
Book Review

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Jeemol Unni, Vanita Yadav, Ravikiran Naik and Swati Dutta, *Women Entrepreneurship in the Indian Middle Class: Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Orient BlackSwan, 2021, 271 pages, ₹1,075 (Paperback), ISBN: 978-93-5442-145-7.

The term entrepreneurship is known to evoke distinctly different images to those who want to study the phenomenon closely. Peter Kilby compared early attempts at defining entrepreneurship to the hunting of ‘heffalump’—the imaginary creature whose features appear different to different onlookers. Inquiries into women entrepreneurship are further complex given the dynamic interaction between gender and culture in shaping its form and character. In this context the book *Women Entrepreneurship in the Indian Middle Class* appears a timely contribution, especially since it brings two contested concepts—‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘middle class’—together in its title. The concept of the middle class is contested in that its size and composition can vary considerably based on how its material characteristics and ideological moorings are defined. Whether a social class is an income group or an articulation of the asymmetry in social relations negotiated through ownership of and control over resources is a matter of debate. Some would even prefer to dispense with the term altogether to avoid the reductionism implicit in grading and categorising people arbitrarily.

In *Women Entrepreneurship in the Indian Middle Class*, the authors have defined the middle class as an income category (per capita income range of \$2–\$10) that combines two subcategories, the lower and upper middle classes; the authors focus more on the lower income groups. Further, the category of middle-class entrepreneurs is subsumed within the self-employed category defined as it is in the Employment and Unemployment Survey of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). Thus, the book clearly posits entrepreneurship as a form of labour and not as a combination of special behavioural or attitudinal attributes, a conceptualisation that informed the entrepreneurship development interventions in the micro and small enterprise sector in the early years.

The book contains four streams of analysis. The first stream—and the bulk of the book—deals with definitional and estimation-related questions based on the surveys of the NSSO. The second stream relates to a brief comparative analysis of behavioural attributes of entrepreneurs by gender with the help of Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) data. Institutional barriers to entrepreneurship in both informal and formal enterprises form the third stream of enquiry with enterprise survey data of the World Bank providing the empirical base. Finally, with the help of a primary survey among college students in the National Capital Region (NCR), the book analyses the individual entrepreneurial aptitude of youth.

The authors have undertaken a detailed analysis of the NSSO data to underscore the central role that women play in the entrepreneurial universe of the middle class mostly by deploying own labour or the labour of family members, often using the home as the workspace. This is markedly different from what is observed in the case of male entrepreneurs who operate mostly from separate premises. The book further reports that women-run enterprises grew at a higher rate from the late 2000s, testifying to the tendency of the informal sector to act as a buffer in times of crises. In fact, it is shown that women-owned smaller enterprises are more dynamic and growth-oriented compared to those run by men or the larger units run by women. More women took to entrepreneurship in 2015–2016 as compared to 2010–2011.

Considering a schism in the category of middle class between the lower and middle segments, the authors suggest that the principal motivation to choose entrepreneurial activity may differ between the two. Women entrepreneurs in the lower middle class are more likely to be pushed into enterprise as there is no alternative for them, while those in the upper middle class choose it to pursue business opportunities. This necessity-opportunity dichotomy was popularised by studies that have used the GEM database, mainly in the 2000s (Fairlie & Fossen, 2018). Though the book sets out to enquire whether men and women who operate low return and innovative enterprises differ significantly in terms of their behavioural traits (risk-taking, confidence and independence), the analysis does not seem to clearly provide any useful clues. These are complex behavioural attributes that have closer and nuanced interactions with social and cultural factors and hence must be unpacked with great care. This is one aspect—the lack of a keen and sharp understanding of the complex construction of gender as applied to business and entrepreneurship—where the book is likely to disappoint readers somewhat. A truly multi-disciplinary framework of

analysis, going beyond management and behavioural economics, would have helped the authors ground their analysis with clarity.

The book strongly endorses the idea that entrepreneurship can provide an effective solution to the problem of youth unemployment. The question, however, is to what extent the young population in India perceive it as a career option. The survey conducted by the authors among college students in the NCR showed that more than half the respondents dreamt of regular salaried jobs once they completed their education. This was found truer of men than of women. Most men would like to work for a few years and then take the plunge so that they can make use of their technical skill or make more money. In contrast, more women were inclined towards starting an enterprise as it allows them greater flexibility and independence. Such findings can meaningfully inform the planning of entrepreneurship education and the designing of start-up incentives in ways that promote greater participation of young women.

Women Entrepreneurship in the Indian Middle Class is a very useful contribution to a largely non-existent body of literature on women entrepreneurship in India. The discourse on entrepreneurship and enterprise historically has revolved around the image of a classy, risk-taking, rational, innovative individual, who is easily imagined as a man despite the claims that the concept is free of any gender connotations. This book has helped change the terms of the discourse on entrepreneurship by reiterating the dominant presence of the informal sector in the country's economy and the role that the self-employed women play within that. I was left with one question though—why did the authors think it important to frame their enquiry within the concept of middle class? The book does not provide us with any convincing answers to that question.

Studies on entrepreneurship in the micro and small enterprise sector have generally focussed either on the attitudes and behavioural traits of individuals or on the institutional environments. As Tripathi (1985) points out, these two elements need to be considered together as it is the interaction between individual-specific factors and the general environment (an assemblage of material and cultural/social milieu of a society) that produces entrepreneurship. Unni et al. attempt to integrate individuals and institutions in their conceptualisation, A truly multidisciplinary approach going beyond just management and behavioural economics and integrating critical insights from sociology and feminist studies would have helped them evolve a framework to locate this interesting and important enquiry in a more rooted manner.

References

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