Article

By, for, with women? On the politics and potentialities of wellness entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Based in original ethnographic research, this article examines the motivations and experiences of those seeking to forge careers in the UK's burgeoning wellness industry. As a movement-market centred around health-enhancement and encompassing a broad array of practices and products, this industry has recently grown to prominence in Britain, driven significantly by the aspirational economies of social media. While the promise of wellness is manifold – including, most obviously, that of health and well-being – here I examine its operation in relation to questions of work and employment. Drawing on interviews with those who already work or aspire to work in wellness – generally on a self-employed basis, but often operating under the sign of a more glamorised 'entrepreneurship' – I explore why women are drawn to participate in this arena in a professional as well as personal capacity. I focus in particular on the lure of wellness work among participants who had already established careers in other settings, for whom the transition entails relinquishing relative economic security to instead pursue an inherently risky pathway. This research reflects critically on existing accounts of 'passionate work' by arguing that wellness entrepreneurship functions as both an individual and collective endeavour. In doing so it grapples with the politics and potentialities of wellness entrepreneurship as a feminised mode of self-employment, situating this analysis within the continuing aftermath of feminism in an era marked by new feminist visibilities and discourses of female empowerment.

Keywords

neoliberal feminism, passionate work, postfeminism, retreatism, women's entrepreneurship

Introduction

At an upmarket grocery store in West London, this evening's panel event features five successful wellness entrepreneurs, all with sizeable social media followings and popular

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product lines. I arrive early to find the storefront given over to their wares; there's a particularly elaborate display for the energy balls one speaker has just launched. Inside, event signage directs me to the upper floor, where a hundred or so chairs are lined up and appraised with goodie bags. Dozens of people are already milling around, and there's an anticipatory hum in the air; behind me, someone says the event is sold out. Looking around as the venue fills, it's apparent the audience is almost exclusively comprised of young women.

As the event gets under way, the host invites each speaker to relate her 'business journey'. Despite different trajectories, a shared narrative arc is readily discernible: no one set out to become an entrepreneur; rather, they were just following their 'passion'. Considerable emphasis is placed on mistakes made and trials overcome, as all five women talk at length about difficulties they have grappled with along the way. The importance of having a positive mindset is underlined throughout, as is the need for hard work. To murmurs of agreement, the most well-known member of the panel – with over a million followers on Instagram – declares that to build a successful business 'you have to love it and believe in it, because it will be your life'.

In the Q&A, the first question – in a pattern I would come to know well – is about financing. Speakers' responses are vague, something I would again later recognise as a pattern. Other questions include how to get past self-doubt, craft a business vision, and scale a fledgling enterprise. When the event draws to a close, a wave of applause ripples out amid a sea of phones held aloft to capture the moment; the resulting photos are rapidly posted online using the event hashtag. Afterwards, several attendees line up to take selfies with the panellists, who smile brightly on cue, fresh-faced and picture-perfect. The rest drift out into an unusually warm autumn evening, the sky awash with pinks and purples which cast a rosy glow on us all.

With the advent of the 'clean eating' trend that lit up social media feeds and was splashed across the pages of glossy lifestyle publications in the mid-2010s, a distinct cohort of young women influencers-come-entrepreneurs began to exert significant cultural and commercial sway in the UK under the banner of 'wellness'. Having first cultivated followings via blogs sharing recipes, nutrition tips and lifestyle advice, their remit has grown to encompass best-selling cookbooks, bricks-and-mortar ventures, widely-stocked product lines, lucrative brand partnerships, record-breaking apps, and more. These women are also regular fixtures at a range of health, food and business events, such as that described above. Some have become public figures in their own right, routinely profiled in the broader media and held up as exemplars of feminine success in women's magazines and business journals alike, where they are lauded for building 'empires' and encouraging an otherwise recalcitrant British populace to embrace 'healthy eating'. Shaped by the legacies of West Coast counterculture (Ingram, 2020), New Age orientalism (Lau, 2000) and the alternative food movement (Guthman, 2011), the 'whole food' and 'plant-based' dietary ethos they promote is nothing new. Nevertheless, it has been mainstreamed to an unprecedented extent in the UK in recent years, fed in no small part by the aspirational economies of social media. Thus it is now *de rigueur* to find products and preparations these women showcase online – such as kale salad, chia seed pudding and the ubiquitous avocado toast – sold in major supermarkets and high-street chains up and down the country.

The cultural spotlighting of these women is part of a more general incitement for young women to not simply *be entrepreneurial* (Scharff, 2016) but to *become entrepreneurs*. In *Be Creative* (2016), Angela McRobbie traces the contours of this trend via the emergence of a 'creativity *dispositif*', wherein young people and especially young women are encouraged to pursue work about which they are passionate. This *dispositif* operates through a range of fora, including education, entertainment and various government initiatives, where entrepreneurship is presented as an opportunity to 'discover one's own capabilities' and 'embark on a voyage of self-discovery' (McRobbie, 2016, p. 15). In arguing that the creativity *dispositif* is gendered, McRobbie extends her earlier work on the gender of post-Fordism (2011), contending that contemporary capitalism 'makes a seductive offer to young women with the promise of pleasure in work, while at the same time this work is nowadays bound to be precarious and insecure and lacking the protection of conventional employment' (2016, p. 105). Writing about the acceleration of self-employment in the UK in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, Stephanie Taylor charts a related line of analysis, arguing that this represents a new iteration of the 'mystique' elaborated by Betty Friedan (1963/2000). While Friedan's concern was women's relegation to the home via the construction of the 'happy housewife' as a normative feminine ideal (cf. Ahmed, 2010), Taylor argues that self-employment is today being imbued with similarly aspirational qualities that obscure the very real strains it typically entails. Citing illustrative examples of 'upbeat' media coverage, she contends that such representational patterns 'promote a withdrawal from the challenges of paid employment' (Taylor, 2015, p. 183), and thereby have the potential to exclude women 'by encouraging them to return home, in the guise of a different set of priorities' (Taylor, 2015, p. 184).

For these scholars and many others, a key source of unease is the extent to which the cultural elevation of 'passionate work' enacts 'labour reform by stealth' (McRobbie, 2016, p. 13), as an overriding preoccupation with the *content* and *character* of one's work comes to outweigh and even eclipse considerations about the *conditions* under which it is performed. This shift has been enabled, in part, by the extension of logics of creativity to a wide range of working realms, such that all manner of work can now be regarded as a vehicle for self-expression, particularly if it is undertaken in an independent capacity. In the process, modes of inequality and precarity which have long characterised the culture and creative industries – wherein discourses of 'passionate work' find their zenith – not only become increasingly commonplace but also ever more difficult to critique, precisely because the work itself is understood as self-chosen (Conor et al., 2015; Gill & Pratt, 2008). Thus as enjoinders to 'do what you love' (DWYL) proliferate (Tokumitsu, 2014), so too do poor pay and insecure tenure, such that many find themselves *not* getting paid to do what they love (Duffy, 2017). For these reasons, the cultural elevation of women's self-enterprise is ultimately deemed regressive, proffering (unreliable) means for individuals to cope with the vagaries of neoliberal capitalism while obviating possibilities for collective action (Littler, 2018, p. 182).

In many ways, the promotion of wellness entrepreneurship as an aspirational undertaking – a vehicle to both physical and financial empowerment (O'Neill, 2020a) – could be understood as yet another instance of this general dynamic. Certainly, wellness entrepreneurship is frequently framed as an 'almost therapeutic, personal creative project' (Taylor, 2015, p. 182), both in the accounts of well-known wellness entrepreneurs and in

media coverage they receive. This kind of work is also presented as something for young women to aspire to in a way that 'questions of making a living fade into the margins' (McRobbie, 2016, p. 12). In addition, 'healthy eating' enterprises of the kind administered by some of the most visible and successful wellness entrepreneurs in the UK centre around traditionally feminised pursuits, namely cooking and food work. In this regard, the exaltation of wellness entrepreneurship may be seen to exemplify the operations of retreatism in another sense, namely that put forth by Diane Negra in her work on Anglo-American postfeminist media culture (on which Taylor indirectly draws via Littler, 2013). For Negra, retreatism represents one of the master narratives of postfeminism; by staging the pleasures of a 'perfected domesticity' (2009, p. 9), it acts as 'a powerful device for shepherding women out of the public sphere' (2009, p. 5). The most luminous exemplars of successful wellness entrepreneurship absolutely embody this 'sumptuous domesticity' (Negra, 2009, p. 8), albeit one calibrated around a gendered imperative to consume in the interests of health (Cairns & Johnston, 2015).

Yet in speaking to those who actually engage in or aspire to wellness entrepreneurship, a different story emerges, or a different slant on the same story. Such dynamics bear exploring if we are to address the question of what a feminist politics of women's entrepreneurship might entail (McRobbie, 2011, p. 73). To that end, this article centres the perspectives and experiences of women who have launched, or plan to launch, their own wellness ventures. It is part of a larger project charting the emergence of wellness as a novel cultural formation in the UK, focusing particularly on its dietary dimensions, the overall aim of which is to locate this movement-market within the broader social, economic and political context of contemporary Britain and account for its distinctly gendered contours. A core preoccupation is the *promise* of wellness, that is, what it seems to offer up or make available. While this promise has a variety of facets – most obviously that of health and well-being – here I consider how it operates in relation to questions of work and employment. Specifically, I ask how and why a personal interest in wellness so often becomes the basis for professional ambition, typically of an entrepreneurial variety and invariably entailing significant risk.

In the following section, I describe how the research was undertaken, sketch participants' career trajectories, and outline their reasons for wanting to leave established careers. In the main empirical section, I discuss why these women want to work in wellness specifically, rather than any other sector. While it might be assumed that the cultural spotlighting of high-profile wellness entrepreneurs plays a key role here – and certainly my participants referenced their example and were inspired by their success – I demonstrate that established and would-be wellness entrepreneurs are centrally motivated by an understanding of wellness as an industry in which women both strike out on their own and collaborate with one another. I further discuss how, although participants are very much orientated towards the pursuit of 'passionate work' (McRobbie, 2016), this articulates with or translates into a desire to 'do good'. In particular, they express a desire to work *with* and *for* women. To conclude, I consider the contradictory ways in which wellness entrepreneurship functions as both an individual and collective endeavour, as women seek to cast off the problems of so-called 'conventional' employment *and* devise better kinds of work for themselves and others. In doing so I complicate existing analyses of 'passionate work', arguing that while this may well precipitate greater precarity

and inequality, in the case of wellness entrepreneurship it contains – both in the sense of including, but also of inhibiting or impeding – an impulse towards the collective. To this extent, for the many young women who attempt to take up its mantle, wellness entrepreneurship represents a constrained attempt to live and work differently under capitalism.

Methods: Wellness as a cultural formation

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken at various intervals between 2016 and 2021. During this time, I attended panel discussions, business seminars, networking meetings, launch parties, festivals and workshops held in venues spanning cafes, co-working spaces, commercial offices, converted churches, former industrial parks, exhibitions halls and digital spaces. I also immersed myself in an ever-expanding range of wellness media, particularly those centred on food and diet, encompassing social media content, blogs, books and podcasts. I interviewed more than 60 people who actively participate or are otherwise imbricated in this sphere, including wellness consumers and adherents, influencers and content creators, business-owners and entrepreneurs, dietitians and medical doctors. Such a variegated approach both emerges from and contributes to an understanding of wellness not as a cultural *fad* but instead as a cultural *formation*, one that brings together a wide variety of actors whose orientations and investments cannot be assumed in advance. To this extent, this research marks a departure from scholarship that examines wellness culture from a distance, without attending to the perspectives and experiences of those who produce and engage it (Baker & Rojek, 2020; Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Wilkes, 2021). Methodologically, this has meant pursuing a multi-sited ethnography, 'quite literally following connections, associations, and putative relationships' (Marcus, 1998, p. 81). This strategy is enabled, in part, by the affordances of social media, where I have been able to 'follow' the accounts of British wellness influencers – beginning with the 'clean eating' cohort whose prominence first drew my attention to this arena – and thereby observe their interactions with other users, learn about events they attend and speak at, examine resources they cite, and so forth. Nevertheless, this is not a digital ethnography *per se*, but rather an ethnography that takes seriously the constitutive nature of social media in defining its object of study.

The present article centres the accounts of established and aspiring wellness entrepreneurs, paying special attention to those who had left, or intended to leave, careers in which they were already established in order to work for themselves. This grouping is distinct from another cohort of wellness workers I spoke to, namely influencers and content creators who typically entered the industry as school leavers or university graduates, and thus do not have prior career experience. Importantly for my purposes, the women whose experiences I centre here know what it is they are giving up when they decide to leave existing careers and become self-employed. This grouping comprises 15 participants, 11 of whom had already made the move into working for themselves, while the remainder were planning to leave their current jobs and launch ventures in various stages of development. Mostly in their twenties and thirties, they are a highly educated grouping; all but one hold undergraduate degrees and four hold additional postgraduate qualifications. They are broadly middle-class in terms of their upbringing and taste formations, but have varied access to middle-class comfort and security in the present. Annual

incomes range dramatically, from nothing at all to upwards of £60,000, with a median of £25,000 – well below the national equivalent.[1] Of further significance in the 'asset economy' (Adkins et al., 2020), just six own their home, in all but one case in conjunction with a partner, while the rest rent or live with family. More than a third are women of colour; the remainder white. All identify as heterosexual, with some mentioning partners in interviews. Only two have children. In many ways, this cohort can be understood as part of 'a global demographic of young women determined to live a life of one's own' (McRobbie, 2016, p. 2).

Industries these women have left or hope to leave include public relations (PR) and marketing; fashion and interior design; personal training and sports instruction; finance; pharmaceuticals; professional services, project management and consultancy work. Many label these jobs 'corporate', a term that serves to denote work that is pointless and polluting, even if they did not actually work for corporations (though many did). Actual and envisaged businesses encompass a variety of 'healthy eating' ventures, including ready-made products, meal delivery services and built establishments, as well as ancillary endeavours such as health and lifestyle coaching or business support services geared to the wellness sector. Despite the heterogeneity of these ventures, participants nevertheless understand themselves as engaging a shared arena, articulated quite simply as 'wellness' or the 'wellness industry'. To this extent, and despite the multiplicity of uses this language is put to – not least as the dieting, beauty and fashion industries seek to rebrand themselves in less disciplinary terms – for my participants wellness represents a distinct 'world', a more or less coherent cultural and commercial space which enables 'new assemblages of experience and meaning which expand the range of existential possibilities for their participants' (Gilbert, 2014, p. 19).

Among those who are now self-employed, the transition often took months or years. Several developed a 'side hustle' while still in full-time employment, maintaining their day job while developing business plans at evenings and weekends. Although a small number of participants were supported financially by partners in this endeavour, the vast majority were reliant on their own incomes. To make this possible, some continued to work part-time even after launching their own businesses. Many stayed in employment far longer than they wanted to in order to build up savings that, they hoped, would get their businesses off the ground. Several found ways of improvising the transition by making sacrifices elsewhere – for example, through shared living arrangements that brought down their monthly outgoings. Despite a typically lengthy gestation, departure from paid employment was often abrupt, with several participants describing themselves as having quit in haste after they finally 'snapped' or reached 'breaking point'. For some of the women I interviewed, entrepreneurial ambitions remain just that, as force of circumstance prevents them from putting their much-desired and carefully-tended business plans into action.

Before elaborating the draw of wellness entrepreneurship for my participants, I want to briefly highlight what they are seeking to get away from when they leave established careers. As it stands, existing sociological analyses tend to foreground the lure of self-employment – for example, the autonomy, choice and fulfilment this is thought to offer – with little regard for what this is envisioned as a counterpoint to. Women's motivations for pursuing self-employment have, however, been extensively documented in

organisational literature (Cabrera, 2007; Hughes, 2003; Knight, 2016; McKie et al., 2013), which the experiences of my participants largely reflect. Long hours, overwork and burnout were recurring themes, with virtually all participants working in excess of their contracted hours and several citing 60-hour weeks. Experiences of ill health were another key driver, as research on the links between health and entrepreneurship also demonstrates (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2015). Conditions catalogued include exhaustion, insomnia, anxiety, depression, digestive problems, eating disorders and substance abuse issues; many felt these had been exacerbated, if not in fact caused, by their jobs. Encounters with 'inequality regimes' (Acker, 2006) also figured prominently, with participants describing acute instances of discrimination alongside a more diffuse sense of themselves as 'space invaders' within their workplaces, 'of and in a space, while at the same time not quite belonging to it' (Puwar, 2004, p. 8). Moreover, such issues were believed to be so intractable, so unlikely to change, that working for oneself was regarded as the most viable 'solution' to sexism and racism (cf. Biese & Choroszewicz, 2019; Heilman & Chen, 2003).

In short, for my participants 'organisational life had let them down' (Mallon & Cohen, 2001, p. 228), such that they were now 'looking for the antithesis of what frustrated and contained them within organisations' (Mallon & Cohen, 2001, p. 223). Yet this does not itself explain why these women want to become wellness entrepreneurs specifically, rather than embark on any other kind of self-employment or work in another sector. In the remainder of the article I explore this question, demonstrating that the appeal of working for oneself in wellness has much to do with the industry's gendered composition and the values it is seen to operate by, in ways that encompass but also exceed discourses of 'passionate work' (McRobbie, 2016). In doing so, I highlight how an impulse towards collectivity animates the pursuit of wellness entrepreneurship, in ways that should complicate any too straightforward assumption that this is a purely self-interested endeavour.

The promise of wellness work

'Women supporting women'

Crucial in understanding the draw of wellness entrepreneurship is the belief – shared by virtually all the women I spoke to – that the wellness industry is a female-dominated and female-defined space, where women work together and succeed on their own terms. Participants frequently commented on the preponderance of women in wellness. As former ski instructor turned wellness advisor Sophie laughingly put it, wellness is 'definitely a very female orientated world!' When I asked how this compared to her experience in the travel sector where she had previously worked, Sophie smiled widely and said: 'It's really cool. It definitely. . . has a sense like, you know, everybody wants to help, and everybody loves to share ideas, and all different things like that – and it's really cool in that respect.' Other participants echoed this sentiment, as when former PR officer Sarah told me: 'It's a friendly industry, everyone's very supportive and collaborative.' Gemma, who was still working in PR but with plans afoot to leave and launch a line of breakfast products, also related:

> All the events I've gone to, all the people are just so nice and they're kind of really friendly. There's not a sense of everyone's kind of out for themselves and it's dog eat dog. It feels like everyone is kind of just really motivated to, to kind of have a positive impact.

In a comment that highlights the cultural backdrop against which this ethos of collaboration is pitched – namely postfeminist 'discourses of presumptive innate female competitiveness' (Negra, 2009, p. 154) – project manager turned life coach Caitlin claimed: 'There's no bitchy competitiveness, there's no. . . I don't know, there's no stealing each other's ideas or stabbing each other in the back, not that I've experienced.' Instead, Caitlin felt the wellness industry was characterised by a surfeit of support, something she saw as part of a 'global rising of women supporting women, and women supporting women-led businesses'.

Having encountered sexism in their workplaces, from the subtle to the stark, several participants spoke about the wellness industry as a space where such attitudes and incidents would not occur; indeed, which seemingly *could not occur* because the industry is largely composed of women. To this extent, it is both a site to escape to and be empowered by, which many find inspiring. Lucy, a researcher advising multinational food companies on their product development, described her current workplace as 'so male-centric' and went on to remark:

> Maybe if it wasn't I wouldn't be so interested in wellness, because it's that kind of like, like women doing their own thing and not having men tell them what to do, or be kind of like paid more or anything [. . .] That's the great thing about wellness, is that you see all these women starting their own businesses.

For Gemma, 'everyday sexism' is a decisive factor in motivating her to leave her current job, a male-dominated field in which she is routinely 'yelled at' by clients and has been effectively 'blacklisted' by colleagues after raising a complaint about unequal treatment. Having her own business would not only save her from such discrimination, she reasoned, but allow her to cultivate a working environment where such issues did not arise in the first place: 'With my business I can make it whatever I want it to be [. . .] I can have policies in place which are, you know, inclusive, recruit people that don't kind of conform to those gender stereotypes. So yeah, I think that is a big, a big factor in it.'

Accounting for why the wellness industry is different from other sectors, participants invoked a 'relational' model of women's entrepreneurship (Lewis, 2014) grounded in essentialist logics of sexual difference. Sophie, for example, claimed: 'All the women that work in wellness are very nurturing. I think it's just a feminine, you know, attribute. They really want to help other people.' According to Caitlin, female founders operate according to fundamentally different principles than their male counterparts. Where corporate systems are underpinned by a masculine definition of success centred on 'money and power', the women entrepreneurs she meets 'pretty much always have a purpose, always have a social purpose. There's always a cause or there's always something that they believe in, that they want to support. It's never just about the money.' Aligning herself with a 'feminine way of doing business' characterised by 'mutual empathy and mutual empowerment' (Lewis, 2014, p. 1857), Caitlin concluded that the

wellness industry operates in accordance with a 'female definition of success', which is all about 'connection, collaboration, community'.

Whilst attending events I frequently saw this ethos manifest, as when conversations unfolded easily among attendees, expressions of vulnerability were met with compassion, and offers of help and advice were freely exchanged. Indeed, many of the events I went to were explicitly geared towards the provision of support, with established wellness entrepreneurs offering counsel to those who hope to pursue this pathway (though as my opening fieldnote suggests, high-profile wellness entrepreneurs tend to foreground the dispositional dimensions of business success – having the right mindset and attitude – rather than the practicalities of financing, administration and so forth, perhaps in an effort to sidestep the privileges afforded by their typically elite background). This desire to participate in spaces created by and curated for women can be placed in relation to the long aftermath of feminism (McRobbie, 2009), wherein expressions of female collectivity and solidarity have been curtailed. Nevertheless, it would be unwise to uncritically endorse claims to 'community' that circulate within and about the wellness industry. As I have written about elsewhere (O'Neill, 2020b), there are distinct limits to this, not only with regard the aesthetic norms that prevail here – slim, toned, 'glowing' – but also the industry's racialised exclusions. While wellness culture is not a white 'thing', the property of white people, as a movement-market it nevertheless privileges whiteness by providing opportunities for some bodies but not others to enter into and be extended by the space it makes available. No doubt too that the maintenance of a specifically *feminine* iteration of entrepreneurship plays a role in motivating such claims, as some women may feel the need to downplay or camouflage strategic motivations lest they be considered overly ambitious. Perhaps, in an era of new feminist visibilities (Gill, 2016), it is important that women not only mask their competition *with men* (*pace* McRobbie, 2009), but also conceal their competition with *other women*.

The rhetoric of 'collaboration' and 'community' is also undercut by the resolutely individual basis on which most of my participants operate or plan to operate their businesses. Almost all are or intend to be sole proprietors; in the small number of instances where this is not the case, they have at most one business partner, either a romantic partner, friend or family member. When asked, many participants admitted that they had not considered alternative ownership or operating models, such as cooperatives. Moreover, some appeared confused by this line of questioning, apparently unaware that such models exist or unclear what they could possibly offer. Thus even as they seek to enact new ways of working, their horizons of possibility are constrained by the model of the lone entrepreneur, cast in a feminine gloss while remaining steadfastly individuated. That going into business is understood as a *de facto* solo undertaking indicates the extent to which alternative organisational models have been quashed from collective memory. This is in keeping with Joshua Clark Davis's argument that, several decades on from the height of the counterculture, *products* imbued with progressive values continue to flourish even as progressive *processes* – namely, 'meaningful structures of shared ownership and participatory management' (2017, p. 242) – have been largely relegated to the past, rendered not so much dated or unworkable as simply unthinkable.

'Doing good'

In talking about why they want to pursue wellness work, participants routinely referenced a desire for work they could enjoy and be passionate about, themes that predominate in DWYL discourse. Indeed, some participants utilised this language precisely, as when Nicole, an auditor at a 'Big Four' firm, told me that she 'hates' her job and wants instead 'to be doing something that I love'. Similarly, former pharmaceutical brand manager Nylah recounted her decision to quit by explaining that wellness is what she's 'really passionate about'. For those who had already made the move, the contrast between the work they do now and that which they performed in the past is sharp. Kate, for example, spoke about her previous role in PR, where she would 'do a good job' but 'didn't really care'. Indeed, she often had to work on campaigns she felt were 'just terrible', such that her work routinely occasioned a sense of shame and embarrassment. Kate compared such feelings with the excitement she had experienced the previous week when hosting a stall offering product samples at an industry event. Recalling an evening spent handing out tasters of soups and stews while speaking to prospective customers, she said: 'It was amazing being there. And kind of just. . . being able to talk about something that I know inside out and that I really really believe in and am really passionate about – it made such a difference!' During our interview, Sarah similarly remarked that becoming self-employed 'is the first time that I've felt genuinely passionate about what I do every day'. Aware that she had worked in PR for more than a decade before leaving to start her own business, I asked Sarah to comment further on this – had she really felt so purposeless for all that time? With a slight shrug, she explained that while her last job had offered a great deal of 'glamour', including ready access to celebrity events, it was nevertheless uninspiring: 'I just was never into it. I found it hard to get excited about stuff. Like, to promote stuff I wasn't excited about.'

Yet in articulating their desire for 'passionate work', participants are not simply seeking work that is interesting and enjoyable, but also and more specifically work that has *purpose* and *meaning.* Indeed, many are expressly motivated by a desire to 'do good'. As Kate went on to relate, the enjoyment she gets from her work now is closely linked to the fact that she sees her business as a 'force for good' rather than 'another money-making company'. Through the course of our interview it became apparent that this notion of 'doing good' was baked into every aspect of the business: a meal delivery service catering for new mothers and others in need of convenient yet highly nutritious meals. In the first instance, it had been inspired by her own experience of wanting to support friends with new babies, but being unable to do so as much as she would have liked owing to time scarcity and geographical distance. As well as carefully sourcing top-quality ingredients, Kate has gone to great lengths to ensure all packaging is plastic-free, something she described a logistical 'nightmare'. Even before launching, the company paired with a children's charity to whom a donation would be made for every order placed. Sarah too felt that setting up her own business had allowed her to realise a 'bigger purpose'. Importantly in Sarah's case, the nature of her work has not changed dramatically, as she is still doing PR. The difference, however, is that she now works for small wellness businesses rather than large corporate clients: 'Everything I do is about empowering [these businesses] to grow and in turn to help as many people as possible. You know, the people

that come to their yoga classes or meditation, or eat at their healthy restaurant.' For Sarah, this marks a radical departure from the world of corporate PR: 'It's not just to line someone's pockets. It's like actually to contribute to this shift in consciousness as well, in my own small way.' While critical of outright profiteering, unremarked upon here is the fact that such amenities and any health benefits they might offer are only available to those with the requisite cultural and economic capital to access them, rather than those in greatest need.

The emphasis my participants place on 'doing good' can be understood in relation to a growing discontent, one that appears especially pronounced among younger people, with the 'business as usual' of neoliberal capitalism. While indicators of such unease abound, conspicuous examples include increasingly transparent attempts on the part of multinational companies to appeal to the ethical sensibilities of potential consumers through strategies of 'woke-' and 'care-washing' (Chatzidakis & Littler, 2022; Kanai & Gill, 2020; Sobande, 2020). It further indexes the extent to which entrepreneurship has come to be viewed as a vehicle for achieving social impact *as well as* realising 'passionate work'. Though not using the language of 'social entrepreneurship' to describe themselves or their businesses, the manner in which my participants position themselves has much in common with such individuals. In her study of social entrepreneurs in London and Milan, Carolina Bandinelli profiles those for whom business represents the most obvious and effective means to 'have a positive impact on society: to make it more just, sustainable and healthy' (2020, p. xv). Chronicling the origins of social entrepreneurship within the context of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009), Bandinelli highlights its contradictory nature and post-political character. A central problematic, she argues, is the assumption that entrepreneurship is ethically neutral, when in actuality enterprise is the base unit of market competition and thus predicated on inequality. As such, the mode of political engagement it makes available is one that actively suppresses systemic change. In this way, social entrepreneurship can be thought of as 'neoliberalism's recuperation of political hope in a form that strengthens the primacy of the market' (Bandinelli, 2020, p. 82). Ideologically, it represents not so much a *break with* as a *refashioning of* capitalism, in the belief that there can be more 'conscious' and 'ethical' variations thereon (cf. Aschoff, 2015). In diagnosing the ills of the prevailing economic order, then, the remedy my participants prescribe is essentially homeopathic, with the maladies of capitalism to be cured by yet more capitalism.

'Helping women'

When talking about their business ambitions, women I interviewed cited a range of social motivations, including: to help individuals improve their own health and address public health problems; to contribute to environmental causes and engage ethical trade relationships; to counter the hegemony of conventional medicine and showcase the wisdom of non-Western medical systems. An overriding goal for many, however, was to 'help women'. Such desires were often borne of intensely painful events in individual women's lives. For Eleanor, the prompt was a 'toxic relationship' of several years' duration, which eventually led her to become suicidal. When she finally exited the relationship, she began to reconsider the value of her work as a personal trainer: 'I really had to take

a step back and think OK, what is it that I can really do to really help women on a deeper level, so they can not have to go through what I've been through, personally with my self-sabotage and my lack of self-worth? How can I really turn that around?' As a result of this reflection, Eleanor determined to pursue a more holistic route:

> That's why I decided to move away so much from being a personal trainer, and really become a health and wellness expert – so I could help women to love themselves from the inside out, as opposed to beasting themselves from the outside in.

Her purpose, as she now sees it, is 'giving women permission to listen to their bodies'.

The coordinates for Olivia's entry into wellness work were set much earlier in life, when as a child her father was sent to prison. In the wake of his departure, her home life crumbled, with particularly devastating impact on her mother, who 'lost absolutely everything'. Olivia drew important lessons from witnessing her mother struggle to hold things together in the years that followed, lessons which have stayed with her to this day: 'I do still believe that we do live in a man's world. It really really was that – I saw that without this man now in our life, we didn't have anything.' These experiences informed Olivia's decision to become a coach working with women who are in the business of 'female empowerment', to which wellness, she explained, is central. She described her role as 'to be of service to women', specifically by ensuring they are 'emotionally and financially independent [. . .] that's fulfilling my why, my belief'.

While feminism has long maintained that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1969), problems arise when political analysis begins and ends with the self. In my research, this issue manifest in the sometimes vague manner participants sought to enact their support for other women. Eleanor, for example, spoke of her 'drive' and 'mission' to help women who have suffered like herself. Describing an 'epiphany moment' that followed her lowest point, she recounted coming to the realisation that:

> I'm here so I can get on stage, I can speak to women who have been physically abused, in domestic violence, they self-sabotage themselves because they don't feel worthy, and really just to speak about how you can do that. If you eat crappy food you feel crappy inside, and it's a vicious cycle, but empowering that mindset and empowering that holistic approach to really owning your body and becoming really powerful.

Making a link between diet and domestic violence, Eleanor annexes both structural inequality and the agency of individual men from the equation entirely, such that abuse becomes something that just happens to women, and indeed, which happens to women in part because of their poor lifestyle choices. Her invocation of a placeless 'stage' belies the extent to which visibility has become an end in itself for certain kinds of feminism today (Banet-Weiser, 2018), with little concurrent attention to the question of what visibility achieves. Relatedly, Olivia claimed that her mother's inability to 'get on with her life' was 'more of a choice, and that really starts with your mindset, which is where the psychology comes in to helping women, and that's like the basis of everything – like everything starts with the mind'. In each case, logics of personal responsibility and an insistence on the primacy of one's own attitude short-circuit the kind of social

and political analysis that might demand structural solutions be found to the kinds of problems that Eleanor and Olivia identify and which form the basis of their entrepreneurial ambitions. Instead, it is incumbent on women to change themselves: a dictate that has been thoroughly excavated in existing analyses of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2018) and confidence culture (Orgad & Gill, 2022). The twist is that women are exhorted to change themselves by contracting the services of *other women* and adhering to the lifestyles they promote. Despite the sincerity of their desire to 'help women' – something which was evident in how earnestly participants spoke to this theme, and underscored by the risks they take when embarking on such trajectories – precisely because their understanding of existing problems is often rooted in personal experience and routed along psychologising lines, the only available modes of redress are individualised, and commercialised, solutions.

Life coach Caitlin is also expressly motivated by a desire to 'help women'. Having successfully escaped the corporate world herself, she has quite literally made it her business to enable other women to do the same. Indeed, Caitlin characterises her clients as 'essentially me in that moment of crisis', that is, the period during which she suffered most intensely with work-related stress. With obvious delight, she explained: 'The biggest thing I love is when women say to me they're not happy in the corporate world and they want to do something else.' Dropping her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, she continued: 'Yes! Talk to me, talk to me! What do you want to do!? I can help you do it!' Indexing the feminist impulse of this work, she recounted a recurring vision, wherein 'men with pitchforks' appear at her door, saying: '"Stop! Stop! Stop freeing women, stop telling the women they can do whatever they want!"' Referencing neoliberal feminist urtext *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013), Caitlin went on to explain:

> In a lot of ways I feel like I'm telling women to lean back, or lean out, that the system's not designed for us. So if you really want it, and you genuinely, like you genuinely enjoy it – because there are friends of mine who do – then yes, lean in, yes, sit at the table, yes, try to make the changes that need to be changed. But in a lot of ways I feel like those changes have to come from the men who are controlling a lot of these systems. And it's almost like you know the whole we shouldn't tell people to fight cancer, because you're implying that if they didn't fight it well enough that they've brought this on themselves. In a lot of ways I feel like that's what we're saying with feminism and with women in work, that unless you're fighting for your job then it's your fault, that you're lacking something. Sometimes you are fighting a losing battle, like the systems and structures are against you, so maybe stop fighting, maybe let go, and find out what actually works for you.

While not exactly aligned with the call to 'lean out' as articulated by the late socialist feminist Dawn Foster (2015), Caitlin nevertheless mounts an incisive critique of the kind of 'moderate feminisms' that pertain in contemporary organisations (Lewis et al., 2019), which enjoin women to achieve equality through sheer force of will and longevity of presence. In determining to leave a system 'not designed for us' she has not only realised the practical implications of this critique for herself but also, through her work as a coach, supports other women to do the same. In this regard, her actions can be understood to involve both a *refusal* and a *re-fusal*, that is, an investment of social energies 'into supporting the continued affective existence and capacities of other forms of life

and ways of being together, as practice and as a form of embodied critique' (Shukaitis, 2014, p. 203). The risk of such a project, however, is that it places the onus on women to break with the system and create escape routes for themselves, *one at a time*. To this extent, it has much in common with the neoliberal feminist project it sets itself up against. Moreover, as with neoliberal feminism more generally, its assumed yet unacknowledged audience is professional women, with little consideration for those whose work – for example, as cleaners and carers – affords little opportunity to 'lean in' in the first place. Thus while expressing a desire to help 'women' in some general undifferentiated sense, participants' efforts are actually directed towards particular kinds of women, namely those that resemble themselves.

Conclusion

For feminist sociologists and cultural studies scholars interested in gendered enjoinders to pursue 'passionate work', a central concern is the extent to which choosing to work for oneself is liable to entail greater precarity and inequality. As Taylor argues, entering self-employment often means 'accepting an almost subsistence level of earning on the margins of the neoliberal economy' (2015, p. 185), marked by 'uncertain incomes, fragile career trajectories and general precarity' (2015, p. 174). While the realities of being a wellness entrepreneur are beyond the scope of this article, suffice to say the experiences of my participants bear out these concerns. In almost all cases the move to self-employment involved a significant depreciation in earnings, in some cases dramatically so. Indeed, one participant described living hand-to-mouth for a full three years while building her business – which began as a market stall selling fresh drinks – ploughing all takings back into this endeavour rather than paying herself any kind of steady wage or salary. For those whose entrepreneurial ambitions were realised, being an entrepreneur proved extremely taxing, demanding even longer working hours, a wholesale individualisation of risk, and the loss of key benefits such as leave entitlements and pension contributions. Some of the business ideas relayed to me with great hope and excitement in interviews never came to fruition, leaving women stranded in jobs they are deeply unhappy with. Other ventures were launched but proved unsustainable, as do the majority of new enterprises in the UK.[2] Where businesses went to the wall, the emotional toll and financial cost was enormous.

Yet in contemplating what a feminist politics of women's entrepreneurship is or might be, and where its feminist potentialities may lie, it is necessary to attend to the psychic patterings, affective investments, embodied states and material realities that animate such endeavours. While the desire to pursue wellness entrepreneurship could be seen to coincide with multiple 'retreatist fantasies' (Littler, 2013), in this article I have attempted to complicate such a reading by centring the motivations and experiences of those who actually embark or seek to embark on this path. Though typically pursued individually, wellness entrepreneurship is nevertheless underwritten by an impulse to *collectively build something new* together with and for other women. To this extent, it functions as both a means to *escape* the conventional working world and an attempt to *transform* this world from without by forging different ways of living and working. Moreover, this desire arises from the very real injuries women incur in paid employment. To this extent,

it is crucial to heed Negra's contention that retreatism is precipitated by 'some of the very concerns about gender and the workplace that have been central to feminism' (2009, p. 24). That many women feel it is necessary to leave their workplaces altogether in order to escape punitive conditions is testament to the diminished horizons for collective action *within* these workplaces, a scenario that owes much to the hollowing out of the organised labour movement in the UK over several decades as well as its lack of momentum within industries where the rhetoric of being 'cool, creative and egalitarian' (Gill, 2002) has done much to ensure unionisation efforts struggle to gain traction in the first place.

As it pertains to questions of work and employment, the promise of wellness complicates the idea that passionate work is 'inherently individualistic and conservative' (McRobbie, 2016, p. 107). While withdrawing from paid employment may seem like a defeat of sorts, it would be both inaccurate and unfair to suggest that the women represented in this study are simply 'retreating from the pressures of the conventional working world' (Taylor, 2015, p. 185). Instead, they exhibit a profound desire to live and work differently, one that is co-opted and constrained by the very conditions that enable it in the first place. This is not, or should not be, surprising. After all, capitalism today depends upon the creation of 'worlds' over and above the production of commodities, yet must at the same time modulate these 'worlds', lest they enable their inhabitants to envision alternative forms of social organisation (Gilbert, 2014). Channelling a desire for change back to the market via entrepreneurship is one such strategy, readily abetted by a media all too willing to glamorise entrepreneurship as the pinnacle of feminine success. Nevertheless, this is not to say that going into business is a necessarily apolitical or anti-political undertaking. Indeed, concluding her essay on the gender of post-Fordism, McRobbie highlights the many feminist and women-led businesses of the 1960s and 1970s which used commerce as a means to realise an 'alternative society' (2011, p. 76; cf. Davis, 2017). While my participants are animated by similar impulses, the material and ideological conditions they find themselves in are vastly different to those which prevailed five and six decades ago. As well as living and labouring under the dogma that There Is No Alternative (Fisher, 2009), their trajectories are shaped by the huge generational inequality that afflicts the UK today (Bangham et al., 2019) – the ultimate effect of which is to relegate many young people to a kind of generalised precarity that extends across boundaries of class and race even as its consequences are most pronounced among the multiply marginalised. At base, the simple fact of having to make a living is a huge barrier for many young women to truly do what they love. Ultimately, it is only by understanding how and why wellness entrepreneurship becomes compelling for those who take up this mantle that its promissory potential may be mobilised towards more radical feminist horizons.

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Notes

1. 2021 figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) put the median UK salary for full-time work closer to £32,000: www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplein-work/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2021 (accessed 5 October 2022).
2. 2020 figures from the ONS give a five-year survival rate of 39.6% for new businesses (i.e. those established in 2015): www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/business/activitysize-andlocation/bulletins/businessdemography/2020 (accessed 5 October 2022).

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