl, 2006; Calás et al.).

Authors not working explicitly with feminist theory, but focused on the topic of women in entrepreneurship, have called for a framework that would integrate research into a coherent trajectory (Brush, De Bruin, & Welter, 2009; De Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2006, 2007). Several themes have surfaced, some of them also noted in the more explicitly feminist works. The prevalence of positivistic method, usually felt to be masculinist in feminist discourse, is a frequent target of complaint as is the overemphasis on financial performance as the end in view. The continual appearance of studies comparing women to men or to masculine standards is often remarked. Authors note that the literature puts the onus on women as individuals to “get their act together” and be better entrepreneurs, rather than dealing realistically with the socially structured constraints (for instance, Brush et al., p. 10).

Throughout the women's entrepreneurship literature, the end in view is usually improving the financial performance of female entrepreneurs. A more direct and proper feminist focus might be on establishing whether, how, and under what circumstances entrepreneurship allows women to escape or mitigate patriarchal domination. In other words, we propose the project of determining whether entrepreneurship can be emancipatory in the sense suggested by Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen: “the act of setting free from the power of another” (Rindova et al., 2009, p. 478). Such a project would need to be critical and feminist in the fullest sense: it would need to be skeptical of all forms of patriarchy, not just the capitalist ones. And it would need to look at influences flowing in both directions: for instance, not just asserting the limitations that the family imposes on entrepreneurship, but looking also at the ways that the experience of entrepreneurship may redefine family norms. The reference for comparison would not necessarily be men at all, but would track outcomes for women. We believe that a pragmatist feminist framework could frame existing women's entrepreneurship within a coherent program, while opening up new directions.

We explore that potential with this study of Avon in Africa. Pragmatist feminist theory would reframe today's theoretical crossroads in terms of the desired end (the empowerment of women) and look for learning from the past (the history of the market economies) to find some practice (perhaps, entrepreneurship) and test it to see whether it would work in the confronted situation (global poverty and gender inequality). So, the task we set for

ourselves was to take a specific manifestation of entrepreneurship (Avon) that we knew had demonstrated emancipatory power for women in the history of the market democracies (nineteenth and early twentieth century America), and then look to see whether the same form would produce a similar effect today, in a very different setting (poor black women in South Africa).

The questions framing our research therefore necessarily run in a different direction from the trajectory of the entrepreneurship literature and make use of past work in a different way. Most studies focus on how women perform as entrepreneurs; we will instead focus on whether entrepreneurship empowers women. Rather than using the lens of feminist theory to analyze studies of women entrepreneurs, we will be using the lens provided by entrepreneurship studies to discern whether previously identified gaps in women's readiness for enterprise may be filled by the Avon system: capitalization, training, mentoring, and networking (Brush, Carter, Greene, Gatewood, & Hart, 2001; Carter & Rosa, 1998; Cliff, 1998; De Bruin et al., 2007; Fairlie & Robb, 2009; Fischer et al., 1993; Holmquist, 2009; Manolova, Carter, Manev, & Gyoshev, 2007; Orser & Hogarth-Scott, 2002; Rosa, Carter, & Hamilton, 1996).

By looking for the ways Avon's system may address previously identified gaps, we formulate a set of means to achieve the ends in view. We are focused on the potential for poverty alleviation; thus we will assess the improvements to standard of living, rather than growth in the firm. The other end in view is empowerment, which we will approach from multiple angles, from self-perceptions to social interactions. We are concerned, with Ahl (2006), that too much of the current literature treats gender inequality as a set of internalized stereotypes without confronting the exogenous reality of a social structure that holds women in an unequal position. Because barriers to women's empowerment in South Africa are formidable, we follow our analysis of "ends" and "means" with discussion of the constraints the Avon system faces beyond its scope of control. So it is important to begin with the place that black women hold in South African society.

Inequality and Enterprise in South Africa

Most readers will expect that the major axis of inequality in South Africa is race. Indeed, the vicious racial ideology of apartheid has left a lasting effect. South Africa's largest "minority" is by far the numerical majority—black Africans constitute 80% of South Africa's population—but the small white elite disproportionately controls power and wealth. Average monthly income is distributed in an inverse relationship to representation in the population: 79% of whites, at 9.2% of the population, are in the top quintile, while less than 9% of blacks earn that much. The financial effects of race are more evident when the income source relates to accumulated wealth, whether from capital assets, investments, or owned property. Whites control 72.2% of income generated through capital sources, while blacks control only 17.8%. Conversely, 60% of welfare benefits and 60% of remittance income flows to black households (Statistics South Africa, 2008a).

Readers will be unlikely, we suspect, to propose that black South Africans' "less successful" economic profile is the result of intrinsic racial differences regarding risk perception or motivation to earn. Indeed, such a hypothesis would not only deny massive amounts of statistical data documenting the exogenous reality of racial inequity, but give the lie to one of world history's most tragic accounts of racial strife. Further, even to assert that such inequities are due to intrinsic shortcomings in the black population would be, for most of us today, a recognizable instance of the racist thinking that perpetuates these very inequities.

Table 1

Income Sources, Male- versus
Female-Headed Households, 2005/2006

	Female heads of household	Male heads of household
Income from capital	21.5	78.4
Imputed rent from owned property	24.3	75.6
Other income	30.7	69.2
Income from work	20.0	80.0
Pensions, social insurance, family allowances	40.5	59.3
Income from individuals	68.9	31.0

Percent of total national income from each source.
Source: Statistics South Africa (2008a) (post embargo).

The subjects of our study, black South African women, struggle at the nexus of two systemic inequities: race and gender. But, while the racial system is the result of the nation's specific history of colonization, immigration, and religious aggression, the gender imbalance is typical of other developing nations and comparable in relative terms with the gender profile of rich nations as well. Black women in South Africa have higher unemployment rates, lower incomes, lower education levels, higher involvement in the informal economy, and lower use of financial products than black men; not surprisingly, inhabitants of households headed by females are considerably more likely to go hungry than those headed by men (Statistics South Africa, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c). While 70% of black men earn at least 1,000 South African Rand (ZAR)¹ a month, only 53% of black women earn that much (Naidoo & Hilton, 2006).

Table 1 is an income source analysis by gender. These data include all races, but remember blacks constitute about 80% of the population—and fully 41% of black households are headed by females. Female-headed households make only 20% of the income from either capital or work, despite being about 40% of the population. Women, as a category, rely on remittances more than blacks, as a category, do. The same is true for welfare benefits.

Rents from owned property also demonstrate a gender bias: Globally, ownership of property shows enormous skews by gender, especially in the developing world. With the end of apartheid in 1993, the new South African state began its attempts to supplant customary arrangements that ruled gender, marriage, ownership, and contracts among blacks. White women had the same property rights as white men, but black women, under prevailing customs, could only enter into contracts with the formal consent of their men. Married black women could only hold property jointly with their husbands, but could not inherit property even as widows. Since married women were “minors” under customary law, they had no decision-making power regarding any jointly owned property. Single

1. The currency of South Africa is the South African Rand, abbreviated ZAR, for the Dutch “Zuid-Afrikaanse Rand.” One U.S. dollar is about 7 ZAR.

black women could not own property at all. National law has now technically given all women equal property rights, but since South African blacks are composed of multiple tribes, each maintaining different customs, actual practice still varies a great deal (OECD, 2010). Given these constraints, it is not surprising women find it difficult to amass the wealth required to generate income from assets. Yet Statistics South Africa remarks that men “*outperformed* their female counterparts with regard to income from capital” (Statistics South Africa, 2008a, p. 11, italics ours). They do not make this judgment when comparing the data for blacks versus whites.

Black women, not white men, are the most likely subgroup to be self-employed: At about one third of total self-employed South Africans, black women outnumber white males nearly five to one. However, 94% of those black females are engaged in informal businesses, employing four people or fewer and focused on hawking agricultural produce or traditional handicrafts, often from the roadside (Naidoo & Hilton, 2006). South Africa’s Black Economic Empowerment Act specifically promotes entrepreneurship for women, but an exhaustive 2006 study by GEM and the International Finance Corporation found efforts to equalize access to training and capital had been unsuccessful because, in actual practice, activities were usually aimed at men (Naidoo & Hilton, p. 5). The study cited gender prejudice and the over-reliance on asset-based lending as causal factors, but also observed that credit histories from the microfinance sector were not available to banks, so a woman’s repayment record was not normally known.

A backdrop of violence, part of the heritage of apartheid, is always present in South Africa and much of it is gender driven (Seedat, Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla, & Ratele, 2009). Women die from intimate partner violence at six times the global average (Seedat et al.). The incidence of rape is believed to be one of the highest in the world, though cultural attitudes about violence against women make estimating the actual incidence very difficult (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002). HIV-AIDS is the leading killer in South Africa and, because of the high incidence of coerced sex, five women suffer from the disease for every two men (Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna, & Shai, 2010; Onyejekwe, 2004). A recent study by the South African Medical Research Council (2009) revealed that a quarter of all men admit to having raped at least once—half of those have raped between 2 and 10 women. Repeatedly, expert studies have attributed South African gender-based violence to the low status of women, to the inequality in male–female relationships, to the normative use of violence in the exercise of that power, and to patriarchal ideas about masculinity (Jewkes & Abrahams; Jewkes, Levin, & Penn-Kekana, 2002; Jewkes et al.; Seedat et al.). Legislative attempts to curb the violence have been unsuccessful, partly because of insufficient support among the police and the judiciary (Standley, 1999). An overview of South Africa’s gender-driven violence problem in a 2009 *Lancet* article concluded that, despite evidence from research, “there has been a conspicuous absence of government stewardship and leadership” in addressing the issue (Seedat et al., p. 1011).

This statistical documentation of gender disadvantage suggests strongly that sex differences in financial performance are the result of a coherent system that discriminates against women. While such a pervasive system is undoubtedly underpinned by cultural beliefs that ultimately affect how the women see themselves, we do not feel it would be warranted to conclude that their “underperformance” is the result of either intrinsic traits or internal subjectivity. The system needs to be viewed holistically, as one where the social gender norm is a palpable exogenous factor and concrete practices perpetuate internalized judgments. We can also see that the low status of black women affects a range of problems, from hungry children to rates of disease. Any intervention that improves that status, even partially, is potentially important to the entire community.

Methodology

The study was conducted over a 3-year period (2007–2010) using multiple methods: focus groups, interviews, surveys, home visits, and participant observation. Key members of the Avon management were interviewed: the general manager, the sales manager, the credit manager, the marketing manager, the personnel manager, and the district sales managers. The remaining research was all conducted among Avon representatives and their customers. Avon management facilitated initial research contacts. Once contact was established, however, they were completely “hands off,” making no attempt at any time to prejudice our findings or censor our conclusions.

All access to Avon representatives and customers was gained through two divisional managers who had responsibility for poor black townships. Four sites were chosen: Soweto (a large urban township), Polokwane (a middle-sized city in a rural region), Vosloorus (a poor suburb of Johannesburg), and a selection of rural villages in the Limpopo region.

The core research team had four members from the United Kingdom and the United States. One was an Africanist anthropologist with extensive field experience; the others brought backgrounds in women’s studies, entrepreneurship, marketing, international development, and sociology. On the ground, extensive use was made of partnerships with research organizations that could provide local knowledge, quantitative data collection, and translations. The organizations were CASE, a local social science research agency, and TNS, a local office of the global market research company. All interviewers, besides the UK/U.S. research team, were black South Africans who could move freely among the 13 recognized languages spoken there. Training for all work carried out by CASE or TNS was done by the UK/U.S. team. Quantitative data were analysed through ATLAS, the University of Illinois’ applied social statistics division.

Quantitative and qualitative work was done in tandem, each informing the other. Qualitative data collection consisted of two large focus groups and 65 interviews, but also observation of field activities, including training meetings, customer visits, and product delivery. These activities were staggered over a 2-year period. At least one UK/U.S. member was present at all qualitative sessions. Interviews were conducted in English where respondents usually spoke English. Where they did not, translations were provided by a native speaker, but recordings were later transcribed and translated by TNS or CASE to ensure accuracy. Qualitative transcripts were analyzed using an open coding process, through which we developed an initial set of categories and concepts, and subsequently through axial coding which allowed us to refine and connect the conceptual categories. Interpretations derived through this process were also used to develop questions and analyze the quantitative data.

Two surveys were conducted. Both were cross-sectional, both used contact lists from district managers, and both included only black women. An exploratory survey ($n = 167$), conducted in Soweto and Polokwane in 2008, made use of insights from the first round of qualitative work. Based on the results from the exploratory survey, the instrument was modified. The second survey was pretested in both English and Pedi in January 2009, revisions were made, and the instrument was formally fielded in March 2009 in Soweto and Vosloorus. Respondents were randomly selected from three lists: one from Vosloorus and two from Soweto. Because this population is often transient, we found that contact details on the list were sometimes out of date. If several attempts to contact a respondent failed, the next name was selected from a second random sample until the goal of 300 reps was reached.

The second survey sample yielded a diverse pool. Representatives ranged from 1 to 200 months in the program. The average length of time in Avon was 26.2 months, the median was 11. Reps in the sample were slightly more likely to be widowed, divorced, or separated than other black women in South Africa, as well as more likely to have a high school or college education and to be employed full time. Vosloorus respondents had a higher mean income than the black female population there, while the respondents in Soweto had lower incomes than black women in that area. Respondents ranged from 19 to 76 years old, with over a third falling in the 30–39 year age category, slightly older than the population. Otherwise, the sample was not significantly different from black females in South Africa.

Our findings report the quantitative data from the second, formal survey and qualitative data from work done over the entire 3-year period.

Findings

Our report is organized in a manner consistent with the proposed theory. We will look first at the means employed, focusing on those areas the literature has previously identified as weaknesses for women undertaking entrepreneurship. The objective here is to investigate how the Avon system aligns with what is known from research and whether it addresses the gaps. Then, we will look at performance against the ends in view, specifically poverty alleviation and gender empowerment. Finally, however, we will situate the Avon system as a partial solution operating within a social setting unfriendly to women, thus offering caution against constraints for policy evaluation and adaptation to other environments.

Means: Entrepreneurship Support

Avon seems to address gender gaps in entrepreneurship by providing support across a range of needs previously apparent from research: capitalization, training and mentoring, social network development, and motivation.

Capitalization. In South Africa, microcredit has had such deleterious effects on the poor that the 2007 National Credit Act included tough regulations to control it. Avon is not classified as a microlender under this law because it provides working capital on the basis of inventory, liquidates the credit each month, and does not charge interest.

Avon carefully manages the credit exposure for itself and for the women in the system. A complete credit check is undertaken for every agent that applies, but the requirements are adapted to the circumstances black South African women face. For example, since many recruits have no formal credit or income, Avon devised a rating system sensitive to small indices of permanence and responsibility, like a mobile phone number or a formal address. Using this information, Avon determines whether a woman can be extended a small amount of inventory on consignment.

With the inventory and a registration fee of about US\$12, the Avon rep can start her business. New reps often begin with very small amounts of credit for inventory, \pm US\$15 for instance, and then build up by regularly paying orders each month. If the woman has no foundation for a credit rating, Avon will accept her on a cash basis, but allow her to prove herself creditworthy by paying for orders over a few months. Many are able to get on a credit basis very quickly. If a woman does not pay for orders on time, her access to

product is cut off until her debt is cleared. This policy causes frustration because customers in the townships are not accustomed to paying in advance, but the practice keeps agents' debt exposure low. The system is forgiving: A woman can earn her way back in, even if she defaults.

Avon emphasizes financial management strongly. The company encourages banking for processing payments; however, in some rural areas, banking services are still not widely available. Avon set up separate payment mechanisms through major retailers and the South African post office so that women unable to reach a bank can still get payments processed. Avon also documents the rep's credit history, which can be reported to banks or other lenders, providing an important future outlet for professional and business development.

Many women we spoke to did not even have the money for the nominal registration fee, however. In that case, other Avon agents often stepped into the breach. For instance, one woman we spoke to was selling tomatoes at the roadside when she learned about Avon; she had no money for registration and did not qualify for start-up credit. The more established agent who recruited her provided a small loan. She soon repaid the debt and now earns an income that would be quite comfortable, even by Western standards.

Networking. On joining Avon, a woman becomes part of a network of agents: She joins a supervised team, and the team is, in turn, part of a regional group led by a divisional manager who reports to Avon South African management. This network provides training and motivation alongside products and marketing materials. Each entrant is strongly encouraged to attract new recruits to be her own "downline" team. Commissions up to 20% come from selling products, but as the team beneath her grows, each rep makes more money from a cut of her downlines' sales. Our survey showed that 58% of group leader income comes from downline.

The internal network constantly pushes its members to expand their external network, the people to whom they sell. Most Avon reps sell to friends (90.7%), neighbors (73.0%), relatives (63.0%), church members (41%), and coworkers (40.7%). However, because of the poverty that plagues black South Africa, it is important for the women to push themselves to approach those who may be wealthier and more powerful—and of a different race. The pressure to prospect among those who are unfamiliar is constant. About a third report selling to strangers (32.3%) and about half report selling outside their town. In addition, reps report a wide variety of sales settings: community centers (34.7%), shopping malls (25.7%), beauty salons (31.7%), churches (55.3%), hospitals (18.3%), schools (30.7%), other peoples' workplaces (39.3%)—even in taxis (30.7%), which, in South Africa, are actually vans and are usually very crowded. About 14% said they sold to whites, a good number given that whites are only 9.2% of the total population. Avon agents, mostly women themselves, report their customers are evenly mixed, male and female. So, while the internal network is mostly female, the practices typical of the enterprise push members to network proactively to reach both sexes and all races.

Mentoring and Training. The Avon network provides new recruits with a wealth of self-employed female role models. The rep's "upline" becomes a mentor, teaching her the business, but also building confidence, giving encouragement, and bestowing rewards. Each representative, in turn, is directed to "show their downlines the ropes," identify potential, and take recruits "under their wing" (Interview, March 17, 2010).

This social web is also a conduit for administrative and financial skills, such as managing accounts and inventory, goal setting, and planning. Training was highly valued by over two thirds of our sample, who said it enabled them to perform more effectively.

There were 89.9% who said that the training gave them skills transferrable to other work or entrepreneurial ventures. One third did not value their training, a report we attribute to the stream of new group leaders produced by pressure to recruit.

Training is ever present and ongoing, occurring in formal settings and in everyday interactions, but never a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Uplines must tailor communications to a workforce who often lack literacy and numeracy, for instance. Indeed, some emphasized that Avon's attention to training and mentorship was particularly appealing to those who "cannot read and write," enabling them to "take advantage" of the chance to do more than "sell tomatoes on the street" (Interview, March 17, 2010). A single mother with very little formal education described to us how her upline's support had enabled her to overcome this stumbling block and grow her business to the point that she was awarded one of Avon's highest achievements—membership in the President's Club (Interview, March 16, 2010).

Training also seeks to cultivate the emotional, psychological, and physical traits of a successful entrepreneur. Uplines emphasize the relationship between deportment and success. As one rep succinctly summarized, "they have to believe firstly in you . . . first they buy *you* before they even go to the product" (Interview, July 13, 2008). At one large focus group we held in Polokwane—with more than 20 reps present—a long and open discussion occurred about grooming and makeup. The consensus was that a sophisticated, well-groomed appearance was essential for the sake of sales, but also for personal confidence and, actually, group identity. While everyone adhered to a good standard of grooming, those who did not wear makeup were gently chastised. These individuals, smiling and shaking their heads, continued to resist and the matter was dropped. Personal choice was honored—the makeup was not that important.

The overall focus is much more on attitude and demeanor than the specifics of appearance. In another meeting, an upline underscored the importance of what she called a "prospecting attitude"; the "game face" needed when recruiting new reps or scouting for customers. "You definitely need to have a positive feeling about what you are doing," she said, "And if you feel that you are down and not feeling good, don't even bother. . . . What you feel when prospecting has a powerful impact on what you do" (Interview, March 17, 2010).

Respondents mostly reported positive relationships with their uplines, often describing them in glowing terms as "a source of inspiration," motivation, and affirmation. One woman described how her mentor's guidance made her "into a strong person" while at the same time validated the upline's skills and commitment. Speaking of her mentor, this respondent said: "Now she is so proud. I am her baby, because she taught me everything . . . She says, 'You know you have done a good job when your protégé knows more than you' . . ." (Interview, September 11, 2007). These women often blur the boundary between economic and social life, becoming friends, confidantes, and sources of emotional support. Over half of the respondents in the survey (60.6%), for example, agreed with the statement "My supervisor advises and helps me with my personal problems." However, developing business skills through this very personalized set of social ties can produce tension—33.1% of reps reported feeling occasional resentment to someone above them in the organization. Though we did not ask for the reasons from survey participants, observation suggested that the pressure to perform, underpinned as it was by intense social ties, could cause anxiety and, therefore, interpersonal friction.

Strategy and Growth. Reps are taught to identify the monthly, weekly, and daily activities needed to achieve measurable targets. Reps and their uplines then track progress, using tools such as the "Weekly Goals" worksheets and "Progress to Date" check-in calls.

In addition to setting sales goals, personal “dream building” is a core aspect of Avon culture. One leader explained how she encourages her downlines to select a photo from a magazine of something they aspire to, such as a home extension, and place it in a constantly visible place. She observed that reps “commit to themselves” that they will deliver business growth to meet their own goals (Interview, April 2, 2007). Another group leader explained, it can be “. . . the only way to reach the next level, otherwise you will stay where you are forever . . . if you don’t see bigger and better things for yourself, no one is going to do it for you” (Interview, September 11, 2007).

Teams meet to set goals, identify strategies to achieve them, and solve problems, as well as to build camaraderie and celebrate accomplishments (Interview, September 11, 2007). The majority (80%) found working in a team a valuable experience, but teams also produce competition. One rep described a rivalry, saying her colleague drove her to achieve: “if she [beats me], ooh my heart. . . . I can’t even sleep at night. She pushes me to work” (Interview, March 17, 2010). This rivalry was affable; for 25% of respondents, team frictions were less benign.

Motivation for growth is also engendered by the competitions for prizes and awards, especially the President’s Club. We found most reps could state, at any given time, exactly how their performance was stacking up for qualification in this honor. Uplines work to ensure their downlines understand the achievement metrics, using prizes to “make them focus on what is going to bring them returns in the business” (Interview, March 17, 2010).

Each agent’s business grows organically out of the push to draw in downlines, increase earnings, win prizes, and reach dreams. Growth outcomes can be seen in team size. In South Africa, black women who are self-employed average four employees, but Avon teams were much larger (Naidoo & Hilton, 2006). While this sample had a small number of group leaders, the average number supervised was 137 people, with a median of 34, in a range from 10 to 817.

The sum of the system, therefore, seems to address many of the shortfalls identified in past research into women’s performance as entrepreneurs, with the expected outcome of growth, even in a situation of scarcity.

Ends-In-View: Poverty and Empowerment

Earnings. In our survey of 300 randomly selected black Avon representatives, the mean income earned from selling Avon was about 900 ZAR a month. Using the closest population data available for comparison, the Statistics South Africa (2008b) *Community Survey*, we found that this income, by itself, would put an Avon rep in the top half of the wage-earning black women in her community and bring her earnings almost in line with a black man’s.

In our sample, 68.8% had several ways of earning money, however. We often observed entrepreneurs using Avon in tandem with other work: one young woman with a tiny hair salon in a rural village sold Avon alongside services, for instance, and we met several teachers who sold Avon after school. So, we felt it was a more relevant test, from a poverty alleviation perspective, to focus on those women who were relying on Avon as their primary income.

Reps who had been working with Avon 7 months or less, but for whom Avon was their primary income, were making only 561 ZAR a month, the lowest quintile of South African earnings. But women who relied on Avon for their primary income and had been in the system 16 months or more were earning a striking 1,409 ZAR a month. Keep in mind this study did not follow the same group of women throughout the course of their

Avon career, rather we are reviewing cross-sectional data. Nevertheless, these earnings put the earner within reach of the middle quintile of the whole South African population, in the third quintile for the black population, and in the top 10% of self-employed black women (Naidoo & Hilton, 2006; Statistics South Africa, 2008a).

Given the extreme skew of incomes by race in South Africa, one would not want to call 1,409 ZAR per month an escape from poverty. But, for perspective, this amount is roughly the average spent by a black household of four to purchase food, nonalcoholic beverages, health care, clothing, and shoes (Statistics South Africa, 2008c). So, it represents a substantial dent in the costs of survival and, especially within the shared households where most of our respondents lived, would have provided subsistence for the woman as well as one or two others.

The subjective self-reports were consistent with our interpretation. Respondents said they felt Avon had given them financial autonomy (74.6%) and job training that could be used to get other employment (89.8%). In interviews, woman after woman said their Avon work transformed them into “a role model” for their children and allowed them to “fulfill their dreams” of self-sufficiency (Interview, September 18, 2007). Nearly two thirds of respondents said they believed someone like themselves could live off Avon income alone.

The dearth of formal employment opportunities is an important backdrop for the entire system, however. Even for the well educated, good jobs are few and unstable. Teachers, in particular, have trouble finding and keeping employment. Instability in formal employment explains why 43.6% of our respondents said that they were earning significantly less than they had in a previous job, while 25.1% said they were earning significantly more. Remember also that most of South Africa’s self-employed are black women and their businesses are usually informal, often simply selling produce and handicrafts along the roadside. A number of those we interviewed were recruited from selling on the street, including many former teachers. Respondents specifically averred that selling Avon was better than selling produce or crafts (96.7%). The reason given most often was that you did not have to sit on the roadside to do it (50%). South Africa’s levels of violence toward women make roadside selling as dangerous as it is hot and boring.

Self-Perceptions. Feminist theory has long held that the gender system produces an internal experience for the female that results in a vastly different view of the world, including “feminine” perceptions of the self. These self-perceptions have been framed in various ways, both positive (“women are more nurturing”) and negative (“women are more passive”); some have been demonstrated in studies of gender differences in self-perception of “entrepreneurial” personality traits (Ahl, 2006; Gupta, Turban, Arzu Wasti, & Sikdar, 2009; Langowitz & Minniti, 2007; Wilson, Kickul, & Marlino, 2007). From a pragmatist feminist perspective, we might hope, then, that a positive intervention would produce concrete outcomes like earnings and skill sets, but also changes in self-perception.

Fully 88.8% of respondents told us that their experience with Avon had made them more self-confident. Several factors seem to contribute: the change in personal demeanor and appearance, the recognition and encouragement that comes through the awards competitions, the support from the network itself, and, finally, the sense of control over one’s own destiny that comes from the goal setting and dream building.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, we think the pressure to adopt a certain appearance and demeanor has a positive effect on confidence. The rep who can take on this sophisticated, well-groomed persona often finds that it works for her and she feels good about herself as a result. Obviously, some personalities would not respond well, but the

women who stay with the Avon system seem to flourish under the directive to look good and act confident.

One respondent told a particularly remarkable story. Before joining Avon, she was unemployed and faced caring for a husband with cancer and a daughter in a wheelchair. She spent whole days “crying, worried, not eating, biting my nails, and sleeping.” She is now hopeful about her future, saying “when I opened Avon’s door, I became happy . . . Avon kept me busy and helped me to take my mind off things, it has changed me” (Interview, March 17, 2010). This woman described her sales strategy, which employed both feminine appearance and sales skills: “Maybe I go to the bank and I find a security lady or security man there. When I walk I make a noise with my heels to get attention and then she will say, ‘You look so beautiful.’ And then I say, ‘This is an Avon brochure, these are the products I use. It’s feminine’” (Interview, March 17, 2010). Now able to purchase groceries, pay school fees, and buy gifts for other handicapped children at her daughter’s school, she described herself as “free” because of her Avon income and professional experience. She said her neighbors had “more respect” for her since she joined Avon, observing that she is “not begging anymore,” but “doing something for herself” (Interview, March 17, 2010). The groomed appearance and assured attitude fed into the sales success—all three made her feel more confident about herself and the way she is seen by her community. Note, however, that her pride is rooted in a distinctly feminine concept of self—not the masculine entrepreneur model.

Avon reps take pride in their new expertise about personal care. In fact, one of the comic features of our fieldwork became the unsolicited commentary on the condition of our skin and the offers of makeovers. We had many conversations about the meaning of this grooming, especially the makeup. Consistent with other reports of the connection between modern grooming and professional identity—in history and around the world today—our respondents tended to see their personal presentation as an expression of ambition, rather than sexuality (Scott, 2005; Weinbaum et al., 2008). Independence was, in their minds, closely intertwined with a specific mode of grooming and so made selling the products a kind of crusade. One explained: “Culturally, the black community and the Indian community have the perception that the women’s role is to raise the kids. ‘I am the man of the house and I will go and hunt, the hunter and the gatherer, and you will cook and feed.’ That perception is changing because the country is promoting women’s empowerment, and [Avon] as an organization are talking about empowerment and self development to women. We’re showing them in communities how to better themselves by looking good through the products, feeling good and earning some money” (Interview, April 3, 2007).

Feminist psychologists have documented the need for recognition through work, an important fuel for a sense of purpose and self-esteem often denied to women (Fels, 2005). Opportunities for women to experience recognition in South Africa seem to be rare. Perhaps this is why the Avon awards have such a profound effect: 87% reported that selling Avon had made them feel recognized. For women who win the highest awards and attend the President’s Club banquet, the event is a memorable milestone. One leader, welcoming us to her township home for tea, showed a photo of herself at the banquet in a place of honor in her living room, positioned between a photo of her daughter’s high school graduation and one of her deceased mother.

We concluded later interviews by asking about goals for the next 5 years. Many mentioned business growth targets. We then asked what their goals would have been had we met them 5 years earlier. This question usually provoked a laugh, followed by the answer that they had no goals 5 years ago, other than to get through the day and make sure

their children were healthy, fed, and in school. This near-term material orientation is visible among new recruits. It was common to hear of uplines telling new entrants to set goals by how much had to be sold in order to feed children: The favorite example was that the commission on one bottle of lotion (itself a staple in South African grooming much like soap or toothpaste) would buy a loaf of bread. One division manager used children's school fees to structure her lessons in planning. She pointed out that tuition for 12 months should be divided into quarterly amounts that could be matched to target Avon earnings (Interview, March 16, 2010). The planning practices, like dream building, seem to have the effect of shifting goals from short-term subsistence to the longer view: 73.6% of our respondents said they use their Avon income primarily for "meeting basic needs," but only 28.5% aimed to continue this practice in the future. Future spending was aimed at more foundational plans: saving (47.1%), buying a car (24.4%), paying debts (34.9%), starting a business (27.1%).

The transformation in expectations for life is itself a powerful confidence builder. Hope is given credibility by the presence of women throughout the system who are living evidence of the possibilities. A black female head of household, who had risen from being a 16-year-old rural orphan to senior management with Avon, gave a powerful testimony:

I could have not achieved things that I have achieved . . . without Avon. It developed me . . . I see myself growing, I wasn't talkative but now I can express myself . . . I didn't see that I had potential . . . I didn't realize that I had skills . . . I did not realize that I could be a leader . . . I wouldn't be driving the kind of car that I am driving . . . I am living in a suburb, it is not a classy suburb but it is a suburb surrounded by whites, you know . . . And I am a single mother. And I can take my child on holiday . . . So in that way Avon has changed my life. (Interview, September 11, 2007)

Changed self-perceptions, improved confidence, and increased hope are important emancipatory outcomes. However, our broader argument is that individual perceptions and performances are constrained by systemic inequalities, which are socially produced. So, we would also want to see a change in social relations resulting from the Avon experience. Respondents did report that Avon had given them better social skills (73.8%), as well as more community and family respect (67.9%). But we wish to delve more deeply into the potentially problematic relationships with men, family demands, and interactions with other races.

Family Relations. We must begin with the difference in family composition, as compared with the two-parent, Western family model that frames entrepreneurship research. The 41% of black households in South Africa headed by a female compare with 12% in the United States (U.S. Census, 2008). In our sample, female-headed households were even higher than in the general population: 31% reported being the head of their household, 20% reported their mothers as head of household, and 2% reported another female family member, totaling to 53% living in female-headed households. Further, 53.3% said they were the primary breadwinner when asked—another 12.3% said their mother was the primary breadwinner, while grandmothers and other female relatives accounted for another 2%. This is a staggering grand total of 68.6% reporting that a female was the primary breadwinner in their family.

Among married women, 46.8% said they were the primary breadwinner, yet only 10.1% said they were head of household. Only 50.5% of married respondents said their husbands were the family's primary breadwinner; 81.8% said their husbands were

nevertheless the household head. These numbers suggest that, even when a woman takes primary economic responsibility for the family, she defers to the man as the head of the house, a clear expression of the power of gender.

Some of this deference is likely meant to counter the risk inherent in affronting gender norms by earning more. One group leader we spoke to echoed several others when she remarked that some men can become “threatened” when their wives or girlfriends earn “a big chunk of money” through Avon (Interview, March 17, 2010). Indeed, we heard several anecdotes about husbands so jealous of Avon success that the marriage ended in divorce. We also heard direct connections made between the sense of empowerment that had been instilled in the Avon rep and their “wanting to walk out of the relationship” as they “start to discover themselves” and realize their entrepreneurial abilities (Interview, March 17, 2010).

Avon also fostered a sense of ownership over earnings. In a country where, as elsewhere in the developing world, women often have trouble maintaining control over money they earn, only 1.6% of respondents said their partner took their money from them. There were 95.7% who said: “I would never let the man in my life take control of my money.” Also, 92% of Avon reps had their *own* bank account, when only 38.4% of black women in South Africa have *any* bank account.

Those who had male partners did sometimes experience conflict related to their new business, especially in the “more traditional cases” (Interview, March 16, 2010). Some engaged in behaviors designed to soften the effect of their work on their men, such as waiting until the husband was asleep and then getting up to fill out orders. However, some issues were different from what one would see in the West. Because the job requires women to wander freely, striking up conversations with strangers, Avon reps are open to charges of promiscuity from their husbands and other males in their communities. In Africa, a woman with money is often inferred to have gotten her funds through sex. For example, one rep said her friends assumed her newfound financial freedom was the result of a “sugar daddy,” never imagining that she had earned the money herself through Avon. She explained their perception that “if you don’t have money, as a woman, you must have a relationship with a man so he can provide for you” (Interview, March 17, 2010). Since the Avon network encourages the use of makeup, which is still associated with “fast” women in some parts of South Africa, we heard stories of husbands who accused their wives of “looking like whores.” Sometimes these issues resulted in pressure to withdraw. A group leader said it was “painful” to see women recently recruited and trained, with Avon orders in the pipeline, “pull out because their husband or partner discouraged them” (Interview, March 17, 2010).

Because of the level of domestic violence, we can infer the urgency behind shows of deference and obedience. One senior Avon manager said he suspected many crimes against women, including rape, forcible incest, and domestic violence, were committed in the homes of his reps and “go unreported.” This manager reported, aghast, that when he was visiting rep’s homes, he would be told that “so-and-so was beaten up by her husband” or “so-and so was raped and now she had AIDS,” and that these crimes would more than likely remain “swept under the carpet” (Interview April 3, 2007). It was touching to hear him, as he regretted his powerlessness to address the situation, saying that Avon encouraged women to report crimes against the offenders, and made offers to provide counseling if needed, but that such appeals often seemed to fall on deaf ears as women felt frightened to incite the wrath of their abuser. This manager emphasized that Avon sought to give women, through entrepreneurship, the financial ability to leave toxic and dangerous family environments. We could also see that the upline Avon mentors became intimate counselors in these situations. And it was clear to us on many occasions that the ethic in

the network runs against taking abuse or remaining docile, yet many women apparently remained in such situations.

The increased earning power did sometimes have a positive effect on a difficult relationship. One rep told how her husband had once treated her with disrespect, daily raising his voice at her and leaning on the car horn in the mornings to hurry her out of the house to her low-paying job as a maid. She dressed in the car in order to appease her husband's impatience. Once Avon increased her contribution to household income, her husband changed, starting their days by saying, "My dear, we are going to work" and waiting for her before walking out the door to the car (Interview, March 17, 2010). At the extreme, we heard of a young woman whose abusive husband stopped beating her because of the Avon income. We also heard stories about males who pitched in and helped with the business, driving their wives to appointments or taking the sales brochure to their workplaces. There were tales of loving partnerships: A former vegetable seller won an Avon award to be presented hundreds of miles away and her husband hired a driver to take her there. Overall, 63.1% reported "My husband or partner treats me better now that I sell Avon products."

In most cases, however, males were simply not present. Of the women in our sample, 52.3% were either never married or currently had no male partner—a number that is only slightly higher than the norm for South Africa, where black women are much less likely to marry than whites (Posel & Casale, 2009). A district leader described her large Soweto team as "mostly SSS—Single, Sexy, and Satisfied." One of this leader's downlines, a teenage orphan who had become very successful, said she felt most of her female friends were "so behind" because they "still depend on their boyfriends, their husbands, their families" for money, but this young woman claimed that, though she might be single "the rest of my life," she was unconcerned as long as she was able to support herself financially. Strikingly, she remarked "money is my husband," claiming she preferred her freedom to a traditional relationship in which "African men, they are the head of the house. . . ." (Interview, September 11, 2007).

The absence of men frames the mother's responsibility to children differently from the norm implicit in women's entrepreneurship research. Loscocco and Leicht (1993) found, in a rare effort to study single mothers, that in the absence of a male provider, women entrepreneurs become just as focused on becoming "providers" as men. In our study, female household heads consistently framed their desire for increased earnings in terms of the ability to feed and educate children. Some said simply they had no expectation of male provision. One group leader whose daughter was also a top-earning Avon rep (and both of whom were heads of households) asserted that "not many black men support their children, it's a known fact" (Interview, March 16, 2010). Besides having little support from husbands, these women seldom had a choice of formal employment available to them. Thus, the conflict that demands so much attention in the West is reversed in this context: It is entrepreneurship that allows these families to survive at all.

Interactions with Other Classes and Races. Pressure to expand their network puts these women in a position where they must do business with people of other races and classes. The emphasis on grooming and professional demeanor seems to help a great deal because the rep's view of herself compared with others of a "higher" social status—whether by race or class—is positively affected. Her sense of social inferiority begins to fall away: 73.8% report that "Because of Avon I am no longer intimidated by people I thought were 'higher' than me."

Many narratives from interviews fleshed out this finding. One rep described how she had overcome her fears and begun selling Avon at car dealerships run by wealthy Indians,

pushing the norms for black women (Interview, March 17, 2010). A group leader described how she had been mentoring one agent “a long time,” and had seen this woman, a black female head of household with minimal formal education, be transformed from a “shy, quiet” person who “didn’t have self confidence” to an effective recruiter and salesperson, fearlessly prospecting nurses, teachers, and others she would have previously perceived to be “of a higher level” than herself. Telling this story, the upline observed, “it takes a certain kind of a person to go and approach somebody of a higher level.” But this rep became “that kind of person” (Interview, March 16, 2010).

Ultimately, however, any improvement in immediate social interaction would need to yield to improvements in socioeconomic standing for the class. It is beyond the reach of this study to show long-term shifts in the status of black women. The length of study is insufficient for such claims and the expectation of complete social transformation due to one partial action would violate the incremental ethic, the achievable ends in view, of a pragmatist approach. Expecting one company’s efforts, or even one aspect of the market society such as entrepreneurship, to solve all problems for everyone is too close to the end-state utopianism of an earlier feminism, a one-cure-for-all-times viewpoint (McKenna, 2002).

However, we did see glimmers of potential for upward mobility across generations. One group sales leader referenced domestic work as a barrier to any form of entrepreneurship by black women, pointing out that traditional Bantu education prepared black women to “work for someone else,” often as a domestic worker. She argued that this perception is something black women “still must erase from our people,” who might perceive a low-paying job as a cleaner to be “better than to have your own business” (Interview, March 17, 2010). Several of the women we met, and some among the most successful, were the daughters of domestic servants. One, in particular, now has two grown children, whom she has educated without the help of a husband; one child is a pediatrician and the other a journalist for the BBC. Another divorced mother had bought a house and a car, had put one son through college, and was starting on the university education of her daughter. So the long-term payoffs, money for better education, or simply a positive female role model in the home, may be substantial. One senior manager noted:

Being a black lady makes me understand the meaning of changing one’s life. I take that very seriously . . . I’m really seeing people’s lives being changed. We are having people that are staying in shacks, we are having people that are sharing a room, the whole family. We are having people that are sitting on a street corner selling something that is not that profitable, selling just to have something to eat in the evening but with Avon we are really changing people’s lives. We are making people to move from the street and become businesswomen. (Interview, Sept. 11, 2007)

Avon offers the potential to help families survive, in addition to helping women stand up to their men and to approach “higher ups” with confidence, as well as improving both their earning ability and self-perceptions. Nevertheless, there are limits.

Constraints and Concerns

National Infrastructure. Our respondents were keenly aware of their moment in history. Most could remember apartheid; they continually pointed out that, under the old order, they would not have been able to sit with us in a restaurant or ride together in a car as equals. They were also aware that, compared with other African nations, their own

colonial experience left infrastructural assets, like roads and phone lines. But the fragility of the future was often a topic: The volatile politics and limited means of South African government loomed large over all hopes.

Reports in the entrepreneurship literature have noted the different historical experiences and government structures that affect women (Bliss & Garratt, 2001; Welter, Smallbone, & Isakova, 2006). We think it is also crucial to take account of the way the infrastructural shortfalls that follow from national disadvantage differentially limit growth of any entrepreneurial effort—from males or females—compared with the rich nations. For Avon division managers, driving to meet with downlines in remote areas was made possible by good roads. However, the public transportation system is severely lacking, so women without cars—that is, most of the reps in our study—were substantially constrained by lack of mobility. One of the reasons Avon's prices compare favorably to products bought at retail is that the price of transportation must be imputed into store purchases. So public transportation affects the system in a complex way, at the sales and consumer levels.

Communications structure was also important. Avon products are shipped to post offices, which exist in nearly every small settlement. So a local rep can go to the post office, pick up products, and deliver them to customers on foot if necessary. The post office also can process payments, if there is no bank nearby. Other developing nations often do not have postal systems that can provide this level of service. Internet access, though, was an issue because it is required to check commission reports. Reps present at a training session we attended denounced this practice, claiming, "We don't even know our e-mail addresses" and complained of the personal expense they incurred by accessing their reports in township Internet cafes.

Basic education and material scarcity have unexpected effects in very impoverished environments. Women sometimes struggled to sign up for Avon, even once they obtained the registration fee, because the paperwork requires literacy and getting access to a reliable photocopier is sometimes problematic. A valid government-issued piece of identification is not something everyone has, nor is a formal address—even a black pen cannot be taken for granted.

Safety Issues. Security concerns were raised by both reps and senior level Avon managers. As one Avon director who had worked in the United Kingdom prior to coming to South Africa explained, he had never imagined the difficulty of running a "door to door business in a country where no one opens the door" out of fear (Interview, April 3, 2007). Especially among Johannesburg agents, experience of muggings, hijackings, robberies, and rape were commonplace. Women moving about to make sales, deliver products, and meet teams are easy targets for such predators. Avon senior managers even reach out to powerful criminals in struggling neighborhoods, seeking to build a relationship with them so that women will be "left alone" as they go about their Avon activities (Interview, April 3, 2007). The problem points back to infrastructure—police, judiciary—but also to overall violence, particularly as related to the gender structure. This is not something that an individual or a company can easily counter.

Lower Limits. Having interviewed several women who dropped out of Avon, we hypothesized there was a limit on how poor a woman could be and still take advantage of it. Those who were both poor and isolated had trouble borrowing the means to start up; if they lived in extremely deprived neighborhoods, or in the "informal settlements" (temporary communities of refugees and homeless persons), it was hard to get even the few first sales. But our respondents were adamant that women in extreme straits had made

Avon work. Such stories did appear in interviews, such as the painful tale of a single mother who had escaped the informal settlements:

I did have a problem . . . my uncle he raped me . . . I couldn't cope with school and the pressure and living with the same man . . . then I found out I am (HIV) positive [from my uncle] . . . I didn't do anything, I didn't care, I didn't want to know . . . I was just waiting for my dying day because I didn't have the guts to kill myself.

I just don't want to die anymore, I want to see my [Avon] business grow . . . I want it to be big at a high level. I left school at an early age, I don't think that there is another way I can survive except to stick [with Avon]. To put all my dedication to this because now I can feed and clothe my kid . . . like [my upline], have a car and drive around, take my kids to town and buy them everything, that is my dream . . . because I didn't go to school, I won't find a job, I have to think of Avon as my job, like raising a child, its my baby I have to raise it . . .

At least when I die I know I left my kid something. I don't want him to say "My mother didn't have work" . . . I am planning to stay with Avon a very long time, as long as I am still with my son. It was the best job that came into my life, before I was sad and miserable . . . (Interview, January 14, 2009)

Discussion

The Avon system does seem to provide an emancipatory avenue for poor women in South Africa, enabling some to lift themselves out of poverty and inspiring many with self-confidence and hope. The Avon system is limited by South Africa's infrastructural constraints, including the pervasive violence. However, the organic nature of the system seems to provide a flexibility that is adaptive to many obstacles. There is no question that it is a partial solution: Not everyone can be an Avon lady and not every woman wants to be one. Even so, it did seem to us that the basic form of the system could be adapted to other conditions and uses, such as selling healthcare goods or providing services. The key advantages over other direct sales and microlending schemes we have observed include: (1) the graduated working capital arrangement, which allows for growth and works in parallel to the conventional banking system, but minimizes credit risk; (2) the mostly female environment, which allows for training and mentoring that is tailored to the needs of women in a variety of situations; (3) the basket of goods, which relies on small, frequent purchases of everyday items rather than a single "big ticket" object; (4) the recognition and support, which encourage women who are otherwise often very discouraged to persevere and achieve; and (5) the protective umbrella of a multinational organization strong enough to provide money and materials, while attuned to the needs of women. In comparison, the entrepreneurship training programs often instigated by governments and well-meaning companies seem somewhat superficial.

The women's entrepreneurship literature provided an excellent way to identify training and support that would be important in analyzing the Avon system. This literature, regardless of any theoretical framework that may be felt missing, can, we think, be used to guide emancipatory work. However, there are cultural assumptions about family, employment alternatives, and infrastructure that need to be adjusted for research among women in poor nations.

We feel it is crucial to encourage more research in those parts of the world with the most gender inequality. Langowitz and Minniti (2007) claimed a universal study of

women's entrepreneurship, finding that diminished self-perceptions among women prevailed everywhere and that gender, as a dummy variable, explained a lot. Of course this is true: We know now that gender is neither a local quirk nor a subjective fantasy, but a ubiquitous system of oppression with consistent features. But, though Langowitz and Minniti was based on a sample of 17 nations, it was, in fact, profoundly biased because no sub-Saharan African or Muslim majority country was included. Since gender inequalities are significantly worse in those regions (UNDP, 2010; WEF, 2010), we can hypothesize that the findings would be heightened by a more representative sample. We would want to see these areas included for deeper analysis to understand the workings of gender and the potential for intervention under the most challenging conditions.

A more global and realistic view of the constraints of women's economic opportunities would compel researchers to recognize the intransigence of gender inequality. The liberal feminist nature of the discourse so far has made it "timid in addressing the persistence of systemic conditions disadvantaging women" (Calás et al., 2009, p. 82). Once the hard reality is grasped, issues like opportunity recognition and risk tolerance may look much different. Perhaps, as the literature currently suggests, women are less likely to "see" opportunities because of their enculturation or self-perceptions (Brush et al., 2009) or perhaps women's approach to opportunity is different from that of men (DeTienne & Chandler, 2007). But the sum of the gender system may actually make fewer opportunities open to women and create greater or different risks than those occurring for men. So, reactions to opportunity or risk may be explicable as realistic, rational assessments of actual conditions—which are different everywhere for women than for men.

Conclusion

An idea at the core of the global push toward women's entrepreneurship is that this business form can operate outside the constraints imposed by customary patriarchy and transcend the limits of infrastructural support, thus giving women agency and the income to meet, especially, the needs of children. The notion is fundamentally subversive, but also perhaps naïve. Nevertheless, great sums of money and much human attention are being put to work behind it. We believe it is important for feminists working in the economic disciplines of the academy, but especially in entrepreneurship, to engage the task of evaluating these programs.

There is much at stake besides economic improvement for nations. In this moment lies the potential for the world's resources to be employed on behalf of women's freedom at a level unknown in history. If, indeed, female empowerment manifests in the ways expected, the outcomes will be massively beneficial for humanity along dimensions from health to national security to environmental protection. Such efforts should have continual, high-quality feedback from independent research, so that each new program can be adapted in light of learning from the last. There would be multiple outcomes besides financial gain to measure, but one measure should always be whether, in fact, women were empowered by what was done.

An important departure from past feminist thought is required, however. To pursue this path, the possibility must be allowed that the marketplace contains mechanisms, such as entrepreneurship, that can be harnessed for feminist purposes. Each independent inquiry must also be free to judge every intervention on its own terms, positive or negative, and not look for a single revolutionary cure for all ills. A pragmatist feminist perspective, because it does not predetermine judgment of outcomes based on an overriding ideology

and values each step in the path toward justice as an important one, provides a broad enough umbrella for this program to progress.

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