From the emancipated to the emancipator: an integrative perspective on women social entrepreneurs’ emancipation experiences

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Abstract
Purpose – Social entrepreneurship has been recently viewed as an emancipatory process that promotes freedom and autonomy for social entrepreneurs and those they serve. However, the mechanisms of how emancipation is enacted remain relatively underexplored. By using an integrative lens, this paper aims to explore the emancipation experiences of women social entrepreneurs and unpack the processes through which they extend their self-emancipation to facilitate the empowerment of others.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study approach. Semistructured interviews were conducted with eight women social entrepreneurs from various industries in Hong Kong to understand and examine their experiences of “emancipation from” and “emancipation to” in social entrepreneurship.

Findings – This study identified a three-phase emancipatory journey of women social entrepreneurs. Specifically, the findings revealed that their emancipation experiences started with self-awareness of constraints in their surroundings, primarily due to stereotyped social norms and institutional barriers. This phase is followed by embracing social entrepreneurship as a coping strategy for navigating the perceived constraints and exploring new possibilities with increased agency. Ultimately, this transformation extends beyond their individual growth into broader social impacts as women social entrepreneurs use their newfound agency to effect meaningful social changes.

Originality/value – This study enriches the “entrepreneuring as emancipation” perspective by embracing an integrative lens that allows us to delve into the complex layers of emancipation experiences of women social entrepreneurs. Notably, this study differentiates various conceptions of emancipation, presenting a dual role of women social entrepreneurs as both the emancipated and the emancipator. By situating the study in Hong Kong, where women often face gendered expectations that shape their career choices and development, this study offers a nuanced and contextual understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities women social entrepreneurs encounter in their environment.

Keywords Emancipation, Women social entrepreneur, Social entrepreneurship, Integrative lens, Hong Kong

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction
Over the past decades, social entrepreneurship has emerged as a promising mechanism to empower women (Datta and Gailey, 2012; Agarwal et al., 2020) and promote gender equality (Haugh and Talwar, 2016). Characterized by its prioritization of social benefits over financial gain (Zahra et al., 2009) and its association with caring and compassionate values (Sengupta and Lehtimäki, 2022), social entrepreneurship has attracted individuals motivated by social and environmental concerns and who may have been excluded or marginalized from traditional business settings, such as women (Levie and Hart, 2011). Consequently, the role of women in social entrepreneurship has gained significant attention in recent literature, which highlighted women’s roles as both targets of social entrepreneurial efforts (Datta and Gailey, 2012) and agents of change via social entrepreneurship with their unique experiences, personal characteristics and contributions to the field (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018).

Recent research has identified the potential of social entrepreneurship as a catalyst for emancipation, enabling individuals to challenge the status quo and the social order (e.g. Rindova et al., 2009; Chandra, 2017; Jennings et al., 2016). This process fosters agency, wherein individuals acquire the capacity to choose among various courses of action and enact new possibilities (Dy et al., 2018; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). Following this “entrepreneuring as emancipation” perspective, scholars have examined, for example, how social entrepreneurship can improve the representation and social status of women (Humbert and Roomi, 2018), empower them financially and politically (Haugh and Talwar, 2016; Datta and Gailey, 2012) and enhance their family and community well-being (Jamali, 2009). However, despite a growing interest in gender aspects of emancipation, there remains a gap in understanding the varied pathways through which women’s participation in social entrepreneurship leads to different forms of emancipation (e.g. Agarwal et al., 2020), such as “emancipation from” perceived constraints and “emancipation to” new opportunities (e.g. Laine and Kibler, 2022; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). This oversight suggests a need for a closer examination of the multifaceted nature of emancipation in the context of women’s social entrepreneurship.

Because of the research gaps above, this study asks: how is emancipation enacted in women’s social entrepreneurship? What are the processes and mechanisms underlying their emancipatory experiences? Drawing from the “entrepreneuring as emancipation” perspective (e.g. Rindova et al., 2009) and an integrative lens that acknowledges the multidimensional nature of emancipation (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018), we use a qualitative multiple-case study approach (Eisenhardt, 2021) to explore the experiences of eight women social entrepreneurs. For this study, we selected Hong Kong as our research site due to its unique juxtaposition, where women continue to navigate gendered expectations and norms in their personal and professional development despite enjoying relatively high access to quality education and employment opportunities (Women’s Foundation, 2023). In the following sections, we will briefly outline the theoretical background that underlies the study, explain the methodology and report the findings.

Women’s participation in social entrepreneurship
Entrepreneurship, historically perceived as a “men’s world” (e.g. Hamilton, 2013), is often associated with masculine stereotypes, such as aggression, competitiveness and ambition (Gupta et al., 2009), with women being more disadvantaged in their access due to persistent gender stereotypes. For instance, women entrepreneurs are often considered as less competent (Gupta et al., 2009) and face challenges when they act in ways consistent with their gender but inconsistent with the dominant male-oriented entrepreneurial role.
(Balachandra, 2020). However, social entrepreneurship, referring to a process of using market-based approaches to address social and environmental challenges (Gupta et al., 2020), presents a more inclusive and enabling space of action for women. This form of entrepreneurship emphasizes collective-focused aspirations such as wealth-giving or community development (Dey and Steyaert, 2016), which aligns well with feminine ideologies that idealize caring, compassionate and altruistic values. This alignment could enhance women’s legitimacy and credibility in the field and reduce gender dissonance (Zahra et al., 2009). Consequently, women are found to be more likely to engage in social entrepreneurial activity than in traditional businesses (Haugh and Talwar, 2016).

Notably, a growing but limited body of social entrepreneurship literature approaches a gender-aware framework in three broad ways. First, scholars examined the role of women as social entrepreneurs, highlighting how their experiences and personal characteristics shape their motivation for social entrepreneurship (e.g. Humbert and Roomi, 2018). A second stream of research has explored the potential of social entrepreneurship to provide agential enabling conditions that empower women and achieve greater gender equality (e.g. Haugh and Talwar, 2016). These studies suggest that women’s participation in social entrepreneurial activities facilitates better family and social standing for women, improved well-being and financial independence and broader societal gains (Jamali, 2009; Datta and Gailey, 2012). Finally, some scholars have critically examined the barriers and challenges that women social entrepreneurs face, such as stereotyped views (Rosca et al., 2020), limited access to financing and resources (Jamali, 2009) and difficulty in balancing work and family responsibilities (Jennings et al., 2016).

While existing studies have shed light on the gender differences in various aspects of social entrepreneurship, they have often overlooked the complex interplay between the experiences of women social entrepreneurs and their surroundings. We do not know, for example, how women social entrepreneurs navigate, adapt to and potentially reshape the gendered norms and societal structures that influence their social entrepreneurial endeavors. Moreover, importantly, how do their experiences contribute to the positive changes within entrepreneurship and beyond? These questions highlight a critical gap in the literature that calls for a more nuanced and contextual understanding of the experiences of women social entrepreneurs.

**Social entrepreneurship as an emancipatory process**

Entrepreneurship was traditionally defined as a purely profit-led economic activity with a key focus on “wealth creation” (Welter et al., 2017). Critical entrepreneurship scholars, however, have contested this narrow view by reframing entrepreneurship as a social change activity (e.g. Tedmanson and Seldon, 2016), for example, serves as a social site for promoting women’s equality and recognizing women’s distinct values (Calás et al., 2009). This shift in entrepreneurship theorizing has led to more critical perspectives that move beyond reductionist approaches and challenge the conception of entrepreneurship as purely a market-based and individualist phenomenon (Tedmanson and Seldon, 2016). Along these lines, Rindova and colleagues (2009) offered a new perspective of “entrepreneuring as emancipation,” which explores why and how individuals disrupt the status quo and reconstruct the social order. This perspective recognizes the liberating potential of entrepreneurial endeavors, emphasizing three key emancipatory mechanisms:

1. seeking autonomy – breaking up perceived constraints in their environments;
2. authoring – taking ownership and becoming one’s own author; and
3. making a declaration – effecting intended change (Rindova et al., 2009).
Expanding on the “entrepreneuring as emancipation” perspective, Laine and Kibler (2022) highlighted that emancipatory entrepreneurship comprises two different yet interconnected dimensions. The first is “emancipation from,” which focuses on freeing entrepreneurs themselves from perceived constraints and removing or reducing barriers, which enhances their personal agency to navigate and reshape their own trajectories. The second dimension, “emancipation to,” emphasizes the potential benefits that entrepreneurship can bring to the broader social sphere and make positive changes. Here, agency evolves into a communal force that extends social entrepreneurs’ influence to foster systemic changes (Dy et al., 2018).

Alkhaled and Berglund (2018) further distinguished these different dimensions of emancipation from a gender aspect, with “emancipation from” centers on personal and financial gains of women entrepreneurs (i.e. enabled to act successfully within the existing system) and “emancipation to” highlighting the potential for challenging entrenched power structures, such as patriarchal systems, through women entrepreneurship.

An integrative approach that recognizes these multifaceted aspects of emancipation is essential as it can capture the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments, from overcoming perceived social and cultural constraints to fostering societal change. Nonetheless, extant research often explores one-dimension while overlooking the other. For example, Al-Dajani et al. (2015) undertook the “emancipation from” perspective and examined how female home-based producers can challenge contractual constraints, while McAdam et al. (2020) discussed how women could escape gendered social norms through digital entrepreneurship. Conversely, studies like those by Datta and Gailey (2012) and Haugh and Talwar (2016) emphasized the “emancipation to” the positive changes. They highlighted the societal benefits of entrepreneurship, such as improving power relationships of the disadvantaged and promoting democratic citizenship. However, what is lacking is an exploration of how different dimensions of emancipation interact and coexist within the entrepreneurial journey, resulting in a fragmented understanding of entrepreneurs’ emancipatory experiences.

To fill the research gap, this study adopts an integrative lens to bridge the “emancipation from” and “emancipation to” experiences of women social entrepreneurs. Recognizing that the interface between entrepreneurs and their environments is two-directional (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018), we seek to understand how these social entrepreneurs navigate perceived societal constraints through social entrepreneurship and how they use social entrepreneurship as a platform to foster new possibilities and societal changes.

**Research method**

To align with the exploratory nature of this study, we used a qualitative multi-cases study approach, which is suitable for resolving research questions involving “how” (Yin, 2003). Emergent insights from multiple-case studies are usually more trustworthy than those generated from single-case studies as it allows researchers to reach theoretical saturation (Eisenhardt, 2021).

**Study context**

We situated this study in Hong Kong, a unique blend of Eastern and Western influences, to examine women social entrepreneurs’ experiences. Despite its status as a developed economy and its international outlook, Hong Kong is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture and Confucianism principles, which have shaped many aspects of women’s career development and choices (Schnurr and Mak, 2011). In Hong Kong, entrepreneurship remains heavily male-dominated, with over 80% of high-growth entrepreneurs being men (Women’s Foundation, 2023). In addition, women in leadership positions also often face the challenge
of having to adopt masculine behaviors to establish their authority and legitimacy (Schnurr and Mak, 2011).

However, the social enterprise sector in Hong Kong seems to be offering a promising avenue for women to navigate these gendered societal norms. According to a survey by the British Council (2021), over 54% of social enterprises reported having female leadership, and around 50% had fairly gender-equal composition in their board. This contrast to traditional entrepreneurship may be due to the sector’s distinctive fusion of social and business logics (Zahra et al., 2009) and its development trajectory in Hong Kong, which is primarily influenced by a community logic with many practitioners from social work professions (Shang and Chandra, 2023). Thus, Hong Kong’s blend of cultural influences and the unique opportunities in its social enterprise sector make it an intriguing context for studying women’s social entrepreneurship.

Sampling and data collection

Our sampling approach in this study was guided by the potential of cases to expand and enrich the theoretical lens of “entrepreneuring as emancipation” (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). From a directory of approximately 700 social enterprises in Hong Kong (SEBC, 2022), we sent interview invitations to 35 women-led social enterprises that met several criteria:

- availability of sufficient information;
- led by female leaders;
- having been actively operating for over three years by the time of data collection; and
- the women social entrepreneurs represent varying prior work experiences, personal backgrounds and impact fields.

This approach allowed us to study the same phenomenon (i.e. emancipatory experiences in social entrepreneurship) across different contexts, thus improving the theoretical generalizability of our findings (Curtis et al., 2000). Among the 35 invited women-led social enterprises, 11 agreed to participate in this study.

The convention in multiple-case study research is to have around six to ten cases to achieve theoretical saturation (Eisenhardt, 2021). We adopted an iterative approach where data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently until reaching data saturation (Gioia et al., 2013). We initially interviewed six women social entrepreneurs, leading to preliminary findings. To validate these findings and further explore the emergent themes, we included two more cases and observed no more new themes from the new data. This approach allowed us to capture a comprehensive understanding of the emancipatory experiences of women social entrepreneurs while maintaining theoretical depth and richness (Strauss and Corbin, 1997).

Semistructured interviews were conducted in Hong Kong between April 2022 and May 2023, using Cantonese, the participants’ preferred language. The interviews focused on participants’ experiences in social entrepreneurship, including their motivations, practices and the mechanisms through which they create social impacts. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min. The interviews were later translated into English by a native Cantonese-speaking PhD student with a background in translation and verified by another bilingual researcher. To ensure the accuracy of the quotes presented in this paper, we provided the interviewees with the translated versions for review and verification. A summary of case characteristics is shown in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case#</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Previous work experience</th>
<th>Social entrepreneurial initiative</th>
<th>Years of operation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>Speech therapist</td>
<td>A workshop SE that offers support to individuals with communication barriers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>Marketer</td>
<td>A work integration SE that provides job opportunities to senior adults</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Agatha</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>Media worker</td>
<td>A co-working space that supports young people to take alternative career paths</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>Banker</td>
<td>A café SE that promotes mental well-being and social inclusion</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Barista</td>
<td>A work integration SE that trains and hires people with visual impairment to become barista</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>Fresh graduate</td>
<td>A work integration SE that hire senior adults as workshop facilitators</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Melisa</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>A fast-food SE that trains and hires people with disabilities</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>Project officer of an NGO</td>
<td>A workshop SE that hires people with mental issues to deliver mental health workshops</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* NGO = Non-governmental organization  
*Source:* Author’s own work
Data analysis

We explored the data at different levels, following good practices for rigorous qualitative data analysis suggested by Grodal et al. (2021) by moving from raw data to new categories through an “active categorization” process. The data analysis was conducted using RQDA, a qualitative software package on the R platform (Chandra and Shang, 2017). We started with open coding (Gioia et al., 2013) to identify the “emancipation from” and “emancipation to” experiences of women social entrepreneurs, focusing on participants’ motivations, how they navigate perceived constraints through social entrepreneurship and their value creation initiatives. This process generated a total of 381 initial codes. Next, following an inductive approach, we moved into analytical coding, which involves reviewing and establishing connections between first-level codes and merging them to create higher-level categories. For example, codes such as “gained suppliers trust and support due to the organizational value” and “franchisees were initially attracted to the social business model” were grouped together under the category “social value-driven partnerships.” Finally, we compared and contrasted these categories to identify their relationships and further integrate them into aggregated categories. To enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis, an external researcher with expertise in social entrepreneurship served as the devil’s advocate, critically examining our findings. Any discrepancies or differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion. Figure 1 below illustrates the data analytical process.

Findings

Drawing upon a perspective of “entrepreneuring as emancipation” (Rindova et al., 2009), this study examined the experiences of “emancipation from” and “emancipation to” of women social entrepreneurs and explored how they negotiate and navigate the stereotyped norms and practices surrounding entrepreneurship in this process. In particular, our analysis revealed a three-phase emancipatory journey of our participants through social entrepreneurship, which includes feeling trapped in constraining environments, (re)gaining agency through social entrepreneurship and catalyzing changes through newfound agency. We will discuss each phase in detail in the sections below.

Feeling trapped in constraining environments

Participants in our study demonstrated strong socio-altruistic concerns toward various social issues, such as active aging, disability employment and youth development. However, our data analysis suggested that having altruistic concerns alone was insufficient to drive participants toward social entrepreneurship. Instead, it was the feeling of being trapped within perceived constraints that acted as a crucial driving force. Our participants emphasized two aspects of constraints that influenced their decision to pursue social entrepreneurship:

1. identified institutional barriers in enacting changes to social problems they care about; and
2. the presence of embedded gendered norms and expectations that limited their personal development.

These perceived constraints ultimately compelled these individuals to become social entrepreneurs as their coping strategy to escape the constraining environment where they felt a lack of control over their circumstances.
Figure 1. Data analytical process

Source: Author’s own work
Identified institutional barriers to enact changes. Most women social entrepreneurs in our study (interviewees #1, #2, #3, #4, #7, #8) recognized the institutional barriers within their respective sectors, which hindered their ability to bring about meaningful change. For example, Debbie (interviewee #1), who once worked as a therapist in a public hospital, highlighted the lack of support and assistance for individuals with communication barriers. This issue was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic when public health-care institutions did not prioritize communication barriers as a “life and death issue” and thus motivated her to find alternative and better solutions. As Debbie explained:

Despite my patients were facing greater challenges than ever before (during the pandemic), these individuals were overlooked by the healthcare system. Because of this huge service gap, I really want to do something different to support these people. This is why I started my social enterprise.

Similarly, Esther (interviewee #4), who was a high achiever in the business sector, noted the prevalent stereotypes that consider individuals with disabilities as “less competent” and “difficult to accommodate.” These misconceptions contribute to the reluctance among many private employers to provide meaningful employment opportunities to individuals with disabilities. Esther’s observations drove her to engage in social entrepreneurship to address such market failures, as she expressed:

I was very motivated to start my own (social) business after witnessing that many people with disabilities were trapped in low-paid and low-skilled jobs that cannot help them attain dignity through work. However, this is how our society works as most employers simply saw them as liabilities rather than valuable assets.

Melisa (interviewee #7), who had extensive experience working for a large nonprofit organization in Hong Kong, shed light on another aspect of institutional barriers. Despite witnessing the struggles faced by their clients with disabilities in finding suitable employment, Melisa encountered resistance when proposing new services and initiatives to her managers. The organization’s bureaucratic system and conservative attitudes hindered the adoption of new approaches to address service gaps, consequently driving her to pursue a different path, as she commented:

The resource allocation in my (previous) organization is deeply rooted in the hierarchy. Frontline staff like us had minimal input or influence in decision-making. It is actually the trust and favor of seminar management that hold more influence than the actual quality and potential impact of our project proposals.

Embedded gendered norms that limited personal development. The constraints perceived by our participants also extended into their personal development due to embedded gender norms that influence their social and professional roles (interviewees #1, #2, #4, #5, #6, #7, #8). For instance, Ella (interviewee #6), the leader of a social enterprise that empowers retirees, described societal expectations for young women like her to prioritize stable jobs over ambitious entrepreneurial ventures, as “we are expected to focus on family responsibilities once married.” Catherine (interviewee #8), the founder of a mental health-oriented social enterprise, also encountered similar gendered norms that pressured her to conform to traditional female roles as a stay-at-home wife. She felt that following these expectations would “undermine her sense of self-worth and personal fulfillment in life.”

Similarly, Liam (interviewee #5), suffering from a traumatic cataract since childhood, encountered stereotyped expectations that limited her career options. Before becoming a social entrepreneur, she was advised to take traditionally “suitable” jobs for visually impaired women, such as masseuses or telephone operators. Despite her passion for the food industry, she faced persistent challenges and rejections:
I had worked in a restaurant that claimed to be disabled-friendly before. However, the owner *did not trust* that I could handle my tasks alone and had to follow me everywhere. Interestingly, this *did not happen to other male employees*. This was a very frustrating experience, but it made me realize that I *must become a social entrepreneur to help myself and help others*.

In addition, participants have also experienced the social pressure on women professionals to “*have it all*” – achieving professional success while fulfilling family responsibilities. For instance, Esther (interviewee #4), a successful businesswoman, felt overwhelmed by societal expectations to excel in all aspects of life and expressed, “It was too much pressure, especially when society only values someone who is strong and powerful.” Like other participants, social entrepreneurship became her liberation from the constraints, as she stated, “This pursuit of a meaning-filled life became my escape from the suffocating expectations of society.”

*Building and capitalizing on individual capacities.* An important aspect of (re)gaining agency is building and capitalizing on individual capacities, in which participants developed essential new skills and social networks to move away from stereotyped norms and expectations that often confine them (interviewees #1, #2, #3, #5, #6, #7, #8). One example is Ella (interviewee #6), who had no prior work experience and started a social enterprise after graduation. To compensate for her lack of relevant work experience, she further pursued a licensed training course in social enterprise management, which not only equipped her with essential skills but also opened up new opportunities for her, as she described:

> I used to feel lost and unsure of my future. But through this experience of founding and running a social enterprise, I have discovered where my passion lies. This journey has not only helped me build entrepreneurial skills but also opened my eyes to different career possibilities, which extend beyond societal expectations (of becoming an office lady).

Catherine is another example (interviewee #8). Drawing on her personal experiences of battling mental health issues, she launched a social enterprise focusing on mental health. She described the experience of social entrepreneurship as a “magical turning point” in her life. From being overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, Catherine transitioned to confidently leading workshops and empowering others, as she reflected, “Social entrepreneurship is very empowering. The positive feedback I received from workshop attendees has greatly boosted my confidence. Day by day, I have witnessed changes within myself.”

In addition to skills enhancement, participants also developed positive relationships with like-minded individuals. The rapid growth of the social enterprise ecosystem in Hong Kong provided many opportunities for practitioners to interact with peers, mentors and experts. These relationships formed a valuable support system that offers guidance and access to diverse resources and critical networks” (interviewee #5). For instance, Regina (interviewee #2), who participated in an incubation scheme, commented:

> This (incubation) scheme provided us with much more than just financial support; it served as a platform for peer social entrepreneurs to connect, exchange ideas, and share resources. We formed close bonds, supporting and inspiring each other along the way. Some peers even referred cases better fitting our business scope.
Consequently, participants in our study highlighted their increased agency and capacities in their social entrepreneuring journeys, which enabled them to move beyond the perceived constraints in their personal and professional growth.

**Leveraging feminine traits for strategic advantages.** Leveraging “feminine” traits, such as compassion and care, emerged as another key aspect of our participants building agency (interviewees #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, #8). Unlike traditional business realms, where women often feel pressured to adopt masculine features, participants in our study found their compassionate attributes particularly beneficial in their social entrepreneurial experiences—from developing social business models to establishing strategic value-driven partnerships to mobilizing support and resources. Esther (interviewee #4) served as an example. Having grown tired of conforming to the strong, tough businesswoman role, she prioritized self-care and mental well-being in her café social enterprise. This innovative model resonated with customers, earning her community recognition and support. As she reflected:

I realized that by embracing my caring nature and integrating it into my business, I was able to *create something truly meaningful*. People appreciate the services we offer, and it has been the key to our success. It is not just about empowering others, it is also *realizing the growth and recognizing the value in myself*.

Another example is Melisa (interviewee #7), the founder of a restaurant social enterprise that promotes inclusive employment. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdown, Melisa managed to maintain a steady supply of raw ingredients thanks to her compassionate business approach that fostered strong, value-driven partnerships with suppliers. Furthermore, Melisa attracted new franchise opportunities during market downturns. As she shared:

We were very fortunate to be approached by two teams who expressed interest in our business model. They sought us out specifically, and I believe it was the appeal of our *compassionate approach* that convinced them to invest.

Importantly, participants also emphasized the enabling environment within Hong Kong’s social enterprise ecosystem. The prevalent welfare-oriented mentality in the sector encouraged practitioners to incorporate traditionally feminine attributes like empathy and compassion into their ventures as strategic advantages. These attributes set them apart from traditional profit-oriented businesses and provided a competitive edge for them in securing funding and resources. For example, as Regina (interviewee #2) reflected on different stages of her social entrepreneuring journey:

I did not personally encounter any barriers related to gender. This is quite *different from what I had experienced previously in the business sector*, where all the CEOs are male. In fact, I think *female leaders are very common in this field and even more suitable in some cases*, as we are caring in nature and need to work closely with many at-risk individuals.

In sum, our findings suggested that social entrepreneurship offers a unique space for women to mitigate the negative impacts of gender in traditional entrepreneurship. By embracing compassionate and caring characteristics, our participants turned challenges into strategic advantages, creating a “soft landing” in a traditionally patriarchal realm.

**Catalyzing changes through newfound agency**

Finally, we witnessed a shift in the social entrepreneuring journey of our participants in which they anchored their self-emancipation and newfound agency in driving meaningful societal changes. Their forms of “giving back” extend beyond filling the service gaps or creating opportunities for their target beneficiaries. Instead, our participants sought to drive
transformative changes at a broader level by introducing new relationships and practices. Three mechanisms were identified through which our participants acted as catalysts for changes:

1. creating an enabling environment for beneficiaries;
2. embedding new entrepreneurial practices and values; and
3. shaping public attitudes and beliefs.

Creating an enabling environment for beneficiaries. Creating an enabling environment for beneficiaries was a core focus for most women social entrepreneurs in our study (interviewees #2, #4, #5, #6, #7, #8). Drawing from their experiences of facing societal constraints, they recognized the need to provide a supportive and inclusive space for their beneficiaries to thrive. This approach extended the traditional notion of social entrepreneurship as merely offering charitable assistance and instead emphasized empowering individuals to take charge of their own lives. For instance, Agatha (interviewee #3) established a supportive coworking space for young people facing challenges in the mainstream labor force. Within her social enterprise, she provided these individuals with opportunities to form positive networks and access essential resources and support, such as training in presentation skills and social media marketing, to enhance their skills and capabilities. The coworking space became an environment where young people could “pursue their interests with a stronger sense of agency in their lives.” Similarly, Ella (interviewee #6), who trained and hired retirees as professional “workshoppers,” also highlighted:

I collaborated with our silver employees to design our workshops. Instead of treating them as passive recipients of services, I believe it’s crucial to involve them as valuable assets and important co-producers who can bring their unique perspectives, skills, and knowledge to the table. Our goal as a social enterprise is to empower older adults, who often go overlooked in society.

Catherine’s (interviewee #8) experiences also demonstrated the emancipatory potential of social entrepreneurship at a broader level by empowering her beneficiaries. Recognizing the challenges faced by women with mental health issues, she provided employment opportunities tailored to their needs, incorporating elements like flexible work schedules and regular mental well-being check-ins. Her commitment went beyond simple job provision; she guided her employees step-by-step, fostering their confidence through meaningful job tasks, as Catherine highlighted:

I still can recall their initial struggles – shyness, self-doubt, and the fear of their own capabilities. It reminded me of the challenges I faced in the past. But witnessing their growth in this journey has been inspiring. They have now become mature individuals, capable of tackling complex tasks independently.

Embedding new entrepreneurial practices and values. Moreover, our participants not only found a “soft landing” in the business sector but also strove to bring about a paradigm shift by instilling new practices and values (interviewees #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, #8). Participants indicated that they were not content with merely negotiating or playing within the existing rules; instead, they viewed their higher purpose as to reshape the entrepreneurship landscape by inspiring others toward a more socially conscious and empathetic approach to business. As Liam (interviewee #5) mentioned, “I started this café to let more and more companies know that hiring people with disabilities is not difficult at all.”
Esther (interviewee #4), the owner of a café social enterprise, believed dignity at work should be at the heart of addressing industry mental health concerns. She not only implemented this concept of workplace dignity within her social enterprise but also seized the opportunity to advocate it to corporate clients. Consequently, her social enterprise became living proof that people with disabilities can, and do, thrive in caring and inclusive employment environments, as Esther illustrated:

Every company can provide jobs to the disabled. But the key difference here is dignity. Many private employers hire people with disabilities but hide them in the kitchen or back office. I do not want to just follow such a standard integration model that changes nothing to the current situation. I want to empower those individuals through work so that they can grow and realize their potential […] We hope to promote this new integration model to other businesses as well.

Another example is Melisa (interviewee #7). With a vision of providing better employment experiences for individuals with disabilities, she implemented a range of employee-oriented initiatives, including customized job roles and ongoing on-site mentorship and support. Through her journey, Melisa shared valuable insights into fostering the integration of disadvantaged employees into the workforce with corporate partners, encouraging them to tap into a diverse talent pool while creating inclusive workplaces. As she commented,

By demonstrating that a fast-food restaurant can be inclusive and empowering for individuals with disabilities, we hope to inspire others to take action. Whether it is through franchising or establishing their own restaurants or companies, we encourage others to rethink their approaches and to adopt similar practices.

Shaping public attitudes and beliefs. Finally, most participants also noted a crucial challenge in effecting changes – the lack of public awareness (interviewees #1, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, #8). For example, Debbie (interviewee #1) found that the prevailing stereotypes and limited public understanding of social enterprises in Hong Kong create a perception that “businesses driven by care and compassion may deliver poorer quality.” Overcoming this barrier required her to actively shape public attitudes and beliefs through public education and promotion.

Catherine (interviewee #8), as another example, understood the need to reshape how the public views and values the potential of women struggling with mental health disorders to challenge unfriendly workplace environments. She emphasized, “Things will not change unless we can make them think differently of these individuals.” Similarly, Agatha (interviewee #3), who found a social enterprise that supports alternative career paths for young people, also stressed the need for a shift in public attitudes, particularly among teachers and parents, to achieve transformative changes. She highlighted the limiting effect of societal expectations from these influential stakeholders on young people’s career choices:

Despite the many career opportunities available to young people today, they are often constrained by societal expectations to work for large corporations or pursue traditional professional careers. I aim to raise awareness among parents and teachers about the rapidly changing nature of the employment market and to advocate for more support for young people to pursue their passions.

In conclusion, our findings shed light on the multifaceted emancipation experienced and initiated by women social entrepreneurs. Their journey began with moments of self-awareness that motivated them to engage in social entrepreneurship, enabling them to escape perceived constraints and barriers and (re)gain agency. This process of self-emancipation eventually extended to uplifting others within their communities and led to broader emancipation.
Discussion
Social entrepreneurship is often seen as a more enabling space for women’s agency and emancipation (Jennings et al., 2016; Datta and Gailey, 2012), yet there is a lack of understanding of how women social entrepreneurs actually experience and enact this emancipatory potential. To address this gap, we adopt a qualitative method of inquiry to study eight women social entrepreneurs in Hong Kong. By delving into their experiences, we gain valuable insights into how women social entrepreneurs perceive, negotiate and ultimately defy the constraints within their environments for enacting emancipation for both themselves and others (see Appendix for a detailed exploration of the themes in each participant’s experience).

To explore and bridge the two dimensions of emancipation (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018), namely, “emancipation from” and “emancipation to,” within the experiences of participants, we use an integrative lens that highlights the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environment and continually cycle back and forth between the findings and existing literature. Subsequently, we theorize a process model of “emancipatory women social entrepreneurship” as shown in Figure 2 below.

This model highlights three important phases in the journey of women social entrepreneurs who enact a transition from being the recipients of emancipation (the emancipated) to becoming agents of emancipatory change for others (the emancipators) and traces how their agency evolves. Initially, these individuals experience a sense of confinement within gendered and stereotyped norms and expectations, which impose limitations on their personal development and aspirations (Gupta et al., 2020). This moment of self-awareness and the feeling of being “trapped” is further compounded by an awareness of solution gaps in addressing social issues they deeply care about. While prior studies predominantly emphasized altruistic concerns and the desire to “give back” to society as the primary driver for social entrepreneurship (e.g. Ruskin et al., 2016), our findings suggest that women social entrepreneurs are largely motivated by a desire to negotiate with their perceived constraints and find a “way out” through social entrepreneurship.

During the second phase, social entrepreneurship acts as a unique space for these women to defy societal constraints. This space provides a “soft landing” for women to pursue their passions and capitalize on feminine characteristics, such as compassion and care, within a traditionally patriarchal domain. These women social entrepreneurs form their business strategies and partnerships around their caring values, turning what could be seen as weaknesses into strategic advantages. This phase aligns with and extends the “entrepreneuring as emancipation” perspective (Rindova et al., 2009; Chandra, 2017),

![Figure 2. Process model of emancipatory women social entrepreneurship](source: Author’s own work)
recognizing the liberating potential of entrepreneurial endeavors, particularly for women navigating societal constraints.

In the third phase, equipped with newfound agency and capabilities, women social entrepreneurs actively strive to drive systematic changes. In particular, they use their social enterprises as platforms to empower their beneficiaries to become advocates for their own causes, embedding new practices and values that challenge the status quo and actively shape and increase public awareness. This phase sheds light on the impacts of women social entrepreneurs’ efforts that extend beyond the initial social problems they sought to address and adds to the notion that social entrepreneurship serves as a catalyst for social transformation (Rosca et al., 2020), embodying a shift from the emancipated to the emancipator in their journey.

However, it is important to note that such an emancipatory process model is not a linear progression. As women social entrepreneurs continuously engage with their environments, they may encounter new challenges and frustrations that require them to reflect on their experiences and adapt their practices and strategies (Chandra, 2017). Additionally, while our study primarily aims to unpack the shared experiences among women social entrepreneurs, it is also important to acknowledge the individual differences behind the broader narrative. For instance, personal traumatic experiences, such as facing gender discrimination, can heavily shape how individuals approach social entrepreneurship. Individuals with that background might be more motivated to challenge gendered norms and practices in their social entrepreneurial pursuits than others. This calls for a closer examination of the heterogeneity in trajectories of social entrepreneurship.

Conclusion, implications and limitations
In this article, we explore the process of emancipation as experienced by women social entrepreneurs using a qualitative approach. The contributions of this study are threefold. First, this study advances the “entrepreneuring as emancipation” perspective (Rindova et al., 2009) by adopting an integrative lens that recognizes and disentangles multiple dimensions of emancipation (Laine and Kibler, 2022; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). While previous studies have primarily focused on the emancipation outcomes of social enterprises (i.e. “emancipation to”), such as the empowerment of marginalized groups (Rosca et al., 2020) or focused on the emancipation experiences of social entrepreneurs (i.e. “emancipation from”) (Al-Dajani et al., 2015), few have sufficiently examined and linked these different dimensions of emancipation. By adopting an integrative lens, this study sheds light on the dual role of women social entrepreneurs as both the emancipated and the emancipator and the complex mechanisms of emancipation in social entrepreneurship.

Second, this study offers a contextual understanding of women’s social entrepreneurship. Much of the existing research has focused on developing economies (Jennings et al., 2016) and exploring how social entrepreneurship can enable women to achieve financial independence (Haugh and Talwar, 2016). We bring attention to the unique context of Hong Kong, where women generally hold a higher social standing than in other regions, yet they still face gendered societal norms that can limit their personal and career development (Kang and Schnurr, 2010). In this setting, we demonstrate that emancipation outcomes can take various forms beyond economic empowerment (Datta and Gailey, 2012). Moreover, our findings highlight that the emancipation experiences of women social entrepreneurs are largely shaped by their surroundings, where societal expectations and norms can hinder or enable their journey (Kang and Schnurr, 2010). By considering the context and the complex interplay between individual agency and broader societal structures, our study broadens the
understanding of gender and social entrepreneurship, emphasizing the significance of contextual factors in shaping women’s emancipatory experiences.

Third, this paper adds to the literature by challenging a broadly accepted notion of social entrepreneurship as purely altruistic “giving back” work (e.g. Ruskin et al., 2016). Instead, our study highlights the liberation potential of social entrepreneurship, where women social entrepreneurs are motivated to break free from societal constraints and (re)gain agency through their initiatives (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018). This finding contradicts the prevailing “heroic images” of social entrepreneurs (Bacq et al., 2016), shedding light on the heterogeneity and complexity in the trajectories of social entrepreneurship. By presenting this nuanced view, we advocate rethinking the prevailing narratives and status quo of social entrepreneurship, promoting more critical perspectives that recognize the nonheroic aspects of social entrepreneurship.

Moreover, this paper offers substantial practical value in demonstrating social entrepreneurship as a potentially valuable tool in efforts to empower women and other marginalized populations at various levels. Policymakers and organizations can use the findings to foster collaborations and networks that support women social entrepreneurs, allowing them to access markets and form partnerships with large corporations where male-dominated environments might otherwise pose challenges. Additionally, social enterprise educators can benefit from insights to tailor training programs that address the specific needs and challenges faced by women, equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in the field of social entrepreneurship.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, this study’s qualitative multi-case approach limits the statistical generalizability of the findings. Second, this study primarily focuses on the experiences of women social entrepreneurs, omitting a comparative analysis with their male counterparts. Future research could benefit from including male social entrepreneurs to uncover potential gender-based variations in experiences. Moreover, the focus on a single cultural context may not fully capture the unique challenges and opportunities of women social entrepreneurs in other cultural settings. Finally, although this study provides insights into the experiences of women social entrepreneurs, it does not examine the effectiveness and wider societal impact of their work. Further study could delve into the emancipatory outcomes of social entrepreneurship, including its capacity to challenge and transform existing power structures and norms.

Note
1. With consent and permission, they were recorded for transcription (in Cantonese) with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality and pseudonyms are used to protect identities.

References


Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Feeling trapped in constraining environments</th>
<th>Shattering boundaries through social entrepreneuring</th>
<th>Catalyzing changes through newfound possibilities</th>
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</table>
| Debbie | - Frustration with family expectations to secure a steady professional job  
| | - Limited institutional support for people with communication barriers | - Defied family expectations in career choices  
| | | - Expanded beyond the traditional service scope of speech therapists to create innovative solutions  
| | | - Crafted an assistive toolkit rooted in care and compassion for beneficiaries | - Engaged beneficiaries and their families as volunteers  
| | | | - Offered inclusive training to health professionals  
| | | | - Advocated for a better public understanding of aphasia  
| Regina | - Encountered gender discrimination in her business internship experiences  
| | - Witnessed the difficulties faced by many retired elders | - Leveraged caring attributes to develop innovative social business models  
| | | - Formed positive connections with peer social entrepreneurs through an incubation scheme | - Empowered elderlies by providing them with opportunities to learn new skills  
| | | | - Promoted the concept of active aging in the workplace to corporate clients  
| Agatha | - Prevalent societal pressures on finding a high-pay and stable job  
| | - Witnessed challenges faced by marginalized youths in their career development | - Leveraged her networks with NGOs and value-driven companies to access resources for helping marginalized youths  
| | | - Stepped out of her comfort zone and transitioned to self-employment | - Opened up new opportunities and empowered young people to pursue alternative career paths  
| | | | - Advocated for a shift in public attitudes toward alternative careers  
| | | | - Promoted dignity at work to her corporate clients  
| | | | - Empowered employees with disabilities to take on meaningful tasks at the social enterprise  
| Esther | - Faced societal pressures on being a successful woman and the expectation of “having it all”  
| | - Grew tired of conforming to male attributes in the business sector | - Determined to go beyond expected career paths and trained herself to become a professional barista  
| | | - Underwent a challenging journey to become self-employed | - Provided professional training in coffeemaking to people with visual impairment  
| | | | - Showcased an effective and inclusive work integration model to other employers  
| | | | - Increased public awareness of the values and capabilities of people with disabilities | (continued)

Table A1. Identified themes in individual cases
Cases | Feeling trapped in constraining environments | Shattering boundaries through social entrepreneuring | Catalyzing changes through newfound possibilities
---|---|---|---
Ella | • Encountered stereotyped expectations of finding stable office jobs as a fresh graduate<br>• Recognized the low social status of many elders | • Embarked on further studies to learn how to run a social enterprise, which opened up new opportunities for her<br>• Leveraging caring relationships with elders to brand her social enterprise and secure new projects | • Created a supportive environment for employees’ personal growth and well-being<br>• Promoted a positive perception of the elderly community and challenging age-related stereotypes |
Melisa | • Encountered bureaucracy in NGOs which hindered her ability to make changes<br>• Felt bounded by the service scope of her profession | • Became self-employed to step away from traditional problem-solving approaches<br>• Leveraged care and compassion to form strategic partnerships with like-minded organizations<br>• Underwent a trial-and-error process to find better approaches of supporting people with disabilities | • Supported meaningful employment of people with disabilities, providing them a platform to showcase their talents<br>• Inspired others to take action and collaborate in expanding the impacts of her social enterprise |
Catherine | • Faced societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles as a stay-at-home wife<br>• Recognized the limited support and understanding for people with mental health issues | • Took control of her own life and career choices through social entrepreneurship<br>• Built new capabilities for overcoming challenges brought by own mental health issues | • Empowered women with shared struggles through meaningful employment<br>• Promoted public awareness toward mental health issues, reshaping societal attitudes to value the potential of individuals facing mental health challenges |

Table A1. Source: Author’s own work

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