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**Culture, Collectivism and Empowerment:
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in Women's Work and Organization**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze the role of ideologies in developing a culture of work and organization among disadvantaged women in societies entrenched in structures of patriarchy. We draw on evidence from *Lijjat*, a women's cooperative in India. Through a careful consideration of the context and relations in which marginalized women were able to initiate, develop, and successfully operate a business we draw two key conclusions. First, we find that pragmatist feminist ideologies are particularly supportive of women's economic activities in patriarchal contexts. Second, we introduce a tiered approach to the study of ideological influences on women's work arguing that these exist both at the individual level (motivation) and at the collective level (organizational practices). Studying the intersection of these tiers enables a better understanding of how poor women's work and organization can be supported in male-dominated cultures.

Keywords: gender, entrepreneurship, organizational practices, patriarchy, feminist ideologies, pragmatism, collectivism, cooperative, *Lijjat*, India

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1. Introduction

In recent years, research on women's work has risen sharply. Women's entrepreneurship received special attention as new research directions have emerged that frame it not only as an economic activity, but also as a harbinger of social change (Calás *et al.*, 2009; Hughes *et al.*, 2012). This is especially so in developing countries where women entrepreneurs often also tackle social issues related to poverty, children, health and discrimination (McGowan, *et al.*, 2012; Roos, 2019; Korosteleva & Stępień-Baig, 2020). Much of research on women entrepreneurs in developing countries is focused on the financial challenges faced by them (e.g. Della-Giusta & Phillips, 2006; Amine & Staub, 2009; Field, Jayachandran & Pande, 2010; Prasad, *et al.*, 2013). A relatively under-researched question is how do women succeed in starting and running a business in a challenging socio-economic context marked by gender inequality and a general exclusion of women from economic activity? What are the motivations behind such work and entrepreneurship? How do these women get started and what factors influence their endurance and the strategic growth of their enterprise? What factors influence the organizational structures of women-owned enterprises? Is there a supportive set of values/beliefs that motivate women in such contexts? What are the policy implications for enhancing women's work participation? This study attempts to answer some of these questions.

Engaging with women from disadvantaged backgrounds, as part of this study, has led us to conclude that answers may be found, at least partly, in shared values and beliefs which can be understood as *ideologies* (van Dijk, 1995). We adopt Trice & Beyer's (1993: 33) definition of *ideologies* as: "*shared, relatively coherently, interrelated sets of emotionally charged beliefs, values, and norms that bind some people together and help them make sense of their worlds*". Within the wider institutional perspective, *ideology* can be viewed as informal institution that helps individuals mediate their interactions with those around them.

The link between ideology and women's work has been examined in the context of developing countries. Women from impoverished backgrounds in South Africa built business networks to overcome patriarchal constraints including pervasive violence (Scott *et al.*, 2012). In a study conducted in Colombia, Bianco *et al.*, (2017) found that gender ideologies of *Machismo* and *Marianismo* promoted social expectations of women as being sacrificial and submissive. These traditions resulted in a complex system of interrelated structural barriers that restricted women's access to resources. Taking an organizational perspective, Özkazanç-Pan, (2015) explored the role of secular and Islamic feminist ideologies in two cases of women's organizations promoting women's entrepreneurship in Turkey. These studies highlight the

influence of ideologies in mediating the entrepreneurial process for women; their role in negotiations with the family, at workplace and wider social institutions, including patriarchy.

In this paper, we examine how ideology influences women's work and organization for entrepreneurship despite gender norms and inequalities that largely exclude them from such activities among low-income households in urban India. We do this by analyzing the discourses of women entrepreneurs of '*Lijjat*', a large worker owned-managed cooperative in India as they reflect on their individual entrepreneurial journeys and describe their managerial practices. The qualitative analysis integrates individual and organizational level discourses. Given that cultural context and power relationship are critical to understand the influences of ideology (Hunt, 1990), we also explore these. Our findings are illustrative of ideologies that can be described as *pragmatist feminist* that supports women's economic activities in a challenging gender context. We further propose that the influence of ideologies is better understood via a tiered approach, both as provider of motivation at the individual level and at the collective level in guiding organizational practices that helps women develop and scale up their enterprise successfully. We argue that an understanding of the intersection of feminist ideologies with gender issues, at the individual and the organizational levels, is crucial to appreciate the motivations behind women's collective initiatives. From a policy perspective, our study explores the space of collectivist strategies to improve women's work participation in India, which remains one of the lowest in the world (Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016). In doing so, we contribute to a growing body of literature that examines how engagement in collective forms of enterprises such as cooperatives, trade unions and self-help groups enables women to overcome constraints in their economic and socio-cultural environments (Colgan and Ledwith, 2002; Subramaniam, 2011; Datta & Gailey, 2012; Haugh & Talwar, 2016; Katre, 2018; Colovic and Mehrotra, 2020).

The remaining paper is as follows. We begin with reviewing evidence on the socio-cultural determinants of women's entrepreneurship, with a focus on ideological influences. Following this is a review of the state of women's entrepreneurship in India. We then discuss the research methods underpinning our work, before introducing the case study – *Lijjat*. The findings of our study are then discussed while considering implications for women's work and organizational approaches to entrepreneurship. Final section presents concluding comments.

2. Women's Work and Organization for Entrepreneurship: The Role of Ideologies

It is widely acknowledged that entrepreneurship is deeply embedded in the socio-culture context that influence motivations, perceptions, and behavior (Thornton, 1999; Hayton & Cacciotti, 2013; Shahriar, 2018). The extensive literature on gender and entrepreneurship largely confirms this view but the focus is mainly on examining individual behavior in specific social contexts (Engle *et al.*, 2011; Díaz-García & Welter, 2011). A nuanced view of socio-cultural influences is to examine the idea of “*how culture provides justifications for individuals' actions*” (Thornton *et al.*, 2011: 109), which have consequences for supporting or discouraging entrepreneurship. Studies have looked at a specific cultural influence, such as that of patriarchy (e.g. Uhlaner, Thurik & Hutjes, 2002), or religion (e.g., Henley, 2017) on entrepreneurship behavior. This view has been extended to examine the influence of ideologies as informal institutions on individual and collective entrepreneurship.

The role of ideologies in shaping entrepreneurial behavior is already well recognised. New institutional economics perceives ideologies as underpinning institutions that essentially define the incentive structure for entrepreneurship (North, 1990). Chung & Gibbons (1997) describe organizational ideology using the notions of ‘*socio-structure*’ and ‘*superstructure*’. *Socio-structure* represents “*the pattern of norms, trust levels, and extent of information sharing in the organization*” which create the social capital, shaping the relations between individual actors; and *superstructure* comprises the “*ideological facet of culture*” which includes the core beliefs, shared values and dominant assumptions in the organization (*ibid*: 7). From this work emerges the idea that ideologies may matter for starting and shaping women's work. As entrepreneurship is socio-culturally embedded, ideologies that matter to women (feminist ideologies) can shape the motivation and intent in individuals to engage and grow an entrepreneurial activity. Understanding the influence of ideologies and their interaction with other contextual factors is important for refining our knowledge of how women think and act entrepreneurially in particular contexts.

Although feminist ideologies are unified in their concern for women's empowerment, there exists two varying perspectives: liberal and social. Liberal feminists suggest that women are overtly discriminated which impedes their ability to succeed in business compared to men (Fischer *et al.*, 1993). This perspective posits that women are disadvantaged because the social structure is male dominated (Calás *et al.*, 2009). Supporting studies report women receiving unequal treatment from various resource providers (Hisrich & Brush, 1984; Stevenson, 1986; Cron & Burton, 2006). Liberal feminists hence argue that lasting opportunities for women entrepreneurs can emerge only from social structural reforms that result in eliminating

discrimination against them. Social feminists, on the other hand, suggest that women and men are affected by early and on-going socialization and therefore may develop differently (Fischer *et al.*, 1993). This socialist perspective focuses on gender relations in social structures rather than separate notions of ‘men’ and ‘women’ (Calás *et al.*, 2009). For example, education and business experience, considered important for entrepreneurship, may be lacking among women (Yang & Triana, 2019). According to social feminists there is greater similarity than difference between male and female (Sexton & Bowman-Upton, 1990; Marlow & Swail, 2014) and men’s and women’s businesses are equally likely to be successful (Kalleberg & Leicht, 1991).

Pragmatist feminist ideology combines both the feminist perspectives with elements of pragmatism (Duran, 1993). It is an ideology where feminism is something that ‘works’ and the goal to bring about change is shaped by practical circumstances. A notion central to it is the importance of women’s unique gendered realities. It recognizes everyday experiences lived by women and a belief in an active engagement in solving real problems. It is less concerned with the extent to which the ‘conventional’ gender roles are adhered to or rejected. It is perceived to have the potential to challenge male dominance in communities using collective aptitude to pursue tangible goals. For example, in their study of Avon in South Africa, a multinational that distributes its products through building networks of women entrepreneurs, Scott *et al.* (2012) find that pragmatic feminism allowed women to operate outside the constraints imposed by customary patriarchy and transcend the limits of infrastructural support, thus giving women agency and the income to meet their domestic needs. More recently, Katre, (2018) found that sisterhood amongst members of women owned and managed crafts-based cooperatives in rural India creates an enabling environment through culmination of positive affective experiences such as mentoring that inspire women to overcome fears of defiance of traditions or cultural norms while engaging in entrepreneurial activities. From the pragmatist feminist perspective, what is important is how women define themselves and their relationships with others, including other women, both within their family/household and outside of it. There is a belief in “*shared understanding and communal problem-solving*” and “*experience is inextricably personal and social*” (Siegfried, 1991). The emphasis is on social rather than individual paths to transformation and priority is given to relationships (between each other) and lived experiences. There is an acceptance of the communal qualities associated with women such as expressiveness, connectedness, kindness and supportiveness (Gupta *et al.*, 2009) and the different expectations of gender behavior while developing strategies to negotiate relations that affect them (Grünenfelder, 2013). Pragmatist feminism depicts the way in which life

experiences affect modes of existence from the viewpoint of marginalized groups such as disadvantaged women (Mottier, 2004).

Although women are motivated, like men, to enter entrepreneurship for reasons such as profit-making and financial independence (Everingham, 2002; Crowell, 2003; Dheer, Li & Treviño, 2019), it is also ascribed to a desire for doing things for others and responding to community needs such as the provision of health, education and legal services (Bilodeau & Slivinski, 1996; Glaeser & Shleifer, 2001). The literature also shows that cultural values and norms play a critical role in explaining behavior (Berger, 1991; Naffziger & Terrell, 1996; Shinnar, Giacomini & Janssen 2012; Shahriar, 2018) and women may choose entrepreneurship to balance work responsibilities and earning potential with domestic/familial commitments (Brush, 1992; McGowan et al., 2012). This is reflected in the literature where many women entrepreneurs who start enterprises see themselves as feminists undertaking non-traditional roles (Mirchandani, 1999; Cheraghi, Wickstrom & Klyver, 2019). Arguably, these women are motivated by pragmatist feminism ideology: “*women whose pragmatism bolstered their feminism*” (Siegfried, 1991). A cohesion may be found between the *individual's* motivation, traits, and cognition associated with being an entrepreneur and the development of a *social* collective entrepreneurial behavior as an outcome at the organizational level.

In comparison to men, women entrepreneurs are found to place more emphasis on a cooperative network of relationships rather than profit-generation *per se* (Brush, 1992; Steensma, Marino & Weaver, 2000) and their self-image is often defined in terms of *we* and not in terms of *I*. Women tend to engage in collective forms of entrepreneurship to promote internal and external collaborations (Sorenson *et al.*, 2008). Cross-cultural research shows that the management style in women-owned enterprises emphasize open communication and participative decision-making (e.g. Gundry & Ben-Yoseph, 1998). The preference for collectivist versus bureaucratic organization, and participatory leadership versus hierarchical authority is symbolic of the distinct values and goals of feminist enterprises (Orser *et al.*, 2012). Collectivism is necessary for both the creation and the pursuit of new entrepreneurial opportunities through the sharing of ideas, knowledge, and expertise (Ketchen *et al.*, 2007; Felin & Zenger, 2009). Indeed, in collectivist organizations, people consider themselves to be interdependent and committed to pursuing group goals (Shinnar, Giacomini & Janssen, 2012). The influence of ideologies and their interaction with other contextual factors may refine our knowledge of how women think and act entrepreneurially in specific contexts which may in turn inform grass-root activism to enhance women's work. Building on Chung & Gibbon

(1997), we extend the idea that pragmatist feminism and collectivism underpin the *socio-structure* and *superstructure* and thus shape entrepreneurial behavior among women.

3. Women's Work and Entrepreneurship: The Indian Context

Notwithstanding the economic advances made over the years, gender balance for entrepreneurship in India remains amongst the lowest in the world. Estimates suggest that men are nearly twice as likely to engage in entrepreneurship, with women comprising just 14% of entrepreneurs in India (GEM, 2019). Moreover, women entrepreneurs are engaged in low productive sectors such as agriculture or informal cottage industry with 71% women entrepreneurs employing five or fewer workers (*ibid*). Other than poverty, some of the reasons advanced for the gender gap include low levels of education and skills training (Ghani *et al.*, 2011), lack of mobility and adequate infrastructure and a deeply entrenched commitment to family obligations (Spierings, 2014).

The preconditions faced by women entrepreneurs in India reflect systemic gender discrimination. Women are heavily constrained by social restrictions in a traditional male-dominated society through gender norms, religious sects, and the perception of women in wider society (Field *et al.*, 2010). For instance, gender segregation prescribed by religion restricts women's social interaction with men outside of their family and lack of mobility limits their access to wider community networks (Subramaniam, 2011). With restricted networks women are unable to identify funding opportunities or access resources to exploit entrepreneurial opportunities (Katre, 2018). Further, families influence a woman's decision to work and they may resist change (Haugh & Talwar, 2016). Women internalize these societal norms of subordination and seclusion which erodes their self-confidence to act independently and they may perceive themselves as lacking in entrepreneurial capabilities (Katre, 2018).

In India, women often engage in collective entrepreneurship to overcome these patriarchal barriers through participation in cooperatives, women's associations, and self-help groups (Datta & Gailey, 2012). Collectivist strategies have encouraged thousands of women from poor communities to engage in entrepreneurship and fight social exclusion. For example, the self-employed women's association of India or SEWA in Ahmedabad, Gujarat in West India is a pioneering trade union with a membership of 1.9 Million in 2016 that has transformed lives of poor, marginalized women in the informal economy since its inception in 1972 (Colovic & Mehrotra, 2020). Mahaul is a rural social enterprise in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat that originated as a self-help group in 1998 that engages women in crafts production

(Haugh and Talwar, 2016). These organizations exemplify the emancipatory potential of social entrepreneurship in transforming lives of thousands of women through collective efforts.

Drawing on a specific case like *Lijjat* can help us understand how women from severely disadvantaged socio-economic women could initiate and grow a successful enterprise. The contribution of this work is to better understand the influence of ideologies on women's entrepreneurial behavior and on forms of collective action for the economic empowerment of women from disadvantaged backgrounds.

***Lijjat*: A view from the field**

As its financial capital, Mumbai attracts migrant manual workers from all over India. Migrant women come either in search of work or accompany men as housewives. Our study focuses on the latter category of women, who were not actively looking for work. As wives of blue-collar workers, they had little education with no skills or opportunity to enter the formal sector, had many children and lived in crowded '*chawls*' (apartment blocks with shared facilities).

In 1959, seven such women, semi-literate urban housewives from low-income households, from a Gujarati peasant community who lived in one such *chawl* as neighbours, decided to use their spare time and culinary skills to start a collective initiative. On the terrace of their building, they started rolling out a crispy wafer like popular savory snack called '*papad*' ('*poppadum*' in the west) widely used in India. They sold their product in the local market. Merely by word of mouth, the demand for their product swelled and over a few years their terrace-enterprise had grown into a large business. Their business model was simple: to ensure quality, raw materials were disbursed to women who enrolled as members of *Lijjat* and payment was made according to the amount of *papad* rolled. Every member's household was thus turned into a 'production unit'.

In 1962, the name *Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad* was chosen by the group for its products. The literal translation of this is 'honorable women's household enterprise' with *Lijjat* being the word for 'tasty' in Gujarati. The Mumbai model was replicated across India, providing self-employment to thousands of urban poor women with little education or professional/technical skills and no other economic opportunities. The main objective of the organization was economic empowerment of women by providing them with employment. Although men are employed, as accountants or drivers, only women become 'sister-members'. *Lijjat* has developed into a successful cooperative exclusively managed and run by the women members who are also owners and workers.

Lijjat's success is manifested in the fact that by 2018, its seed capital of Rs. 80 (\$1.5) had an annual turnover of around Rs.800 crores (~\$109 million), providing employment to 43000 women in 81 branches and 27 divisions all over India (Anand, 2018). Women members were involved in semi-manual production of a large portfolio of products, including snacks, breads, and spice mixes, making *Lijjat* one of the most recognizable Indian brands.

So, what underlies the success of the women who are engaged in *Lijjat*? Going beyond simple economic decision-making, what were the influences on their entrepreneurial process? What helped them overcome the socio-cultural constraints of patriarchy? What was the role of the market opportunity? Over the years, as the cooperative expanded to include women from other castes, regions and religions, what has kept this collective going and establish itself as a successful model of women's entrepreneurship?

4. Research Methods

As the study was exploratory in nature, we chose an interpretive approach as it enabled us, as researchers, to get to know the participants and interpret their realities (Weber, 2004). This approach is concerned with how social reality is constructed, accomplished and sustained. Within this wider approach we used multiple methods for data collection, including direct field observations; attending managerial meetings; semi-structured interviews and using secondary sources like, company archives.

In the first instance, we observed two production centers of the cooperative over three days in one of their Mumbai branches. In the first center, we observed the daily routine of activities, which included activities such as production, packaging, sale and the disbursement of daily remuneration to the members for their work. We also observed a *chapati* (flat bread) making venture of the cooperative. We noted the daily communications between the women. We also observed meetings between managers, which gave us an insight into the decision-making and managerial practices. We also studied archival material and corporate videos that provided useful background context.

Next, to gain an understanding of the worker's cooperative, a formal request was made to interview some of the members. As per our research interests, we requested to speak with members who were with the cooperative for a good length of time and were willing to describe to us their memories and experiences of the motivations for the beginnings of the cooperative and its journey through the decades. Given these requirements, a senior manager at *Lijjat* helped identify the women research participants. Our sample included seven participants in

three categories – an administrator from the head office; four members of the cooperative who also served on the management committee that year; and two women who were just members.

A profile of these seven participants containing the highlights of their entrepreneurial journeys is presented in Table 1. All seven women had joined the cooperative in their 20s. The six *Lijjat*-members in our sample had joined in 1970s, which was just a few years from when the cooperative had begun. At the time of joining, they were all housewives, with very little education, no previous work experience and no other technical/professional skill except their domestic culinary skills and experience of managing their homes/families. They all came from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, where family income was insufficient for their needs. They were all mothers, with children and family responsibilities. Although they hailed from different parts of the country and from different communities, in other socio-economic aspects their background was like that of the seven founding members of *Lijjat*.

<TABLE 1>

Ethical approval was gained from the lead authors' institution at the time of the study. Participants were provided with information sheets and informed consent forms which were also explained verbally. Pseudonyms have been used in the paper to preserve anonymity. In line with the interpretive approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the participants lasting just over an hour. The interview was designed to capture their experiences as well as their views. It began with asking the participants to describe their entrepreneurial journeys. They were encouraged to reflect upon their experience right from the day they joined *Lijjat* and how their careers developed over the years. Like in ethnographic research, we let the participants share their stories and reminisce even if this was tangential to our research interests (see Weatherall, 2019). Next, we asked questions on the managerial practices within *Lijjat*. We specifically asked about the ways in which disputes and disagreements are handled. All interviews were carried out by the lead author. It is important to acknowledge that the participants were probably influenced by the presence of an interviewer from an entirely different socio-economic background, particularly with respect to how they chose to present themselves. As a working mother herself, the interviewer has experiences encompassing of struggles with work-family balance. During the time spent with participants, these experiences were inevitably brought to bear, and much common ground was found with a significant amount of lively exchanges and laughter during the interviews.

Interviews were translated from the local language Hindi and transcribed as verbatim as possible and analyzed inductively using thematic coding (Silverman, 2006). Our thematic analysis followed an inductive process and a mutually agreed coding between the authors was generated via a back-and-forth between data, context and literature (Spiggle, 1994). Since our purpose was to tease out the influences of ideologies on women's work and organization, we used discourse analysis techniques to interpret the transcripts as embedded in the 'localized accounts' of the practices, ideas and identities of the women (Alvesson, 2003; Johnstone, 2017). In viewing the material from the interviews, we used our intertextual understanding of the wider socio-cultural currents of the Indian society. Each account was examined as situated within its own pragmatic framework, in which the individual is always center stage such that the account is viewed as deeply embedded in its socio-cultural context (Buchbinder, 2010). The final agreed thematic codes resulted from an interpretation using a collaborative approach to data analysis which echoes feminist enquiries that aims to give voices to women's everyday lives while acknowledging their identities. Our thematic analysis was also guided by the literature on gender and entrepreneurship which highlights individual's motivations for work, the value they place on inter-personal relations and how they view managerial practices and its influences on their identity. As such our interpretation and thematic coding and later our data analysis focusses on how women's accounts were positioned in relation to their own understandings and practices of work and organization.

5. Findings: Pragmatist Feminist Ideologies at Work

Careful analyses of the transcripts for coding led us to conclude that a tiered approach to the study of ideological influences on women's work would be necessary. Several themes emerged that could be usefully considered under two dominant themes or parent nodes. The first theme identifies individual woman's motivation to take up entrepreneurial activity (*socio-structure*) and the second theme identifies organizational practices that aspire to collectivism as a strategy to grow and expand (*superstructure*). We constructed two thematic codes or language labels that captured the paramount sentiment in each of the tiers: '*I do it for the family*' and '*We are a family*'. These are used to trace the influence of pragmatist feminist ideologies both at the individual level and at an organizational level as motivations to begin entrepreneurial activity and enablers that help to sustain and grow it. We find that the influence of ideology and pragmatism helps women give meaning to their personal agency and at the collective level helps identify strategies that can resist patriarchal corralling of business opportunities.

'I do it for the family': Ideologies, pragmatic agency and social acceptance

A critical factor for entrepreneurial activity is motivation (Schjoedt & Shaver, 2007; Dheer, Li & Treviño, 2019). When asked about their reason for engaging in work, the women mentioned their primary motivation was to support their family as well as to be self-reliant and have their own income. Within their discourses, we developed an understanding of their realities and the meaning they gave to their own experiences that bore a clear sense of defiance for woman's traditional role as 'homemaker' and man's role as 'breadwinner'. The ideology of being able to provide 'like a man' for their family was clearly of great relevance to these women. In this sense, these women saw themselves as feminists undertaking non-traditional roles (Mirchandani, 1999; Cheraghi, Wickstrom & Klyver, 2019). This practical motivation for taking up an economic activity was evident in all the participants' accounts:

- *My husband has been long term unemployed. I run the family entirely from my income...I am the 'man' in this family* (Deval)

- *I and my family roll out 25-30 kilos of papad daily. The income helps to run our family. For my daughter's wedding, the gold coins I received as profits (from the business) were very useful* (Kajal)

Insufficient family income as the primary motivation to engage in entrepreneurship supports the assertion about the predominance of 'necessity entrepreneurship' among women in developing countries (Pines *et al.* 2010). Economic need often provides the only reason widely accepted in society as a justification for a woman taking up work (Grunenfelder, 2013) and for collective agency (Durbin, Page and Walby, 2017). Further, food production fits in with gendered ideas about work (Amin, 1997). Indeed, in the case of founders of *Lijjat* and our research participants, community acceptance seems to have been an important consideration. As Lata explained to us, the founding members of *Lijjat* started their initiative "...by borrowing money from their community". Additionally, two male social workers are said to have provided support in organising the business accounts, as the women lacked this knowledge. There was a shared belief within the community, which viewed women's entrepreneurial activities for supporting family incomes positively. *Lijjat* was founded a decade after India's independence when the Gandhian ideals of self-reliance and harnessing of *stri shakti* (female power) held a sway over the masses. The hold of these ideals also explains the support the women received from their family and community in starting the enterprise. From archival materials about the organization (*Lijjat*, 2007), we also find that the women who had started the enterprise had the same motivation of self-reliance, which continues to inspire women even today as they associate their everyday actions with it.

- *The women founders did not take any form of charitable donations or other support offered to them. We do not take any donation from any external agency (Lata)*

- *We have not taken any form of donation or charity. The organization has grown because of the hard work we sisters do every day (Deval)*

While the need to earn their own income was the paramount sentiment found within the theme '*I do it for the family*', we find that discourse elements of pragmatic feminist ideology were mobilized by the participants in various ways. Two practical concerns that are important to them and have motivated their choice of work surfaced in the discourses: their role as wives and mothers and lack of education.

(i) *The importance of being a wife and a mother*: Flexibility in workhours and being able to keep to family commitments as a mother, wife, or daughter joined the discursive elements of financial necessity in this theme. Despite wanting to earn a living, these women saw household duties as central to their identity which can at times deter women from entrepreneurial pursuits (Katre, 2018). As evident from the participant's accounts, earning was only possible when it allowed them to be close to home and carry out 'their household duties'.

- *I joined (Lijjat) because I could earn an income while maintaining my home, doing my duties as a wife and mother. My house turns into a 'micro-enterprise' every evening, as my daughters and daughters-in-law also join in the activity" (Deval)*

- *This flexibility is important to me as I can to run my family while doing my job (Hiral)*

- *...working close to my residence attracted me to work here in the first place. My children and now my daughters-in-law help me roll papads every evening at home (Jyoti)*

- *...as I work from home and with other women, my husband does not object (Kajal)*

- *I started off by helping my mother. Later...when I became a sister-member, I started taking on a lot more work. I had to stop for a while because my mother-in-law was not well but now, I do a lot more again, as I have my own daughter helping me with the papads (Hiral)*

Living in a patriarchal context meant that the entire household burden was on these women. It is not surprising then that finding work that fit in with their family commitments and allowed them to negotiate the 'social appropriateness' and, where possible, share their work burden with others in their household was important to them. Their entrepreneurial activity was 'integrated' rather than separated from family and societal expectations (Brush 1992). Given their constraints, for most of these women, the job of rolling *papads* at home (or some such other household industry) was clearly a pragmatic choice. Moreover, the organization's practices seemed to accommodate diversity in their needs and experiences while remaining family, community and women centered. Availability of such work is likely to pull more

women into work in a country like India which historically has very low female labour participation rates (Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2016; Dhamija & Roychowdhury, 2020).

(ii) *Lacking education and skills*: Another practical consideration for the research participants was their disadvantaged background, which limited their opportunity to gain education or technical skills and left them with little prospects for meaningful employment (Table 1). This is typically of women who join *Lijjat* (Lijjat, 2007).

- *I had no education, so finding meaningful work in Mumbai was out of question* (Bhumi)

- *When I joined, I lacked education or skills, so there were no jobs for me* (Deval)

- *Earnings here (at Lijjat) depends on the labour you put in. Women from my background that lack education and skills can earn a regular income throughout their lives* (Jyoti)

- *...I manage to earn a regular income by working in the mornings for a few hours and then continued with my studies by attending evening school* (Reval)

- *Although I was illiterate, my family has benefited from my income as I was able to educate my children and send them to university* (Hiral)

In the context of little education and training, an industry that used everyday skills that women developed in their reproductive sphere was the only viable work for these women. Women met the practical need of supplementing family income through a flexible work routine “*doing what they knew best*” (Deval). This was also their opportunity to be the ‘agents of change’ by influencing their children’s education and own betterment. Once again, the organization’s practices accommodated women’s personal development and familial goals. Research suggests that women empowered by engagement in collective entrepreneurship ensure that their daughters complete their education and acquire marketable skills (Haugh & Talwar, 2016). Gender gap in education and skills remains a huge concern for India but also for other developing countries (Alderman et al., 1996; Ghani *et al.*, 2011; Chandra, 2019). Closing this gap is important, but equally so is to explore opportunities that enable women with low skills join the workforce and contribute positively to their households and economy.

Entrepreneurial activity was important to these women in three ways: to meet family’s economic needs while overcoming work-family conflict and to overcome constraints imposed by lack of education. These women forwarded their intention to earn an independent income and do something for their families but whilst remaining pragmatic about their constraints. Given the conditions of patriarchal family responsibilities and lack of training and capital, the only vocation available to these women was one that exploited their skills as ‘home-makers’ in a way that did not call into question their familial and social roles. The attitudes, motivation and values that prompted them to take up this venture has elements of pragmatist feminist

ideology. It prompted them to turn to the one vocation that would allow them to meet all their complex needs – to earn an independent living but to work within the limitations of their realities. It is described that people with a pragmatic orientation, show an ability to accept disadvantages, adapt to their circumstances and persevere in achieving results (Duran, 1993). Moreover, the cooperative environment enables poor women to acquire vocational skills through experiential learning better suited to their lived experiences than classroom based, structured, trainer led entrepreneurship education (also see Katre, 2018).

Recognizing the importance of ideologies in the lives of disadvantaged women gives us an insight into the issues that are relevant to them. This also enables us to understand how marginalized women find agency. Agency here includes ‘...the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity...’ (Kabeer, 2001: 21). Their ideology of self-reliance and the motivation to overcome their gendered constraints using practical solutions is the manifestation of agency among these disadvantaged women. Their acquired agency embodies the pragmatist feminist ideology that drives the work culture among these women.

‘We are a family’: Ideology, culture and collectivism

For women to start a business in a highly patriarchal context is challenging but growing this business without having it taken over by the men requires almost a militant strategy at the organizational level. This, it seems, was the intuition of the founders of *Lijjat* when they restricted the membership to women only: men could be employed as salaried staff but not allowed to become members of *Lijjat*. The influence of feminist ideology at an organizational level is manifested in the dual strategy of membership for women only and collectivist ownership. Through this strategy *Lijjat* could not only avoid the patriarchal corralling of business but also expand its business concerns as women became committed to the ideology of belonging to a cooperative that is exclusively owned and managed by them. When asked to describe *Lijjat* as an organization, all the research participants used the word ‘family’.

Company documents also suggest that the sense of ‘family’ was endorsed as an organizational practice to improve trust and fraternity amongst its members. It was common to come across excerpts such as “...*the organization is like a family with a feeling of mutual trust and friendship*” (*Lijjat* 2007a: 2). Furthermore, explicit strategies that strengthened commitment to the organization were adopted. As Lata explains, the cooperative’s constitution requires every woman member to sign a pledge of devotion to the basic tenets of *Lijjat*: “*Commitment to earn legitimate honest income, through work on a cooperative basis*” (*Lijjat*, 2007). The philosophy behind this pledge constitutes its unique managerial structure.

Cooperative values were reiterated regularly in all its meetings, gatherings and newsletters. The newsletter is published in English and three Indian languages, Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi, and it is distributed to all the branches in the country. As a discursive practice, these reiterations of the organizational value can be perceived as the ‘glue’ sustaining the ideological drive behind *Lijjat*.

We argue that the discourse of the organization as a ‘family’ and the pledge that women take when joining the organization are all pragmatic strategies to avoid the patriarchal corralling of their growing venture. A feminist collectivist strategy that restricts membership to women and provides collective ownership and profit sharing ensured that the fundamental objectives of the business model: “*To provide livelihood to vulnerable women*” (Lijjat, 2009a), remain unchanged. Furthermore, as joint owners, there is congruence between individual goals of each woman with the organization’s goal that fosters cooperative behavior. From the feminist perspective, they had “*common, not competing, goals and interests*” (Jaggar, 1983).

The cooperative in our study is unique as its membership and ownership was restricted to women right from its inception. In India, where there are social and economic barriers to women’s ownership of resources (Garikipati, 2008), women’s owning the organization is more than symbolic, it explicitly challenges the subordinate status of the women in a traditional society. The discourse of organization as ‘family’ is also upheld in practice. It provided to the sister-members employment for life, conducted literacy campaigns, set up housing schemes and provided other associated benefits as explained by the administrator,

- *We run literacy campaigns for our members, give scholarships to children and organize health check-ups from time to time* (Lata)

These welfare measures facilitated a deeper involvement of the women with the organization through on-going constructive change in their own lives and inculcated a group loyalty. The productive potential in turn that was created from the ‘collective’ structure of relations between the members can be described as giving rise to ‘social capital’ (Coleman, 1988). The organization created a community which is an interconnected and mutually interdependent group that considers others’ needs, engages in dialogues to enhance the cooperative venture but also to develop ways in which member’s welfare could be enhanced for personal and organizational good. In such an organization, the members’ ‘worth’ is more than that of an employee and personal goals are subsumed into organizational goals, where member’s welfare and a need to impart a strong sense of belonging among them are valued in organizational life. Within the thematic code of ‘*we are a family*’, we find the use of other

strategies that resonate further with pragmatist feminism: spreading the notion of a sisterhood; spreading the culture of work; and flat organizational structure.

(i) *Belonging to a sisterhood*: The women in the cooperative address each other as *behn*, meaning ‘sister’. We argue that the use of the word is a discursive and pragmatic practice shaped by the need to create a collective feminist identity. Its influence is to construct the organization as a family collective and establish deep interpersonal relationships among the worker-owners. It also translates to helping each other in times of need. Sisterhood creates a relaxed environment for women and triggers positive feelings of solidarity that motivate women to act as a collective.

- *We are like a large family of sisters. The sister-members come from every religion, castes and background. We support each other through difficult times in our lives – survive unemployed, alcoholic husbands, educate and settle our children* (Kajal)

- *I enjoy working here in the company of other sister-members. The friendships we develop here help us to tide over difficult times in our lives* (Jyoti)

- *I like that I can interact with other women and develop lifelong friendships. Some of these sisters belong to my community and live near my family home* (Hiral)

By opposing relationships that emerge from organizational power structures, the discursive strategy of ‘sisterhood’ used by the women is essentially feminist. The self-image or ‘feminist identity’ of the women members is constructed in terms of ‘we’ and not ‘I’ and this works to form a close-knit collectivist group in which they can expect loyalty and support from each other. Sisterhood provides the ‘social glue’ (Chung & Gibbons 1997: 18) acknowledging the diverse socio-economic backgrounds that members come from.

(ii) *Empowering by spreading the culture of work*: Work and entrepreneurship contribute to women’s empowerment by enabling them ‘to take action’. In the cooperative, women from lower income groups “*became active agents in the process of their empowerment*” (Ramanathan, 2004: 1689). All the women participants report that they had a relative or friend who was also a member and all of them were introduced to the organization by another member suggesting that members spread a culture of work among women. For example, Deval, Hiral and Bhumi relate how they began with *Lijjat*

- *I was introduced by a behn from the neighborhood* (Deval)

- *I joined ...in 1975. My mother was a behn since 1970 and she encouraged and helped me join the organization.* (Hiral)

- *My neighbor and sister-in-law introduced me to the organization* (Bhumi)

Our evidence suggests that knowing someone in the organization affected women’s

decision to join as they are already familiar with the roles, expectations, and networks. By offering economic opportunity, the cooperative contributed to women's social inclusion and empowerment (Rindova *et al.*, 2009). There was empowerment in this form of entrepreneurship through the ability to earn an independent income, but also from the feeling of belonging to a collective. The discourse that emerged is the emancipatory potential of women's collective endeavors, especially in situations of poverty and entrenched gender inequalities.

(iii) *Flat organizational structure and democratic management*: Our evidence from the discursive practices adopted at *Lijjat* supports the claims that ventures embedded in feminist ideologies result in relatively flat, non-hierarchical structures. Each of *Lijjat*'s 81 branches operated as a self-administered unit managed by a 'sanchalika' who leads a committee of 11 sister-members chosen by consensus every three years to look after local operations. Branches send their accounts to the head-office on a regular basis; however, each branch shares its profits or losses among its own members, thus making each responsible for its own performance (*Lijjat*, 2007). The head-office of the cooperative at Mumbai coordinated activities such as procurement; business with dealers or exporters; auditing branch accounts, advertising, and operational issues at the national level. All strategic decisions at *Lijjat*, such as expansion and product launches, were the responsibility of a central management committee that was chosen from amongst the sister-members based on consensus once every three years. Their strategic decision-making process was described as follows:

The committee considers proposals for new ventures or branches. These proposals are then evaluated for their market feasibility and the potential for generating self-employment for local women. The proposal with maximum market potential and the ability to maximize employment opportunities for women is then selected (Lata)

While *Lijjat* has a few salaried employees, both men and women, who worked as administrators or drivers, the cooperative was mainly managed by the active participation of its sister-members. The shared responsibility for success among the sister-members made it a collectivist organization where promoting careers in a way that was valuable to them became important rather than hierarchical advancement. So 'value promotion' rather than 'career promotion' became part of the organization's culture.

- As sister-member and co-owner in the organization, I have no boss as such. This means that I have the freedom to choose my work, the number of working hours I want to work so that this fits in with my lifestyle and family situation (Hiral)

- There is a relaxed atmosphere there are no bosses.... Nobody is discriminated whatever work they may do. We do the work because we want to (Kajal)

- *The informal set up ...meant that I was my own boss and at the same time my regular interactions with other sister-members helped me to develop lifelong friendships* (Deval)

An 'informal and relaxed atmosphere' in the workplace is in tandem with the discourse of organization as a family. We found this philosophy in archival materials: ... *in a real sense Lijjat is a school to learn how to develop oneself by imbibing the spirit of unity and cooperation* (Lijjat, 2009b, p. 3). We also observed this in the production centers in Mumbai where women were involved in different tasks (quality checks, packing, labelling) in an informal, relaxed manner. This set up also encouraged horizontal and vertical mobility, whereby women took up work that they could do best with the skills and time they had, but through hands-on experience, they also gradually acquired higher skills and confidence to manage aspects like banking, making inventories of raw materials and finished goods, financial accounting etc.

The influence of feminist ideologies on making a constructive change in the lives of sister-members is evident from the personal histories, self-evaluation, and the experiences the research participants. The women working in the cooperative perceive themselves as *making a difference* both at the individual and collective level. The mediatory role of pragmatist feminism ideology is clear when set in the context of the socio-economic background of the women and the cultural context within which the cooperative is embedded. It exemplifies empowerment of women which is much more than just in terms of their capacity to earn: "*It is also about the individual lives of women affected in terms of their personal equations at home, their reproductive rights as well as the right to education and personal space in a patriarchal society...*" (Ramanathan 2004 p. 1696). Instead of waiting for wider structural change to take place in the society or being recipients of benefits through the trickling down effect of welfare measures, these women became active agents of their empowerment. Feminist ideologies facilitated the initiation, development and scaling phase of the cooperative that made entrepreneurs out of socio-economically marginalized women. Overall, our findings suggest that women's economic interaction in a repressed socio-cultural context can be mediated through feminist ideologies. Within a broader institutional perspective, ideology as a discursive institution enables women to mediate the socio-cultural influences on their economic activities.

6. Concluding Comments

By identifying a market opportunity where they could use their skills to make and sell a consumer product of good quality, by organizing their own labour and their own meagre capital to create economic value, seven women from low-income households became entrepreneurs. Our findings highlight how pragmatist feminist ideology helped them create

work and nurture their organization in a deeply patriarchal socio-cultural context. Feminist ideologies played an important role in legitimizing and enabling women to work and organize themselves under challenging conditions.

Ideologies influenced behavior at two levels – at the individual (*socio-structure*) level and the collective (*superstructure*) level. At the individual level, they shaped motivations and at collective level, they shaped organizational structure and practices. This assertion is consistent with the feminist organising theme of cooperative business ventures.

In a women's cooperative like *Lijjat*, feminist ideologies facilitated entrepreneurial processes among women who came from a disadvantaged background to provide incomes, build skills, and instill agency. These ideologies provided the inspiration and motivation for women to 'change things' within a restricted socio-cultural environment. Use of pragmatic strategies was only a response to their constraints. This is leveraged through their integration into a cooperative enterprise and a collective social identity. Their shared belief in self-reliance, cooperation, collective ownership and profit-sharing based on personal experiences creates the 'entrepreneurial ideal' (Mirchandani 1999: 226) as it encouraged women, even under challenging conditions, to step out of traditional gendered roles while still giving priority to their relationships – familial and social. Although the women's cooperative offered financial security to the women, the motivation for organising themselves in a way that echoes with feminist ideals, as exhibited by the managerial practices, was more complex than just profits.

Our study is limited to a specific cultural and entrepreneurial context. Given this limitation, it is difficult to generalize. Nevertheless, there is evidence emerging from other contexts suggesting that feminist ideologies may help motivate women towards work and help them in organising themselves for entrepreneurship. For instance, Ozkazanc-Pan (2015) finds that in Turkey, Islamic feminist approaches to organize themselves are a means to challenge gender inequality. Similarly, Agarwal (2018) finds that in Kerala women farming groups with democratic operational structures are not only more profitable than individual farms but are also empowering. Recent evidence moreover suggests that organising themselves in groups is likely to help women's economic activity and have other beneficial outcomes. For example, several studies find that women are deeply influenced by their female peers in starting and growing business ventures (Field, et al., 2016; Sharafizad & Standing, 2017; Markussen & Roed, 2017) and working collectively seems to enable them to challenge gender structures (Meier, 2016; Peters, 2017; Roos, 2019).

The specific success story of the women's cooperative in our study directs our attention to two points. First, although ideologies alone cannot explain work and organizational behavior,

they appear to condition women's potential for economic activity, and in this way generate differences across groups/societies. Second, an insight from the organizational practices suggests women going beyond aspiring for 'work-life balance' to 'work designed by women for women' which is centered on women's lives and accounts for their gendered realities. These insights have policy implications in terms of institutional support required to facilitate an environment that fosters cooperatives' values and sisterhood amongst disadvantaged women to work and organize themselves, especially in collective initiatives. Identifying opportunities that can be designed around women's everyday lives, with consequent implications for organizational practices that can nurture and grow them may help improve their participation in a labour market that has so far ignored their potential.

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Table 1: Profile of research participants

Lable	~Age	Education	Role at <i>Lijjat</i>	How joined?	HH composition	Socio-econ background
Lata*	52	Degree	Paid-employee, administrator at headoffice. Gatekeeper. Supports the Management Committee.	Joined in 1981 as employee. Inspired by context and history of organization and introduced by a sister-member.	Married with three children. Lives with family.	Christain, middle-class background. Husband employed.
Deval	61	Degree	<i>Lijjat</i> sister-member. Works for cooperative as Vice President. Branch Manager.	Joined in 1973; introduced by a neighbour who was a sister-member. Obtained her education after joining.	A widow, lives with her two children.	Hindu, Gujarati, lower-middle class. Only earning member even when husband was alive.
Hiral	53	No formal education	<i>Lijjat</i> sister-member. Works for cooperative as member of the Management Committee.	Joined in 1975; introduced by mother who was a member to help with family maintenance after father's death.	Married with two children. Lives with family.	Hindu, Gujarati, lower-middle class. Husband manual-labour. Saved up to send son to the US for higher education.
Reval	51	Degree	<i>Lijjat</i> sister-member. Works for the cooperative as Treasurer. Member of the Management Committee.	Joined in 1974; introduced by neighbour who was a sister-member. Obtained an education after joining.	Recently widowed, lives with her two children.	Hindu, Marathi, lower-middle class. Only earning member till recently. Now son works.
Bhumi	50	Degree	<i>Lijjat</i> sister-member.	Joined in 1974; introduced by sister-in-law and neighbour who were sister-members. Obtained an education after joining.	Recently widowed, lives with her two children.	Hindu, Gujarati, lower-middle class. Sole-breadwinner now. Husband worked while alive.
Jyoti	60	Degree	<i>Lijjat</i> sister-member. Works for cooperative as member of the Management Committee.	Joined in 1974; introduced by neighbour who was a member. Obtained an education after joining.	Recently widowed, lives with her two children.	Hindu, Gujarati, lower-middle-class. Sole-breadwinner now. Husband worked while alive.
Kajal	54	No formal education	<i>Lijjat</i> sister-member.	Joined in 1975; introduced by neighbour who was a sister-member.	Married with two children. Lives with family.	Hindu, Gujarati, lower-middle-class. Husband is a casual worker.