

**GENDER AND WORK: CAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP BE A MEANS FOR WOMEN  
EMPOWERMENT?**

**GÊNERO E TRABALHO: PODE O EMPREENDEDORISMO SER UM MEIO PARA O  
EMPODERAMENTO DAS MULHERES?**

**GÉNERO Y TRABAJO: ¿PUEDE EL EMPRENDIMIENTO SER UN MEDIO PARA EL  
EMPODERAMIENTO DE LAS MUJERES?**



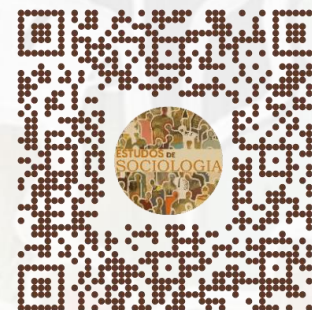
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**ABSTRACT:** Faced with the significant increase in the precariousness of work, entrepreneurship has spread as an alternative for workers. For women, it sought to represent a means for empowerment and for overcoming traditional labor market barriers. This research analyzes the relationship between entrepreneurship, empowerment and gender inequalities at work, inquiring about the role that entrepreneurship plays in reproducing or overcoming gender inequalities. To this end, based on documentary research, we analyzed a concrete case where business management points to entrepreneurship as a means for empowerment and for overcoming gender barriers in the labor market. We conclude that entrepreneurship can emerge as an alternative for survival and as a means of individual empowerment and may promote some individual improvements in certain living conditions, but never as a means of collective empowerment and transformation of power structures.

**KEYWORDS:** Entrepreneurship. Empowerment. Gender and work.

**RESUMO:** Diante do aumento significativo da precarização do trabalho o empreendedorismo se propagou como alternativa para os trabalhadores. Para as mulheres, ele procurou representar um meio para o empoderamento e para a superação das tradicionais barreiras do mercado de trabalho. A presente pesquisa analisa a relação entre empreendedorismo, empoderamento e desigualdades de gênero no trabalho, indagando acerca do papel que o empreendedorismo ocupa na reprodução ou superação das desigualdades de gênero. Para tal, analisamos a partir de pesquisa documental um caso concreto onde a gestão empresarial aponta o empreendedorismo como meio para o empoderamento e para a superação das barreiras de gênero no mercado de trabalho. Concluimos que o empreendedorismo pode emergir como alternativa de sobrevivência e como meio de empoderamento individual, podendo promover algumas melhorias individuais em determinadas condições de vida, mas jamais como meio de empoderamento coletivo e de transformação das estruturas de poder.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Empreendedorismo. Empoderamento. Gênero e trabalho.

**RESUMEN:** Ante el aumento significativo de la precarización del trabajo, el emprendimiento se propagó como alternativa para los trabajadores. Para las mujeres, buscó representar un medio para el empoderamiento y para la superación de las tradicionales barreras del mercado de trabajo. La presente investigación analiza la relación entre emprendimiento, empoderamiento y desigualdades de género en el trabajo, indagando acerca del papel que el emprendimiento ocupa en la reproducción o superación de las desigualdades de género. Para ello, analizamos a partir de una investigación documental un caso concreto donde la gestión empresarial señala el emprendimiento como medio para el empoderamiento y la superación de las barreras de género en el mercado laboral. Concluimos que el emprendimiento puede surgir como alternativa de supervivencia y como medio de empoderamiento individual, pudiendo promover algunas mejoras individuales en determinadas condiciones de vida, pero nunca como medio de empoderamiento colectivo y de transformación de las estructuras de poder.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Emprendimiento. Empoderamiento. Género y trabajo.

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## Introduction

From the 1970s onwards, a series of transformations in society and the world of work marked the beginning of the flexible stage of capitalist accumulation. In this new stage, the flexibilization of work and workers led to a significant increase in the precariousness of work. This process was accompanied by an increase in female participation in the labor market, mainly in precarious and informal occupations. It is in this context that entrepreneurship has spread as an alternative for workers to face the old and new challenges of the world of work. For working women, entrepreneurship has sought to represent a means of empowerment and of overcoming the traditional barriers they face in the labor market.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship between entrepreneurship, female empowerment and gender inequalities in the world of work. This analysis will allow us to investigate the role that entrepreneurship plays in reproducing gender inequalities or in overcoming them through its emancipatory possibilities.

In the section that follows the introduction, we present a summary of the changes that have taken place in the world of work since the 1970s in order to understand the context in which entrepreneurship emerges as an alternative for workers. We then analyze a specific case in which the business discourse points to entrepreneurship as a means of empowering women and overcoming the traditional barriers encountered by women in the job market. To do this, we used documentary research as a data production technique, treating as documents the book written by the founder of Mary Kay Inc., Mary Kay Ash, entitled *The Mary Kay Way: The Leadership Style of One of America's Greatest Entrepreneurs*, and the digital media of Mary Kay Brasil and the content they contain. 277 posts made during 2020 on the company's main Instagram in Brazil were analyzed, as well as the company's website in the country. Finally, in the concluding remarks, we reflect on the emancipatory possibilities of this form of employment.

## Changes in the world of work and the emergence of entrepreneurship

From the second half of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, capitalist accumulation, characterized by the organization of production in the Taylorist/Fordist model and by an organization of the national economy based on Keynesianism, entered a state of crisis. This crisis occurred because the model in force at the time began to show difficulties in containing the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production and, consequently, its mode of

societal domination was constantly questioned, putting its legitimacy in check (HARVEY, 2008; ANTUNES, 2009). In response to this crisis, a process of productive and economic restructuring and political and social readjustment began at the heart of the global capitalist economy in the 1970s.

During the period in question, a number of intellectuals, including sociologists, began to debate the centrality of work and the working class in contemporary society<sup>3</sup>. Between those who defended the end of the centrality of work and those who defended its continuity, there was a common understanding that the world of work was undergoing a series of transformations. For David Harvey (2008), this series of transformations marks the capitalist transition to a new regime of accumulation, still within capitalism, which he calls flexible accumulation.

This process of restructuring and readjustment through which capital reorganized itself, as indicated by authors such as Harvey (2008) and Ricardo Antunes (2009), took place through various transformations in society and in the world of work. Financial capital consolidated its dominance over the economy; the computerization and rationalization of the production process through the increase in high technology and new forms of control and management - such as the horizontalization of the company structure into networks and participatory management, where the quality of production is controlled by the workers themselves in the act of working - gave rise to Toyotism<sup>4</sup>. Increased productivity and intensification of work was the path taken by capital to reaffirm its dominance, and the result was an increase in unemployment, underemployment - and with them the most varied facets of informal and precarious work - and outsourcing. Through a neoliberal policy of deregulating labour laws and weakening social policies, capital implemented its project of productive and economic restructuring and political and social readjustment, thus constituting the model of capitalist accumulation characterized by Harvey (2008) as flexible accumulation<sup>5</sup>, as mentioned above. As a consequence of the increase in productivity and in contrast to the reduction in factory employment, capital sought to promote measures to speed up its turnover time, which enabled the growth of the services sector and, together, of the services proletariat.

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<sup>3</sup> This debate can be represented in its two opposing positions in the works *Adeus ao proletariado* by André Gorz (1982) and *Adeus ao trabalho?* by Ricardo Antunes (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Toyotism is a form of work organization. Its characteristics include: the just-in-time work organization and management system, the total quality policy, teamwork, the high degree of technology employed and production outsourcing (RIBEIRO, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> These characteristics that mark flexible accumulation and that developed from the industrial sector, in what became known as toyotism, were not limited to the industrial production sector, but also expanded to other sectors.

Between 1980 and 2008, the services sector "grew its relative weight by 30.6%, and now accounts for two-thirds of all national production, while the primary and secondary sectors lost 44.9% and 27.7%, respectively, of their relative shares in GDP". These transformations within the dynamics of capitalist accumulation ended up affecting the composition of the workforce. [...] It was this significant expansion of services that reconfigured the working class in Brazil (ANTUNES, 2018, p. 135, our translation).

This growth in the service sector has not only been due to an increase in the number of workers formally employed in commercial establishments. Part of this growth is also due to the increase in the number of underemployed workers, informal workers, outsourced workers, the self-employed, entrepreneurs who are "bourgeois-of-themselves and proletarians-of-themselves" - in the words of sociologist Ricardo Antunes. In the vast majority of cases, these workers carry out their activities without social and labor protection, they do deregulated work or work with flexibility regulated by mechanisms that seek to hide the precarious nature of the work they do. Antunes (2018, p. 139) shows how, in Brazil, during the 1990s there was a drastic reduction in the number of formal jobs, followed in the 2000s by the creation of "21 million jobs, 94.8% of which were low-paid".

Just as work underwent changes, the worker himself had to adapt to the new world that was emerging. This change in the ideal profile of the worker has led to an increase in female participation in the workforce, preferably in precarious and informal jobs. The typical worker of this new stage of accumulation is the flexible worker, who is characterized by work without fixed remuneration - constituting new forms of salaried work and remuneration linked to productivity; without labour rights, nor working hours determined in advance - often the working day is determined by targets to be met. There is still no spatial division between the workplace and the non-workplace, which erases the difference between the time and place of work and the time and place of non-work. This worker is expected to be multi-skilled, multi-functional, qualified, participative and engaged. Part of this process of participation includes tasks such as thinking about work and performance with a view to maximizing time and increasing productivity - functions that, under Taylorism, were assigned exclusively to management.

From the point of view of gender distinction, statistics show that women are being incorporated into activities with insufficient working hours, i.e. 39 hours a week or less. [...] These are especially women who, with the increase in average incomes in society, have started selling goods such as clothes, perfumes, beauty items, shoes, used things, etc. Many of them are not actually self-employed; they are salaried workers disguised as self-employed. In the field of perfumery and beauty, this practice is well known and widely used by

Avon, Jequití, Natura and countless other national and international companies. [...] They are self-employed, self-employed, self-employed at the service of large companies. [...] as a general rule, contracts are not formalized and workers are understood as autonomous individuals who work on their own account and at their own risk (DAL ROSSO, 2017, p. 243, our translation).

This set of transformations has affected the world of work in a profoundly destructive way from the point of view of working conditions and workers' rights. It is in this context of living and working conditions, and as a response to this situation, to "try to 'alleviate' this scourge", that, as pointed out by Antunes (2018, p. 44, our translation), the business discourse propagates as an alternative "a new subterfuge: 'entrepreneurship', on which all hopes are pinned and whose outcome is never known what it will be", constituting, as previously pointed out, a mass that is a "mixture of bourgeois-of-themselves and proletarian-of-themselves". This alternative seeks to hide the forms of wage labor through the myth of autonomous and deregulated work.

The definition of what entrepreneurship is and who and what an entrepreneur is is not entirely consensual. Before the advent of neoliberalism, the notion of entrepreneur was confused with the notion of businessman - except perhaps that the former, as well as being an owner like the latter, should also have an innovative and creative spirit<sup>6</sup>. However, since the productive restructuring that began around the 1970s and the emergence of neoliberalism, the notion of entrepreneurship has undergone a re-signification in which private property is no longer a requirement for being an entrepreneur. In this way, the notion of entrepreneur became detached from the notion of businessman.

The new notion of entrepreneurship accepts a diversity of ways of doing business. The change in the meaning of the notion of entrepreneur brought about by neoliberalism has not only made it possible for everyone, even those who do not own private property, to undertake, but has also made entrepreneurship something to be desired by everyone.<sup>7</sup>

The replacement of the defense that everyone can be a businessman with the conception that everyone can become an entrepreneur seeks to remove the need for private property as an index of proof of professional and personal success (AMORIM; MODA; MEVIS, 2021, p. 7, our translation).

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Schumpeter's (1997) definition where the entrepreneur is responsible for what the author called 'creative destruction'.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Sennett (2006, p. 72) in his book entitled *A cultura do novo capitalismo* (The Culture of the New Capitalism) observes that in contemporary capitalism, which we are treating here as neoliberal, there has been a "change in the value system of culture as a whole, conferring less and less moral prestige on stability".

In an article entitled *Empreendedorismo: uma forma de americanismo contemporâneo?* (Entrepreneurship: a form of contemporary Americanism), Henrique Amorim, Felipe Moda and Camila Mevis (2021) defend the thesis that entrepreneurship is a form of contemporary Americanism. In other words, just like Americanism, entrepreneurship would be a 'hegemonic way of life' of a given 'social formation'. When studying Fordism, Gramsci (2007) observed that this model of organizing the production process was accompanied by a specific way of life that formed a type of man suited to this type of production. The way of life "structures the way workers live in its most varied aspects [in habits, behavior, thinking, values, etc.], as something that is materially verified in social practices inside and outside the workplace" (AMORIM; MODA; MEVIS, 2021, p. 2, our translation). Thus, the way of life is directly linked to the formation of the worker's subjectivity - a subjectivity that is now guided by the logic of the market and competition in the most different spheres of life, or as Dardot and Laval (2016, p. 133, our translation) state, in neoliberal capitalism we have the "valorization of competition and the company as a general form of society". It is in this sense that Amorim, Moda and Mevis (2021, p. 8, our translation) understand current entrepreneurship as the "synthesis of a new way of life, representative of neoliberal society" constituted and consolidated since the 1970s: "entrepreneurship imposes itself as the current and hegemonic way of living in capitalism" (AMORIM; MODA; MEVIS, 2021, p. 10, our translation).

Entrepreneurship with a new meaning - you no longer need to be an owner - and now understood as a way of life, produces in workers the idea that they themselves are a company. Workers would therefore be entrepreneurs-in-themselves, the entrepreneurial subject or even the company-man of Dardot and Laval (2016). According to the authors, this subject is the one who internalizes the business logic and begins to exercise the same control over themselves that in Taylorism, management exercised over the workers.

It is in this context of the growth of the service sector, the increase in informal and precarious work, the establishment of the flexible worker as the ideal model for the new world of work, the spread of entrepreneurship as an alternative and the expansion of women's work, that Mary Kay Inc. emerged. Because it is one of the largest companies in its field worldwide and because, as we will see in the next section, its discourse defends and promotes female entrepreneurship as a means of empowering women, we chose the company as a concrete example and an important expression of the business discourse that associates entrepreneurship with female empowerment. Therefore, in the following topic we seek to demonstrate how the

company's discourse understands female entrepreneurship and what role the company attributes to it.

### **Business discourse and the promotion of entrepreneurship as a means of empowering women**

Mary Kay is a cosmetics and skincare company founded in 1963 by Mary Kay Ash and which arrived in Brazil in 1998. It is one of the world's three largest companies in the direct sales sector for cosmetics and skincare products. With almost 60 years on the market, the company has a sales force of more than 3.5 million people, the vast majority of whom are women, distributed in more than 40 countries<sup>8</sup>.

As we have seen, Mary Kay's growth took place in a broader economic context which, among other characteristics, is marked by (1) the growth of the service sector, (2) the growth of women's participation in the labor market, and also (3) the spread of entrepreneurship as an alternative for workers and also as an object of desire. We call it an object of desire insofar as, today, entrepreneurship is not only one of the few alternatives for a large proportion of workers - the so-called entrepreneurship by necessity - but it is also seen as something good, something to be desired, since, as we have seen, flexibility has become one of the main constituent elements of work in the contemporary world.

The company, which has adopted the Direct Sales System (DSS) as a means of marketing its products, has more than 3.5 million people worldwide making up the Mary Kay Independent Sales Force - the name given to the group of consultants who are responsible for selling the brand's products. In Brazil, there are more than 440,000 consultants working throughout the country<sup>9</sup>. DSS is described by the Brazilian Association of Direct Sales Companies (ABEVD), an organization with which Mary Kay is associated in Brazil, as "a system for marketing products and services through a relationship between independent entrepreneurs and their customers, outside a fixed commercial establishment". It is precisely because of the way sales are made, i.e. through the DSS, that the women who make up the Mary Kay Independent Sales Force are characterized as entrepreneurs by the company's discourse.

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<sup>8</sup> The information was taken from the Forbes website. Available: <https://www.forbes.com/companies/mary-kay/?sh=2f970d1b2bc9>. Last access: 17 June 2021.

<sup>9</sup> The number of consultants in Brazil was taken from the company's own website. The survey is from 2016. Available: <https://www.marykay.com.br/pt-br/about-mary-kay/press-room/press-releases/2016/aniversario-mary-kay-brasil>. Last access: 20 Dec. 2022.



In addition to characterizing its consultants as entrepreneurs, Mary Kay also states that the development of female entrepreneurship is one of its main objectives and pillars. According to the founder herself, in her book entitled *The Mary Kay Way: Timeless Principles from America's Greatest Woman Entrepreneur* (ASH, 2013), the company was created with the aim of offering women "an excellent opportunity to [...] earn as much money as their abilities allowed" (ASH, 2013, p. 167, our translation). In her professional career, M. K. Ash has experienced various difficulties encountered by women in the job market. According to her, these difficulties were due to the simple fact that she was a woman. As an example of these difficulties, Ash cites lower salaries than those received by men, the devaluation of her skills and the lack of opportunities to fulfill her potential. It was these difficulties that motivated Mary Kay Ash to found Mary Kay Inc., a company through which she intended to create unlimited opportunity for women so that they would not have to suffer what she had suffered in the job market.

Therefore, in the company founded by Mary Kay and which bears her name, the pursuit of profit, an inherent characteristic of any company, should be compatible, according to her, with valuing women's work. The company sees female entrepreneurship as an important means of empowering women and overcoming the difficulties they traditionally face in the job market. Female empowerment as an objective and a value of Mary Kay Inc. can be exemplified by the following sentence, taken from the company's website in Brazil, referring to the brand's creator, M. K. Ash: "She changed the business world by creating more opportunities for women, built a company guided by her values and empowered women by putting them in control of their own future" (our translation). It is through female entrepreneurship that women would be freed from any gender-based obstacles encountered in the traditional job market and could achieve professional success on their own merits.

After experiencing inequality in the workplace, she [M. K. Ash] knew she had to make a change, not just for herself, but for all women. In 1963, Mary Kay Ash launched her business transforming the previously male-dominated workplace. An agent of change and an innovative entrepreneur, Mary Kay Ash dedicated her life to empowering women and putting them in control of their own futures (Retrieved from the Mary Kay Brasil website [online], our translation).

This perspective, in which female entrepreneurship represents a means by which women can empower themselves, seems to update some well-known positions, such as liberal feminism and also Marxist economic feminism, in which women's emancipation would come about through their entry into public life and the job market. The figure below is made up of various

posts taken from the company's Instagram in Brazil and demonstrates the connection we have just mentioned between empowerment and entrepreneurship.

**Figure 1** – Empowerment and entrepreneurship



Source: Mary Kay Brazil's Instagram profile. Access 17 June 2021

Based on the understanding that entrepreneurship is a means of female empowerment, the company has positioned itself as a means of developing entrepreneurial practice among women, as a professional support tool for women to achieve success in the job market (see figures 2 and 3). On Mary Kay Brasil's official profile on the Instagram social network<sup>10</sup>, it is possible to find posts, as shown in the examples below (see figures 2 and 3), where the company advertises this opportunity to become an entrepreneur with the brand's products. In the posts we followed, made throughout 2020, the direct connection established by the company's marketing between being a reseller of the brand's products, i.e. being part of Mary Kay's sales force, and being an entrepreneur is explicit (see figures 2 and 3).

<sup>10</sup> Available: <https://www.instagram.com/marykaybrasil/>. Access: 12 June 2021.

**Figure 2** – A pioneer in female entrepreneurship



Source: Mary Kay's Instagram profile. Access 17 June 2021

**Figure 3** – Tools needed for success



Source: Mary Kay's Instagram profile. Access 17 June 2021

On the company's social networks, there is constant advocacy and promotion of Mary Kay entrepreneurship as an opportunity for success and as a means of realizing personal dreams. As stated in one of its publications (see Figure 3), Mary Kay would provide the support and tools necessary for success. Another example is in Figure 4, where it says that "your independent business [...] will be as big as you decide". Therefore, Mary Kay entrepreneurship is presented by the company as a simple and profitable business opportunity (see figure 3), where the company would have the formula, or tools, as one of the posts says, for the success of its consultants (see figure 3). Mary Kay Ash, the company's founder, serves, in this case, as an example of success: someone who, on her own merits, achieved success through entrepreneurship and who now, with the formula for success unveiled, has created a company that aims to serve as a support for other women to achieve professional success through entrepreneurship, just like her (see figures 2, 3, 4 and 5).

**Figure 4** – Independent Mary Kay business



Source: Mary Kay's Instagram profile. Access 17 June 2021<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the image that the company tries to convey through the content on its social networks is that Mary Kay Inc. is not a producer and marketer of cosmetics and skin care products, at least not only. This production and marketing activity carried out by the company is merely the means by which the company puts its real business and objective into practice: selling the formula that allows women to achieve professional success and fulfill their

<sup>11</sup> Even though the image is available on the official Mary Kay Brazil Instagram, we have chosen to hide the face originally present.

individual dreams (see figures 3, 4 and 5). As we have seen, this formula is female entrepreneurship, which would allow women to achieve the professional success that is difficult for them in the traditional job market due to the barriers imposed by discrimination and gender inequality resulting from the way the sexual division of labor is configured in our society.

**Figure 5** – Formulas for achieving the dream



Source: Mary Kay's Instagram profile. Access 10 Feb. 2021

As Helena Hirata and Danièle Kergoat (2007) put it, the sexual division of labour places men and women in a relationship of conflict over how work will be divided and organized. This form of division of labor has two fundamental principles: the principle of separation and the principle of hierarchy. The first distinguishes the most varied jobs into men's work and women's work; the second attributes greater social prestige to those jobs that have been assigned to men through the principle of separation. The principles of separation and hierarchization result in the social inferiorization and marginalization of the female contingent of the population in the social relations of production. Therefore, the sexual division of labour assigns men to productive work, which is valued and socially recognized, and frees them from the obligations of domestic work, while women are responsible for reproductive domestic work. On entering the job market, in the professional world, women start to face a double working day, i.e. the accumulation of domestic work and employment. If, in the domestic sphere, the reproductive

work carried out by these women is unpaid work, in the public sphere they find themselves marginalized from the relations of production. They occupy the most precarious jobs, their abilities, skills and competencies are undervalued and they receive lower salaries than men, since their income is seen as complementary to their husbands', since the sexual division of labor places men in charge of providing for the family and women in charge of reproductive domestic work (BIROLI, 2018). It is in this sense that Mary Kay would be a company that creates opportunities for women to achieve professional success through their merits, without suffering from the problems of discrimination and gender inequality traditionally encountered by women in the job market.

As consultants are seen as entrepreneurs, the logic of meritocracy and free competition is permeated throughout the company's structure, which creates a mechanism whereby the company protects itself from certain criticisms or challenges to its work and transfers responsibility for their situations to the consultants. The company communicates to the sales force how the system of commissions, prizes, recognition, promotions, etc. works. "With this basic information available to everyone in a convincing way, there is no justification for accusations that we have committed some injustice," says the company's founder (ASH, 2013, p. 228, our translation). Therefore, in Mary Kay's career plan, as envisioned by the company, nothing, apart from their own performance, prevents consultants from growing professionally.

In Mary Kay's independent sales force, an individual can grow and progress without traditionally moving up the career ladder. Millions of Beauty Consultants operate independent businesses that deal directly with customers. Each Independent Beauty Consultant sets her own goals, productivity and rewards. One expression of this responsibility is the role of Independent Sales Director. She is the person who builds a team, educates and guides the other Independent Beauty Consultants (ASH, 2013, p. 35, our translation).

As an entrepreneur, in other words, as the owner of its own business, the company aims to sell the idea that the result will be the result of merit. Therefore, it would be enough for consultants to put in dedication and commitment, to work hard to achieve success. All of this reinforces the idea that Mary Kay makes it possible for women to achieve professional success and fulfill individual dreams through the opportunity to become entrepreneurs. To the extent that you are your own boss, since you are an entrepreneur working for yourself, you alone are responsible for your professional success or failure. If she succeeds, it is the result of her efforts, her dedication and her merit; if she fails, it is also her fault. The idea is then constructed that the entrepreneur needs to work as hard as possible to achieve success, since she works for herself, and her success only depends on her efforts and the fruit of her work belongs to her

alone. This idea can be summarized as follows: if she fails, it's because she has not worked hard enough, she has not dedicated herself enough, in other words, it's her fault and she needs to try harder.

I have always seen the independent sales force as a microcosm of the American free enterprise system. Regardless of age, gender, religion, race, education or work experience, anyone who becomes a Mary Kay Independent Beauty Consultant enters the business on the same level as other Independent Beauty Consultants. They literally become the president of their own company. We support her by giving her the tools that can help her succeed. In the true spirit of free enterprise, each woman earns from her business what she is willing to invest. She is her own boss, and no one tells her when or how to work. If she takes the initiative and draws on the experience available to help her, she can quickly create a successful business (ASH, 2013, p. 184, our translation).

Since in the logic of neoliberalism entrepreneurs are responsible for their successes and failures, what we see is, at least in the discourse, the prevalence of the logic of meritocracy, where the entrepreneurs themselves compete in a market and the one who best takes advantage of the opportunities and takes the best actions will succeed. In the case of Mary Kay, the logic of meritocracy, intrinsic to the discourse of business management through the notion of entrepreneurship, ends up making women individually responsible for their professional success or failure. Of course, this business discourse disregards the fact that each consultant's performance depends not only on her efforts, but also on other factors, such as the aforementioned double working day that robs women of time and energy.

From this point of view, failure would be the result of individual factors, such as a lack of commitment and dedication to activities. In other words, the problem of professional failure would be the fault of the women themselves and not the result of a discriminatory social structure that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for working women as a whole to achieve professionally, a structure that results in women being socially inferior and marginalized from the job market. What seems to be present in this conception and is also contradictory to a discourse of female empowerment, is a logic of overvaluing the individual and individual action to the detriment of the collective and the relationships that are constituted in society, but, as David Harvey (2008, p. 158, our translation) observes, this logic is typical of neoliberal society. For the author, in the transition from capitalism to a stage of flexible accumulation, there has been a "general shift away from the collective norms and values that had hegemony, [...] towards a much more competitive individualism as the central value in an entrepreneurial

culture that has penetrated many aspects of life". Therefore, in the new entrepreneurship, workers feel responsible and guilty for their successes and/or failures.

The question that arises here is not necessarily whether there is a contradiction in a discourse that combines exacerbated individualism with female empowerment, but whether female entrepreneurship, marked by exacerbated individualism, can contribute to female empowerment, understood as the empowerment of a collective.

### **Final considerations: can entrepreneurship be a means of empowering women?**

The term 'empowerment' is used in a way that is marked by various contradictions and conflicts. One of the main contradictions in its use concerns the fact that this concept is shaped by political disputes over its use.

On the one hand, we have its use from an individual perspective, where the term refers to individual mastery and control and can be expressed as self-confidence and self-esteem. The focus of this approach is on individual growth, taking the issue of power out of the equation (LEON, 2001). From this perspective, empowerment would represent a process through which the individual becomes better prepared to face a competitive market of opportunities and choices (CORNWALL, 2018).

Empowerment narratives from a business and corporatist perspective, where there is an individualized notion of self-empowerment through the market, as is the case with Mary Kay, are referred to by professor and anthropologist Andrea Cornwall (2018) as 'empowerment lite'. Empowerment lite would be centered on the "desire to enable women to realize their potential" and would be a version of empowerment "devoid of any confrontation with the underlying social and power relations that produce social and material inequities" (CORNWALL, 2018, n.p., our translation), focusing only on the economic dimension of empowerment. "Liberal empowerment simply seeks to accommodate women within the market without disrupting existing social and power inequalities [...] empowerment lite promotes docile conformity" (CORNWALL, 2018, n.p., our translation). Behind the narratives of empowerment lite is the idea that it would be possible to empower women by engaging them in the market.

Talking about "empowering women" implies that power can be transmitted, and women are vessels that can be infused with it. Claims to be "empowering women" by engaging them in the market [as is the case with MK] combine power with money. The acquisition of money comes to have almost magical powers, as if, once women had their own money, they could wave a wand and magically make the underlying social norms, emotional relationships and



institutions that constrain them disappear (CORNWALL, 2018, n.p., our translation).

Empowerment, on the other hand, is associated with the collective. It represents both the process and the result of that process which aims, in the case of women's empowerment, to question patriarchal ideology, transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate discrimination and gender inequalities, and create the conditions for women to have access to material resources and information. Although it does not neglect the importance of empowerment on an individual level, its focus is on collective action (SARDENBERG, 2012).

For us feminists, women's empowerment is the process of achieving autonomy and self-determination. [...] for us, it implies the liberation of women from the bonds of gender oppression and patriarchal oppression. [...] the ultimate goal of women's empowerment is to question, destabilize and ultimately end the patriarchal order that sustains gender oppression (SARDENBERG, 2012, p. 2, our translation).

Therefore, liberatory empowerment, as Cornwall (2018) calls it in opposition to liberal empowerment, places the question of power at the center of a process through which women seek to end patriarchy and gain autonomy and self-determination.

The female entrepreneurship expressed through Mary Kay Inc. seems to be, as we have just seen in the previous topic, in line with the narratives that characterize empowerment in light of the fact that, in the case we analyzed, there is an individualized notion of self-empowerment through the market, in other words, a notion of empowerment focused on the economic and individual dimension that does not question the structures of power and exploitation that result in the social inferiorization of women and their marginalization from the social relations of production. From this perspective, it is through their own efforts, the search for an individual solution, that working women should seek to overcome the difficulties and barriers imposed by the exploitation and oppression to which they are subjected. This notion of empowerment may even bring about some improvements in women's situations, on an individual basis, but it does not bring about any transformation in the structural power relations that produce gender inequalities. In this way, the neoliberal ideology that marks female entrepreneurship appropriates the idea of empowerment to strip it of any social change and systemic transformation and subordinate it to the current capitalist and patriarchal order, domesticating it. In this sense, if the use of the term empowerment is marked by political disputes, we agree with Cornwall (2018, n.p., our translation) when she says that "rescuing

empowerment as a feminist strategy requires reformulating it in ways that reinscribe a concern with changing the structural power relations that produce inequality and oppression".

Finally, we can conclude that, in the midst of transformations in capitalism and the world of work, the flexible work modality exemplified by Mary Kay entrepreneurship can emerge as a precarious alternative for survival and as a means of individual empowerment from a liberal perspective, and may even promote some individual improvements in certain living conditions, but never as a means of collective empowerment and transformation of power structures, let alone emancipation, which is understood as the status where empowerment has been achieved in its entirety. Therefore, neoliberal ideology appropriates the idea of empowerment to empty it of any transformative character, subordinating this notion to the prevailing order and domesticating it.

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