

# Legitimacy and women entrepreneurs in masculinised industries: a postfeminist perspective

Caroline Essers

*Institute for Management Research, Radboud University Nijmegen,  
Nijmegen, Netherlands*

Maura McAdam

*DCU Business School, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland, and  
Carolin Ossenkop*

*Institute for Management Research, Radboud University Nijmegen,  
Nijmegen, Netherlands*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper explores the ways women entrepreneurs in male-dominated industries do identity work in order to gain legitimacy. In particular, we consider such identity work as a process being prompted by their direct environment, while demonstrating the gendered structural power relations in these women's entrepreneurial contexts. We use a postfeminist lens to show how, in their quest for more legitimacy, they seem to be interpellated by postfeminist discourse.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We have used a narrative approach to show how women entrepreneurs in masculinised contexts do identity work to acquire legitimacy, and moreover use a postfeminist perspective to reflect on this identity work as to demonstrate how these Dutch businesswomen consider their agency in specific feminist terms within these men-dominated industry environments.

**Findings** – We present empirical data of ten women entrepreneurs in the Netherlands and how they discursively and subjectively make sense of their surrounding gendered contexts, in order to illustrate how local gender regimes and individual actions may conspire to constrain as well as stimulate these women's entrepreneurship. By reflecting on three different ways of identity work through a postfeminist lens, we show how these women are interpellated by postfeminist discourses when trying to gain legitimacy.

**Research limitations/implications** – The rather small sample does not allow us to generalise our findings to the whole population of women entrepreneurs in men-dominated contexts, yet this was not our goal anyway.

**Practical implications** – Such a reflection might help policy makers and such women themselves realise how, after all, gender inequality is still persistent in the entrepreneurship field and drawing on postfeminism does not necessarily help to support these women entrepreneurs' work-life balance.

**Social implications** – Our findings underline the importance of a more gender inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystem, in which women entrepreneurs in both masculinised and feminised sectors are seen and treated as legitimate entrepreneurs.

**Originality/value** – Postfeminism, to our knowledge, has hardly been applied to women entrepreneurs' experiences in men-dominated environments, and is in itself still a rather new field in entrepreneurship studies.

**Keywords** Women entrepreneurship, Gender, Postfeminism, Identity work, Legitimacy,

Masculinised industries

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Although traditionally seen from an individualised, masculinised, heroised standpoint, there is a growing recognition of the socially embedded nature of entrepreneurship (Jack and

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Anderson, 2002; McKeever *et al.*, 2014; Martinez Dy, 2020) and the notion of entrepreneurship as an activity which is by definition gendered (Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018). Conceptualising entrepreneurship in this way directly acknowledges the extent to which entrepreneurial opportunities and actions are embedded within their wider social, gendered context (McKeever *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, such a perspective encapsulates the “doing of entrepreneurship” as a social practice, which is deeply influenced by the socio-cultural values and norms concerning gender and other identity categories of in- and exclusion in a particular context (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Bruni *et al.*, 2004a, b). This relational shaping of entrepreneuring can be understood via the concept of identity work, which refers to “*the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept*” (Snow and Anderson, 1987, p. 1348). Identity work is thus understood in relation to the dynamic interplay between ones’ own self-reflection (i.e. self-identity) and engagement with the cultural, discursive and institutional notions that define oneself (i.e. social identities) (Watson, 2009; Ybema *et al.*, 2009).

The process of identity work within entrepreneurial contexts is an activity undertaken by reflexive subjects in attempt to gain entrepreneurial legitimacy within the various environments they encounter (Marlow and McAdam, 2015). This implies that entrepreneurs are required to construct an entrepreneurial identity that they consider legitimate and is legitimised by others (Navis and Glynn, 2011; Lewis, 2013; De Clercq and Voronov, 2009; Swail and Marlow, 2018). Legitimacy is the generalised perception that the individual acts in accordance with the socially constructed system of norms and beliefs (Suchman, 1995; Thompson-Whiteside *et al.*, 2021). This legitimisation process entails the entrepreneur negotiating the paradoxical tensions of reproducing habitual practices of entrepreneurship (i.e. fitting in) while being novel (i.e. standing out) (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009).

As a woman entrepreneur, these tensions are exacerbated, as recurrently gendered identity work must be undertaken, which entails maintaining femininity while ensuring that the masculine traits associated with entrepreneurship are assumed (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Marlow *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, often specific identity work is done as a means of managing the competing social roles and the masculine normative standards imposed by the field (Ahl, 2006; Lewis, 2013; Chasserio *et al.*, 2014). In specific entrepreneurial contexts, such as traditionally feminised sectors, women can effortlessly draw upon assumptions which map competencies onto stereotypes to create provisional selves that fit within this specific environment (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). However, concurring with Marlow and McAdam (2013), we contend that women entrepreneurs who enter masculinised contexts must engage in particular forms of identity work if they are to be recognised as a legitimate entrepreneur. To do so, they may draw on specific feminist discourses in their societal environment to craft a favourable identity as a woman entrepreneur. For instance, Lewis (2014) and Lewis *et al.* (2022) show how women entrepreneurs often are interpellated by postfeminist discourses to craft their entrepreneurial subjectivities to align with the normative expectations in their surrounding milieu.

Postfeminism serves as a framework to understand how gendered narratives and belief systems subtly shape what are perceived as women’s choices (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Lewis, 2014). Centring on individual responsibility, choice and agency underlines the neoliberal core at the heart of postfeminism which calls women to adopt a mode of living which is entrepreneurial, market-focused, driven and self-regarding (Lewis *et al.*, 2022). Postfeminism assists to reproduce traditional notions of femininity in a context of choice and liberalisation (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; McRobbie, 2004, 2020), by appropriating and undermining traditional feminist principles such as equality, empowerment and choice. However, in doing so, it perpetuates and upholds conventional gender dynamics (Treanor *et al.*, 2021). To the best of our knowledge, such a postfeminist approach has not or has been scarcely applied to women entrepreneurs in masculinised industries. With this novel focus, for this special issue concerning Feminist Approaches to Gender and Entrepreneurship Research,

we aim to address the following research question: *How do women entrepreneurs in Dutch masculinised industries engage in identity work to acquire entrepreneurial legitimacy?* In order to achieve so, we use postfeminism as an analytical device.

Within the entrepreneurship literature, postfeminism has mainly been approached as a discursive formation being made up by a set of interrelated discourses around gender, feminism and femininity. Postfeminist entrepreneurial subjectivities, encompassing this dialectic, have been identified in a range of text-based government, business and media sources (Byrne *et al.*, 2019; Lewis, 2014; Nadin *et al.*, 2020; Pritchard *et al.*, 2019; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017), but less in empirical, academic material. We aim to contribute to this gap in understanding through our adoption of a postfeminist lens to make sense of how women entrepreneurs in masculinised sectors engage in identity work to acquire legitimacy.

Our article is structured as follows: First, it begins with a conceptual review of our analytical constructs – gender and entrepreneurial legitimacy, identity work and postfeminism. We then describe our methodology, data collection processes and analytical methods. This is followed by a presentation of our detailed empirical findings that depict how women entrepreneurs engage in various forms of identity work. We then discuss our findings and position them within the context of the extant literature. Finally, we conclude by highlighting the theoretical implications of our findings, as well as recommendations for future research.

## Literature review

### *Gender and entrepreneurial legitimacy*

The concept of entrepreneurship is recognised as tacitly gender-biased implying men are still considered the representatives of the archetypical, ideal entrepreneur, with characteristics of successful entrepreneurs distinguished as masculine (Ogbor, 2000; McAdam, 2022; Swail and Marlow, 2018). Ahl (2006) argues that the discourse on entrepreneurship conflicts with the discourse on womanhood, given the lack of fit between women’s ascribed femininity and the embedded masculinity of the entrepreneurship domain. We concur with West and Zimmerman (2009, p. 140) that “*a person’s gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does and does recurrently in interaction with others*”. Gender is thus a multiplicity of fluid social ascriptions, which are socially constructed assumptions stereotypically associated with sex categories (Marlow *et al.*, 2019). Gender, therefore, is a performative (Butler, 2002) and a situated social practice (García and Welter, 2013). As such, gender can be viewed “*as both an organizing principle and an axis of power . . . gender is theorized dynamically in processual and material ways . . . as a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and (as) a primary way of signifying relationships of power*” (Calás and Smircich, 2006, p. 26). These power relations directly influence identities and given that they operate through normalisation, they define the standard, i.e. the “normal” way to act (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Swail and Marlow, 2018).

Within the entrepreneurship domain, scholarly work has underscored the challenges associated with entrepreneurial legitimacy and restrictions to the possibilities of who can claim the subject position of “entrepreneur” (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Calás *et al.*, 2009; Watson, 2009). Legitimacy, as defined by Suchman (1995, p. 574), is “*a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, beliefs, and definitions*”. This concept offers a framework for understanding how women’s access to various resources, credibility and societal approval can be enhanced (Vershinina *et al.*, 2020; Ojediran *et al.*, 2022). Swail and Marlow (2018, p. 3) described entrepreneurial legitimation as “*a multifaceted process requiring the enactment of a convincing identity plus, access to resources but also, a credible actor who fits field expectations*”. Entrepreneurial legitimation is, thus, about being perceived by others as an entrepreneur who meets established standards (Swail and Marlow, 2018; Ojediran *et al.*, 2022). The attainment of such legitimacy requires contextualised

acknowledgment and confirmation for the self as a credible actor in a specific setting or across cultural and symbolic environments (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Vershinina *et al.*, 2020). Women often face difficulties in attaining entrepreneurial legitimacy because they do not comply with the standard of masculinised prototypical entrepreneur and men-dominated discourses.

Crucial in the legitimation process is the construction of an appropriate identity, fitting with the entrepreneurs' sense of who they are, what an entrepreneur should be and the extent to which this fits with the normative, ideal entrepreneur (Greene *et al.*, 2013; Thompson-Whiteside *et al.*, 2021). In order to meet the expectation of fitting in, entrepreneurs are challenged to develop external validation in the eyes of a field's constituencies and stakeholders (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009; Vershinina *et al.*, 2020; Bunduchi *et al.*, 2023). Legitimacy is, therefore, a social construct shaped by feedback or affirmation from a broader social group (Thompson-Whiteside *et al.*, 2021). Entrepreneurs must comply with dominant narratives of what an entrepreneur should look and act like in this field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Calhoun, 2003). For example, Malmström *et al.* (2017) revealed that financiers often view women entrepreneurs as distinct from their men counterparts and the "ideal" entrepreneur, associating entrepreneurial qualities more strongly with men than with women. Duong and Brännback (2024) found that entrepreneurs, especially women, are urged to adopt certain dominant masculine behaviours to affirm their entrepreneurial identity and enhance the credibility of their ventures. Thus, in order to be recognised as legitimate actors in the field, women need to balance a managerial identity which reflects dominant (masculinised) norms, while still being considered feminine given the importance of social adherence to detectible gender identities (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2002; Swail and Marlow, 2018). Additionally, for women to be seen as legitimate within masculinised entrepreneurial arenas, women have to undertake particular forms of identity work to reflect the dominant norm (Vershinina *et al.*, 2020). For women entrepreneurs to gain legitimacy within this discourse, they are encouraged to adopt and reproduce *neutral* entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviours, which are, in fact, replicas of what men do and what men are within this context (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Swail and Marlow, 2018). Previous research has emphasised a range of strategies employed by women to establish legitimacy, including reshaping gender identities, upholding symbolic boundaries and either challenging or conforming to norms (Bruni *et al.*, 2004a, b; Essers and Benschop, 2007; García and Welter, 2013). These approaches highlight the multifaceted ways in which women navigate their identities and intersections to achieve legitimacy, underscoring the varied and strategic nature of their identity efforts (Stead, 2017; Ojediran *et al.*, 2022).

#### *Identity work and structure-agency*

Entrepreneurs seek social validation from stakeholders in their local context, whilst trying to make sense of their environments in which they do business (Vershinina *et al.*, 2020). Individuals therefore need to mould their identity in their local context situationally to function well (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). In this respect, we contend with Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 626) that individuals are engaged in identity work, whilst when reacting on their surrounding identity regulations, they are actively "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness".

Entrepreneurs are guided by identity motives, such as the urge of belonging (the need to feel close to, connected to and accepted by others) (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016; Stead, 2017), but at the same time yearn to distinguish oneself (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009; Arshed *et al.*, 2023). Through identity work, individuals reflect on issues such as "how shall I relate to others", while negotiating with those others via dialogues and narratives (Brown, 2015, pp. 21-23), in relation to their various surrounding "regulations" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Identities take form in a continuous

dialectic of “structure” and “agency” (Giddens, 1991; Brown, 2015, p. 26), and through identity work processes people craft their selves. Going beyond talk, identity work also involves physical appearance (e.g. the way individuals dress, wear their hair), the selective association with other individuals and groups, as well as credible dramaturgical performances (Brown, 2015, p. 24; Down and Reveley, 2009; Goffman, 1956).

### *Gendered identity work, power and postfeminism*

Women entrepreneurs’ experiences in masculinised organisational contexts and their endeavours to reach a context-appropriate, desired self (Brown, 2015), not only underlines their agency (Caza *et al.*, 2018), but also demonstrates the power dynamics involved in women entrepreneurs’ gendered identity work. Power is about “breaking” rules in a certain context, dealing with structural constraints within particular opportunity structures, and amending existing, traditional (gendered) relations and masculine norms informing entrepreneurial activities. Thus, power is involved in identity work and, therefore, also in the process of legitimisation. Given the fear and uncertainty related to deviating from the norm, individuals will seek compliance to the norm (Alvesson and Billing, 2009).

Such gendered identity work can be understood by the adoption of a postfeminist perspective. We consider postfeminism as a collection of ideas revolving contemporary femininity that women engage with as a means of securing acceptance and recognition, thus resulting in the take-up of postfeminist subjecthood (Dutta, 2021; Gill *et al.*, 2017; Lewis, 2014). Made up of a set of interrelated discourses around gender, feminism and femininity giving rise to a set of cultural ideas and beliefs, postfeminism emphasises the “end” of gender discrimination and assigns a taken-for-granted status concerning gender equality (Banet-Weiser *et al.*, 2020). This claimed achievement of gender equality calls women away from a traditional femininity characterised by a sole focus on serving men and caring for children, towards a reconfigured feminine subjecthood with educational and economic capacity (Dean *et al.*, 2019; McRobbie, 2009; Projansky, 2001). Nevertheless, the latter does not imply the obliteration of conventional femininity, rather what emerges is the common-sense coexistence of gender equality and traditional gender norms. This creates an interdependence between a feminism which advocates for women’s access to masculine spaces such as the world of work and conventional notions of femininity (Hemmings, 2018; Lewis *et al.*, 2019). This interrelationship manifests as a fusion of masculine and feminine behaviours, forming the central core of postfeminist subjectivity, with an emphasis on individualism, choice, empowerment, self-improvement, self-transformation, “natural” sexual difference and domestic retreatism (Treanor *et al.*, 2021). Postfeminism runs in parallel with a neoliberal ideology, in that both posit individual choice, agency and meritocracy (Berglund *et al.*, 2018). Hence, postfeminism interpellates women to constitute an individualised, entrepreneurial subjectivity through engagement in masculinised behaviours of drive, determination and self-actualisation alongside highly stylised feminine performances connected to beauty and motherhood (Heizmann and Liu, 2022).

Studies elaborating on postfeminist entrepreneurial subjectivities highlight the dominant representation of the individualised, heroic, superwoman entrepreneur (Byrne *et al.*, 2019; Lewis, 2014; Nadin *et al.*, 2020; Pritchard *et al.*, 2019; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). Attention is directed at the overwhelmingly positive portrayal of entrepreneurship for women often within text sources such as the media, where self-improvement, reinvention and happiness are presented as available to those who put in enough effort (Negra and Tasker, 2007). Common to this optimistic and meritocratic representation of women’s entrepreneurship by the media or government policies is a downplaying of any tensions when embracing an entrepreneurial subjectivity. However, researchers exploring entrepreneurial femininities that postfeminism offers women, also do reveal the discomfort and tensions resulting from an adoption of these subjectivities. In addition to insubstantial economic rewards, the anxiety, fear, pain and fatigue associated with the pressures of running a business while managing domestic responsibilities

and engaging in aesthetic labour on the body are made visible (Pritchard *et al.*, 2019; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017).

Connected to exposing the challenges and contradictions that attach to these entrepreneurial subject positions is the emergence of a psychological turn in our understanding of postfeminism. Precedingly, Gill (2007) highlighted the importance of feminine bodily management and self-discipline. Now, alongside this, women and girls are also called to work on their psyche by developing self-confidence and resilience (Gill and Orgad, 2015, 2018; McRobbie, 2020). Steadily, resilience, understood as the ability to recover quickly from setbacks and treating problems as opportunities for change, has been integrated into postfeminism as a discursive formation. Accordingly, discourses of resilience overlap with the postfeminist emphasis on individualism, self-improvement, reinvention and transformation (Gill and Orgad, 2018). Constituting women as responsible for their own success means perceived failures or difficulties encountered when striving to achieve ambitions are experienced in a deeply personal way, with resilience being put forward as the means to recover from such disappointments (Baker and Brewis, 2020; Baker and Kelan, 2019).

In the empirical section which follows, we adopt a postfeminist lens in order to explore how the interviewed women entrepreneurs engage in identity work when negotiating being a woman entrepreneur in masculinised environments.

## Methodology

### *Epistemology*

In unveiling the identity work of individuals, which is an inherently social phenomenon, this study adopts a post-structuralist epistemology. Post-structuralist feminism pays attention to issues of knowledge, power, difference and discourse and how these intersect and intertwine in the lives of women (Randall, 2010). Such an approach is deemed appropriate as it draws attention to the social landscapes that both produce and shape gender possibilities in relation to norms (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Butler, 2002). This approach deliberately seeks to pay attention to women's lived experiences and unveil women's perspectives and experiences in industries dominated by men (Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018), by focusing on those narratives told by, for and about women. Following Henry *et al.*'s (2015) call for more research using a constructionist epistemology to study gender as a process, we gathered in-depth biographical narratives, "*as narrated by the one who lives them*" (Chase, 2005, p. 651). This approach resulted in freely narrated responses, which sought to honour the voices and stories of our participants (Essers and Benschop, 2007).

### *Research context*

The research context for this study concerns women entrepreneurs in masculinised industries in the Netherlands. Loscocco and Robinson (1991) made a distinction between men-dominated (e.g. manufacturing, construction and high technology) and woman-dominated (e.g. retail and service industries) industries. In the Netherlands, 38% of all entrepreneurs are women, and only 5% [1] of all technology entrepreneurs are women, with less than 1% of all venture capital invested in women entrepreneurs (TechLeap.nl, 2019).

### *Research sample and data collection*

Specifically interested in women entrepreneurs' identity work in order to gain legitimacy within a masculinised context, purposive sampling was deemed appropriate as a means to compose our sample. Purposive sampling is based on "*the researcher's judgement regarding those of the population's characteristics that are important in relation to the data required to address the research aim*", and thus, in the context of our study, allows us

to specifically focus on participants meeting the following criteria: participants needed to (1) be entrepreneurs (i.e. own a company), (2) identify as a woman, (3) operate in a men dominated, masculinised industry to be able to reflect on the issue of legitimacy. As for the latter, when initially approaching them, participants were asked if they recognised any challenges of being accepted as a woman entrepreneur in a men-dominated environment. Lastly, we deliberately sought to choose women entrepreneurs in different industries within [Loscocco and Robinson's \(1991\)](#) classification to acquire a diverse sample gaining broad insights. Purposive samples are sometimes criticised for being small, and for not being widely generalised nor easily defensible as representative of the wider target population ([Etikan et al., 2016](#)). Nevertheless, we regard purposive sampling appropriate for our research question, agreeing with [Miles and Huberman \(1994, p. 29\)](#) that the selection of small purposive samples should be underpinned by “*a conceptual question, not by a concern for representativeness*”, which we deem the case in the realm of the present study. We approached initial participants through the researchers’ (extended) professional network followed by snowballing technique and chain referrals.

To ensure theoretical saturation ([Corbin and Strauss, 2008](#)), data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged. Our final sample size of ten women entrepreneurs whose businesses were located in various Dutch cities facilitated an exhaustive examination of participant narratives until a point of theoretical saturation was reached, where no novel insights or emergent themes were discernible from subsequent data collection and analysis. A table with the specification of the interviewed women entrepreneurs can be found in [Table 1](#).

The participants’ entrepreneurial experiences and identity work were studied in-depth, using interviews and some non-participant observations. Appearances, gestures and ways of communication were noted, as embodied performances (i.e. focusing on the materiality of human bodies, physical appearance, behaviour), provide a more “nuanced and dynamic” appreciation of the context under investigation ([Liu and Maitlis, 2010](#); [Langley and Abdallah, 2011](#)).

Observation memos ([Bleijenberg, 2013](#)) were used to record the observations during the process of data collection, which were helpful to identify information beyond the use of language. The ten in-depth interviews were conducted by a research assistant, following a life-story interview protocol ([McAdams, 2012](#)), which was thoroughly prepared together with the first author of this paper. The narrative interviews entailed asking the interviewees to think about their lives as if they were a book, including important life chapters. They were asked to focus on the messages they received from their surrounding stakeholders, such as employees, clients, other entrepreneurs, as well as their families concerning gender and entrepreneurship, all in relation to identity construction. Interviews were conducted in 2019 and lasted between 90 and 180 min. Interviews were carried out and transcribed in Dutch and the used quotes for this article were carefully translated to English. To establish trust with the interviewees, the researchers confirmed the confidentiality of the subject matter discussed and ensured the anonymity of the material collected with pseudonyms. The interview protocol furthermore included some questions about the interviewees’ personal demographics such as age, marital status and number of children and questions about their enterprises such as industrial sector, age of the enterprise and number of employees.

After conducting the interviews and observations, the audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim. After transcribing the interviews, the coding process commenced. Atlas-ti was used to enable a systematic and rigorous categorisation of the codes at different levels. The transcripts were coded using an inductive approach, starting with the informant first-order codes ([Langley and Abdallah, 2011](#)). The analysis of qualitative data required the researchers to be reflexive, as well as critical ([Alvesson, 2003](#)). For this study, thematic analysis was used, which is concerned with identifying key themes within a narrative in order to recognise themes that are prevailing in all the biographical narratives ([Maitlis, 2012](#)). Following [Peters and Wester \(2007\)](#), this was done through a structured coding process, to first find the sub-themes (i.e. thematic or analytic codes), and upon this, the main themes (i.e. pattern codes/aggregate

**Table 1.** Characteristics of respondents

First name	Main product	Industry	Foundation of the company	Age (years)	Number of employees	Education	Civil status	Number of children
Emma	Poultry for meat	Farming	2016	21	0	Helicon: green vocational education	Partnered	0
Pamela	Security solutions	ICT	1998	60	35	Technical polytechnical university	Married	3
Jenny	Cars and repair	Car	2017	40	9	IVA: business school of mobility	Married	3
Sandra	Software consultancy	ICT	2007	49	25	Administrative informatics	Married	3
Julia	Real estate development	Construction	2009	46	0	Construction engineering business administration	Married	2
Rina	Coaching	Music	2017	35	4	General cultural sciences	Partnered	0
Haily	Glass	Construction	1999	50	125	Chemical technology	Married	2
Zoë	Transportation	Logistics	2003	50	13	Secondary transportation academy	Married	1
Lucinda	Architecture	Construction	2017	45	10	Architecture	Married	2
Monica	Contracting	Construction	1995	45	7	Road and hydraulic engineering, vocational education	Married	2

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

theoretical dimensions). This ordering resulted in three relevant themes: *Knowledge as proof of fit*, *Situatedness* and *Positionality*, which encapsulate the identity work of these women entrepreneurs in their men-dominated context. The coding process and identified themes were carefully discussed amongst the authors.

The most illustrative quotes showing how the interviewed women made sense of the three main themes were finally interpreted through a narrative analysis, in order to signal how the narrator assigns meaning to social reality, her experience and identity (Maitlis, 2012). This involved reading and re-reading the narratives and the chosen quotes critically by the research team, with specific attention for *what* and *how* things were said and what the *context* was in which these narratives were created (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). This way of analysing is particularly relevant given that we are concerned about not just reproducing what the women entrepreneurs said, but rather interested to discursively interpret their utterings from a postfeminist perspective. Our aggregate theoretical dimensions are detailed in our data structure table, which is presented in Table 2.

**Findings**

Adopting a postfeminist lens and particularly interested in the participants’ identity work within masculinised entrepreneurial contexts, first we will illustrate how knowledge plays a role in the women’s experiences of gaining legitimacy as an entrepreneur. Second, we will show how the specific situations in which the women find themselves play a role in how they embrace an entrepreneurial subjectivity. Third, we will demonstrate how the women position themselves as entrepreneurs in relation to others and vice versa.

*Knowledge as proof of fit*

The first theme to emerge from the data was that knowledge was seen as crucial by the interviewees in proving their fit in the masculinised contexts they operated in. Even though they are experts in their respective fields, all interviewees referred to scenarios in which they

**Table 2.** Data structure table

Provisional categories and first order codes	Theoretical categories (2nd order themes)	Aggregate theoretical dimensions
Statements about how extensive knowledge about their product or service was deemed highly essential for them being perceived as legitimate entrepreneurs	Proof of fit Fitting in while standing out Continuous self-improvement Acquisition of “inside knowledge”	Knowledge as proof of fit
Statements about how various different situations played a role in the uptake of an appropriate contextualised identity	Salient entrepreneurial identity The “Juggling Act” Mother, wife and entrepreneurial identities	Situatedness
Statements about how the women positioned themselves as entrepreneurs (via networks, dress for example) and how others positioned them and pigeonholed them	Navigating gender stereotypes Anchoring themselves in their specific field Distancing themselves from women in non-male-dominated fields Clothing and appearance as legitimising devices	Positionality

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work

were “tested” on their knowledge. Jenny (car industry) talks about the resistance she faced, working in the car industry:

[...] when I was much younger, I was always tested. Then I was asked those ridiculous questions that I thought they would never ask my male colleague. Like “a boxer engine how does that work?” Why? [...] But yes, knowledge is power. Women still have to prove themselves a bit more for sure [...] Femininity as means, but of course with knowledge. There has to be a nice external package around it, but at the end it is about the contents.

Julia (real estate business) refers to experiencing similar resistance in business meetings with men in her capacity as a real estate entrepreneur, as she remarks:

knowledge is power for women. [...] I always read all my reports, prepared all my things. Men bluff a whole lot away. I have to be ready, otherwise you would be completely swept off the table [...] At some point I even got training as to learn how as a woman, you can act in a man’s world.

These quotes show that knowledge is an important resource for all entrepreneurs. Yet, knowledge seems especially important for women entrepreneurs in the masculinised context that we studied, as women entrepreneurs are not immediately seen as legitimate, knowledgeable actors in their environment, especially when they are younger. Furthermore, the quotes demonstrate that while gaining legitimacy is an active process entailing fitting in while standing out (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009), it can be enabled through professionalism and knowledge (Ojediran *et al.*, 2022). We also see elements of postfeminism involved in the women entrepreneurs’ identity work of fitting into the masculinised industries, such as continuous self-improvement, often in line with masculinised behaviours of drive, determination and self-actualisation. For instance, Jenny explicitly connects this masculine behaviour of drive and determination with a highly stylised feminine presentation, combining femininity with knowledge and content (Lewis, 2014), yielding that a “nice external package” is advantageous in this perspective (Pritchard *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, Julia shares that she undertook training to learn how to act as a woman in a man’s world. Besides illustrating how Julia assumes individual responsibility and agency (Lewis *et al.*, 2022), this quote reveals that for women entrepreneurs, content-related knowledge is not enough; women entrepreneurs must also invest in gaining inside-knowledge on the sort of masculinised behaviours needed to fit into their particular field.

The interviewees also discussed situations in which their legitimacy as an entrepreneur was contested by others through both belittling and gendered comments. For instance, Rina (coaching, music industry) and Pamela (cyber security) recalled utterings such as “*ah you are now the little director*” and “*why does he walk to that little woman over there*”. Their response strategies to such comments entailed blending in their respective masculinised environments through an individualised, determined manner. As Rina explained “*you’re a director now, then I think damn; then something comes to my mind that you get a kind of urge to prove yourself*”. However, they do not appear to directly question or oppose such challenges to their legitimacy as an entrepreneur. Here, the previously mentioned paradox/interrelation/challenge inherent to postfeminist discourse (Hemmings, 2018; Lewis *et al.*, 2019) becomes apparent: women entrepreneurs engage with the postfeminist expectations of individualised resilience as an answer to particular set-backs (Baker and Brewis, 2020), while at the same time conforming with expectations associated with femininity (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Marlow *et al.*, 2019), such as being modest and not “too confrontational” (Swail and Marlow, 2018).

### *Situatedness*

The second theme underscores the specific situations the women entrepreneurs find themselves in and how these determine the extent to which the women entrepreneurs feel comfortable in embracing their entrepreneurial identity. For instance, Pamela (cyber security) does not always tell people that she is the entrepreneur:

yes, that is a surprise often. So, that depends on the situation, what your goal is with that conversation. Uhm, sometimes I do not say it [that she is the owner]. I sometimes . . . I have a card that does not state which function I have, if I do not think it is important, then I do not say it. Many do not think that you are the director, if they don't know you.

This quote illustrates that, depending on the situation, Pamela consciously decides whether or not she discloses that she is the owner of the company. This decision materialises in her two business cards, accommodating her in either hiding or highlighting her entrepreneurial identity.

We also understand this quote as an example of a “juggling act” (García and Welter, 2013). In situations in which Pamela disguises the fact that she is the owner of her company, she chooses not to challenge the status quo of gender differences in the context of masculinised entrepreneurial contexts. In other scholarly work, similar situations of women entrepreneurs’ conscious choices on when to disclose their entrepreneurial identity have been described, where women, for instance, first put forward a man technician in order to build trust with a client, before uncovering their own position as the owner of the company (Bruni *et al.*, 2004a, b). This also resonates with a postfeminist way of reflecting on these situations, by not actively combatting gendered assumptions about whom can be an entrepreneur, herewith also implicitly accepting “natural” sex roles (McRobbie, 2004, 2009).

The women entrepreneurs shared additional examples where they felt the need to choose between one of several identities, in line with the specific situations they find themselves in. The most recurring example was related to the challenge of keeping “*several balls in the air*”, such as being a mother, a wife and an entrepreneur simultaneously. Several of the interviewees used the expression of a “juggling act” in their work–life balance.

For some women entrepreneurs, such as Julia, the societal expectation that women should assume more caring duties than men, plus her personal situation, led to her decision to start a business. Envisioning to be able to combine raising her kids with work, Julia now however finds herself working late hours and during the weekends, whilst also feeling the need to defend herself as to why she works so much. Zoë (transport and logistics industry) furthermore shared:

I am the owner of a transport company, but in my private life I am the mother of a 12-year-old daughter, and I am a wife. My husband is a dentist whom I try to support in that too, and yes, then I also have my work. There I'm the owner and there I am for these young guys who come to train with me, kind of a mama, haha. I do everything. And there they sometimes do very stupid, they don't estimate my full value, make remarks behind my back . . . But then I just act if I don't hear this, I don't know. As I get older, it becomes easier because then you carry a little more weight. But if you are a girl of 20, until you are 35, you are certainly not always valued, because you are surrounded by men who are also often older than you. You have to persevere to be taken seriously.

Jenny stressed: “*it's keeping all balls in the air, honestly. As with a family, women feel more responsible for that than men. Because we want to have things right for the kids too, and we feel we need to have time for them too*”.

In the case of Zoë, we see that even though she is the boss in her transport company, she feels that within the situatedness of her family and her husband being a dentist, she still should take up the traditional, gendered caring role and help him. Having the influential role of main shareholder and training younger men, she interestingly also pictures herself as a mother figure in her company, and disregards negative remarks undermining her legitimacy as a woman entrepreneur. Here, we thus see postfeminist discursive remnants of domestic retreatism and motherhood that the interviewed women seem to interpellate in their identity work (Lewis *et al.*, 2017), which is explicitly being reified by Jenny stating that women feel more responsible for the family and their kids than men. However, this struggle as Zoë shared also with us, seemed to decrease over time with age, which could concur with García and Welter's (2013) idea that often women entrepreneurs, in due time, are able to even create competitive advantage due to differences in gender.

### Positionality

Positionality, which refers to the ways in which individuals locate themselves within a specific social context, is reflected in the data in two manners. First, the interviewees shared how they feel that others position them in the masculinised entrepreneurial context. Second, the interviewees also explicate how they distance themselves from other entrepreneurs, which we understand as a specific means of anchoring themselves in their specific field.

Illustrating the first reflection of positionality, focusing on experiences of how others locate the women entrepreneurs within the masculinised context, Jenny describes:

they first think I am that girl who brings the coffee, but I think that's fine, I don't mind. Because actually then I know immediately in five minutes what you want without you noticing my position.

Jenny's experience of, as a woman, being mistaken for "*the girl who brings the coffee*" by others, instead of being recognised as the entrepreneur, shows that others locate women (entrepreneurs) in service- and caring positions rather than in leadership roles, which is in line with traditional gender-role expectations. Jenny's reaction to being located as such, in turn, illustrates how women entrepreneurs navigate their complex social contexts, reflecting elements of postfeminist thinking: not challenging gender inequalities and instead individually finding their own ways to handle (and in the best case to even profit from). This demonstrates a situation in which (1) gender inequality is assumed to be a non-issue (Ahl and Marlow, 2021) and (2) in which women are responsible to solve related challenges individually (Gill and Scharff, 2013).

The second reflection of positionality illustrates how women entrepreneurs seek parts of their own positionality by distancing themselves from others, in particular (women) entrepreneurs in non-male-dominated fields. As Sandra (IT sector) remarked, for instance:

in the industry where there are many women active, they lose a lot of energy on things that I don't find important, haha. These are almost tea hours . . . No, I've tried that before [a woman's only network]. In any case, the female entrepreneurs' clubs don't make me very happy, so yeah, I'm not going to do that anymore.

Similarly, Jenny states: "*I can always level very well with men, they are easygoing, straightforward, there is no chattering and chatting . . . . I would find it difficult with only 30 women.*"

These quotes illustrate how Sandra distances herself from other women entrepreneurs, specifically in women-dominated fields. Jenny describes other women in line with common gender-stereotypes, often portraying women as "chattering and chatting", implying that women do not hold serious conversations – a reason for Jenny to prefer to work more with men (than with women). Another interviewee reasoned in a similar manner, when, off the record, calling her own business "*a real business*" as opposed to "women's hobby projects" in relation to other fields. Women entrepreneurs describing other women's businesses and meetings in such ways claim their own legitimacy as an entrepreneur in line with the prototypical image of an entrepreneur, who is generally focused, driven, effective (Swail and Marlow, 2018). In attempting to increase their legitimacy as an entrepreneur (one of their salient identities in the said context), the interviewees "backstab" their identity as a woman, by postulating other women and their initiatives along the lines of stereotypical gender roles and expectations. This dynamic, described as one of the paradoxes of intersectionality (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010), unveils the complex interplay of identity work women entrepreneurs engage with. These quotes demonstrate how the interviewees feel less connected with women entrepreneurs who do not work in sectors (i.e. non-masculinised sectors) they can relate to. Stead (2017) also argues that creating a sense of group membership is a critical element of identity work as belonging to a group assures security and makes the individual legible as legitimate. Reflecting on this, though, micro-discourse seems to reiterate the mainstream, gendered entrepreneurship discourse, positioning (other) women entrepreneurs as less than men entrepreneurs, and as "secondary" (Ahl, 2006).

Interestingly, clothing and appearance were used as legitimising devices by the interviewees to articulate their position as entrepreneurs (Pritchard *et al.*, 2019) in a masculinised environment. Pamela stated that as a woman entrepreneur in this masculine industry, it is important to “*dress to impress*” (her own words). She continues:

I always wear a jacket with a shirt. Because I have discovered that if you wear a dress that is too cute, you go to some customer somewhere . . . Then an entire building is watching you and if you dress a bit like them, you will also be looked at more closely. Yes, that works better. I really do have a special closet for clothes for that, yes, yes, I always wear a suit, or pants and a jacket, or a shirt. Yes. And high heels, not flat shoes, yes, you do look a bit like them.

This quote demonstrates that Pamela strategically decides to wear a jacket with a shirt to fit in with clients whose appearance she seemingly aims to duplicate, being aware of the fact that her looks are carefully being judged by these others. This notion is consistent with Marlow and McAdam (2015), who state that for an entrepreneur to gain legitimacy, it requires contextualised acknowledgment and confirmation of the self as a credible actor in a specific setting. This self-actualisation results in Pamela having a special closet for these occasions, a form of careful identity formation. Yet, for other interviewees, dress was deployed particularly to be recognised as a woman in rather traditional, gendered terms and thus to stand out (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009). Also, we learned that as time evolved, the women entrepreneurs also dared to dress more feminine. Haily elaborated on this temporality:

when I started here, I very much had the tendency to dress quite male business like. With pants and a jacket too, but at some point, I started to dress more feminine. And I have had a style coach too.

Whilst Jenny stated she used her clothes to position herself strongly as a woman entrepreneur in a masculinised business by saying:

we always wear business clothes, but since we’ve been here, we actually only wear dresses and high heels. To make a bit of a statement to those men, that not only men work there. And that we are also just women. And we are also wonderfully different, and we will remain so. Because we don’t become one of the men, and you shouldn’t want that at all. So, we often make sure that we are dressed extra femininely to just make that statement.

This finding supports the insights of Calhoun (2003), who states that after being in the industry for some time, women entrepreneurs may feel more comfortable to look like and wear what one likes, instead of dressing like their male counterparts. However, from a postfeminist perspective, we note how some interviewees on the one hand want to blend in and carefully monitor their appearance when accessing masculine spaces (Hemmings, 2018) as they feel the individualist responsibility to assimilate, whilst others, on the other hand, strategically combine masculine, determined behaviours in congruence with beauty and femininity, as exemplified by having specific closets, style coaches and always wearing high heels and dresses. Entrepreneurially also, interviewees use such feminine images to stand out, plus emphasising “*we are also just women, wonderfully different, and we will remain so*”, underscores endorsing “natural” sex roles which is at the core of postfeminism.

## Discussion

Adopting a postfeminist lens, we explored how Dutch women entrepreneurs engage in identity work to seek legitimacy in masculinised business contexts. Postfeminism served as a framework to understand how gendered narratives and belief systems subtly shape what are perceived as women’s choices (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Lewis, 2014). Our findings show that the women entrepreneurs engaged in identity work in various occasions to gain legitimacy. In relation to our first theme, knowledge as proof of fit, the women entrepreneurs regularly got questioned on their specific knowledge by (often men) stakeholders. Women entrepreneurs coped with this testing by gaining as much knowledge as they could, extensive preparation and showing they were on “top of things”. This act of proving they are more knowledgeable than

their men counterparts demonstrates personal initiative and responsibility. Indeed, the women appear to view their achievements as the result of individual effort and preparation, leveraging their education, and highlighting their specialised technical expertise. Instead of attributing challenges and setbacks to external circumstances, challenges and setbacks in their entrepreneurial endeavours are perceived as personal experiences, requiring ongoing self-improvement and the reinventing of their business strategies (Gill and Orgad, 2018). Centering on this individual responsibility, choice and agency underlines the neoliberal core at the heart of postfeminism which calls women to adopt a mode of living which is entrepreneurial, market-focused, driven and self-regarding (Lewis *et al.*, 2022).

The second theme concerned situatedness, which demonstrated that the particular context plays a role in the interviewees' disclosure of their entrepreneurial identity. This way of situationally claiming their entrepreneurial identity comprised a juggling act, in which the interviewees tried to balance a more masculine approach of doing business with societal expectations related to being a woman. This finding is consistent with Eriksson-Zetterquist (2002) who stated that in order to be seen as legitimate, women need to balance an entrepreneurial identity reflecting dominant (masculinised) norms, whilst performing femininity in accordance with the importance of social adherence to detectible gender identities. Taking a postfeminist perspective, we see that women take it upon themselves to strike a balance between expected masculine behaviour as an entrepreneur and performances of femininity as a woman. This struggle to do justice to all, sometimes contradicting expectations, reflects the representation of the individualised, heroic, superwoman entrepreneur (Byrne *et al.*, 2019; Lewis, 2014).

The third theme in women entrepreneurs' identity work to gain legitimacy involved *positionality*. First, we saw how others, along the lines of traditional gender roles, locate women in more traditional feminised (work) contexts, such as service or care work, rather than in the masculinised role of an entrepreneur. The act of locating women entrepreneurs incorrectly also asks them again to take a stance and (re)work their identities. Second, we noticed that women entrepreneurs distance themselves from other women whom they perceived to be "less" entrepreneurial than themselves, through constructing an in- and out-group categorisation of "real" (read prototypical/masculinised) entrepreneurs. Within this theme, we also observed the women used dress as a legitimising device (Marlow and McAdam, 2015). Dressing more feminine increased their visibility, thus making it easier for them to stand out, yet decreased their ability to blend in. The women entrepreneurs played with this and dressed either more masculine or more feminine when they went to business appointments, and also strategically hired style consultants to help with their appearance. Interestingly, a postfeminist reflection informs us that engaging in aesthetic labour on the body, whilst pro-actively working on their appearance, emerged as an important agentic deliberation to acquire legitimacy. This concurs with insights from authors such as Pritchard *et al.* (2019), as well as Lewis (2013, 2014), who found that women entrepreneurs often engage in aesthetic labour to demonstrate a "liberated", agentic, autonomous female entrepreneur, whilst celebrating conventional femininity.

During our analysis, we found that time seems to play an important element across all three themes with regard to the women entrepreneurs' identity work. When starting their ventures, the women entrepreneurs expended considerable effort in *fitting in* whilst standing out (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009). Over time, however, with age and being more established in their (immediate) entrepreneurial environment, the women entrepreneurs started to move away from fitting in towards *standing out* (e.g. the example of changing the way of dressing over time). In other words, standing out became more comfortable as the women entrepreneurs built legitimacy over time (Vershina *et al.*, 2020). We also see that this shift appears not only to be relevant for the women entrepreneurs themselves, but also to how they were seen by others. The women entrepreneurs reported that they were challenged less often on their knowledge the older they became and the longer they were in business. Standing out not only became more comfortable, but sometimes was even valued as a unique selling point, as the women

entrepreneurs both built and were awarded legitimacy over time (Vershina *et al.*, 2020). Not only did the women entrepreneurs dare to stand out more as they built legitimacy, but they were also more inclined to challenge the gendered status quo. Yet, interestingly, while trying to change the gendered status quo, some of them also seemed (most likely unintendedly, we would estimate) to play down other women entrepreneurs, by, for instance, referring to other women's enterprises as hobby projects. So, while being interested to network with "real" entrepreneurs, mostly men, as to acquire appropriate gender capital (McAdam *et al.*, 2019), they also appeared to (unconsciously) reproduce the gender subtext in traditional entrepreneurship discourse.

### Conclusion

This paper utilised postfeminism lens to make sense of the identity work of women entrepreneurs in masculinised environments in their pursuit of entrepreneurial legitimacy. In general, we can conclude that while the process of gaining entrepreneurial legitimacy is one of fitting in, while simultaneously standing out (De Clercq and Voronov, 2009) for women entrepreneurs in these specific masculinised industries, the initial concern is fitting in but sometimes in complicated and even contradictory terms. While men entrepreneurs have the advantage of fitting in (almost) unproblematically and immediately can think of how to stand out since the entrepreneurial discourse is masculine (Ahl, 2006), for women entrepreneurs when pursuing legitimacy, it is vital to carefully reflect on how their female identity positions them in the industry. This is exacerbated for women entrepreneurs in men-dominated industries.

Our findings empirically contribute to the literature at the intersection of entrepreneurship, gender and postfeminism. Within the entrepreneurship literature, postfeminism has mainly been deployed as a discursive formation being made up by a set of interrelated discourses around gender, feminism and femininity (Treanor *et al.*, 2021). Interpreting the narrative accounts of Dutch women entrepreneurs in masculinised industries illustrates the kind of components of postfeminist discourses such women may be drawn to, as to gain more credibility as women entrepreneurs. In this Dutch setting, postfeminism seemingly assists to reproduce traditional notions of femininity revolving entrepreneurship, in a context of choice and liberalisation (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; McRobbie, 2004). Postfeminism, as we have demonstrated, has a strong appeal to Dutch women entrepreneurs and operates under the assumption that gender equality has already been attained, rendering feminist activism redundant (Ahl and Marlow, 2021), placing the responsibility on individual women to exercise their agency within a meritocratic framework (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). Postfeminism sensibilities shape women entrepreneurs into individualised entrepreneurial subjects by encouraging engagement of masculinised behaviours alongside highly feminised performances. Aligning feminist progress with individual success suppresses feminist perspectives that emphasise a critical stance and a collectivist spirit grounded in mutual struggle, communal relationships with other women and the pursuit of collective solutions to common issues (Lewis *et al.*, 2017).

Our study has empirically shown how postfeminist thoughts are at play when women do entrepreneurship in masculinised environments, herewith reproducing traditional entrepreneurship discourse. Concurring with the literature on postfeminism and entrepreneurship, our study has shown how women were called into entrepreneurship, whilst agentially focusing on the individualised, heroic, superwoman entrepreneur in their narratives (Lewis, 2014). We noticed that within the context of Dutch, men-dominated industries postfeminism interpellated women entrepreneurs to constitute a rather masculine, individualised, entrepreneurial subjectivity by engaging in masculinised behaviours of drive, determination and self-actualisation, while simultaneously enacting highly feminised performances often being connected to physical appearance and images of motherhood. We add to the literature by illustrating how the women entrepreneurs overwhelmingly

portrayed entrepreneurship positively where self-improvement, reinvention and happiness were presented as available to those who put in enough effort, while simultaneously being able to downplay any tensions in taking up an entrepreneurial subjectivity in an overly positive psychology style.

Comparing our findings with the gendered identity work in business environments described in the 1990s, which was eloquently elaborated by [McDowell and Court \(1994\)](#) on women in merchant banks, we have to conclude that regrettably still after several decades of feminist movements women entrepreneurs in masculinised environments are still often inclined to perform – in that milieu – acceptable versions of professional femininity through deliberate behaviour and dress. Based on this, we would argue gender discrimination (in contrast to what postfeminism visualises) has certainly not reached its end yet, and we should definitely question the nowadays often taken-for-granted status concerning gender equality in entrepreneurship.

One may argue that our relatively small sample size may be a limitation to our study, as it does not allow for generalisation of the findings to a larger population of women entrepreneurs in men-dominated contexts in the Netherlands. Yet, we are confident that engaging in qualitative research, which generally entails small sample sizes, aligns best as a way of data collection and analysis, as explained in the method section extensively. We feel that studying our small sample in this way enabled us to showcase deeply how the specific cultural and industrial context of the Netherlands prompts the interviewed women entrepreneurs in men-dominated businesses to undertake specific forms of identity work while pursuing entrepreneurial legitimacy.

Content-wise, we would be interested to understand which role class and family status may play with regard to the ways women entrepreneurs, in masculinised industries, experience the quest for recognition and which identity work they may apply to acquire this. Hence, we would recommend a more fine-grained intersectional study on women entrepreneurs' identity work, taking the crossroads of gender, class and family status into account, as this could provide a more complex analysis. Finally, in relation to the topic of dress as a legitimising device, which might be a specific technique of impression management, we would argue it would be interesting to devote more attention to the broader techniques of impression management that women entrepreneurs use to acquire legitimacy, a notion which has been more broadly studied in management contexts, but less in entrepreneurship contexts.

## Notes

1. SHELEADS\_Dashboard\_2023.pdf (nlgroeit.nl)

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**Corresponding author**

Caroline Essers can be contacted at: [caroline.essers@ru.nl](mailto:caroline.essers@ru.nl)