Women pursuing entrepreneurship face an inherent challenge: to succeed as an entrepreneur, they need to balance the expectations of the entrepreneurial role with those attached to other roles they may have in life. They are subtly – or overtly – pressured into conforming to stereotypical expectations of what makes a “good” entrepreneur. And often, they are unfairly penalised for essentially not closely resembling our default image of an entrepreneur. As a result, many women entrepreneurs end up having to jump through unnecessary hoops, just to be accepted, and to accept themselves as legitimate entrepreneurs.

So, how do they find a way to reconcile this catch-22 situation? This was the question I wanted to answer through my research.

A Legacy of Problematic Stereotypes:

The way we think about entrepreneurship has changed drastically over time. However, when we take a closer look at how we think about entrepreneurs – our collective mental image of an entrepreneur, if you will – we find that the “default” we expect has not changed very much.

Studies show that the dominant representations and narratives around successful entrepreneurs are based on masculine norms. For instance, for most people, the image called to mind when thinking of a successful entrepreneur is usually a male stereotype - someone who is perhaps described as being ambitious, aggressive, or risk-taking.

Entrepreneurs are also usually presented as a homogenous group, with similar characteristics and a similar ‘entrepreneurial mindset’. This implicitly suggesting a “correct” way of becoming or being an entrepreneur. As a result, an individual who does not automatically appear to match these stereotypes of a ‘true’ entrepreneur often ends up being undeservedly penalised for it. Groups of individuals who may be negatively affected in this manner include women, migrants, and students.

The Real-World Issue:

All entrepreneurs want to do well. For all of us, the feeling of achieving something is partly based on how good it feels, and partly on how others see us, and recognise our efforts. This goes for women entrepreneurs, too. Studies show that their confidence and success in their role will partly depend on how comfortable they feel identifying themselves as entrepreneurs, and partly on being recognised as a legitimate entrepreneur.

To this end, they may need to meet the expectations of those around them, of what makes a “good” or successful entrepreneur. This is especially true for influential figures such as mentors, decision-making...
makers at incubators or accelerators, VCs and investors – think Barbara Corcoran on Shark Tank, or Peter Jones on Dragons’ Den – who can open doors to resources and useful connections.

However, on the other hand, individuals tend to be happier and more motivated when they feel they are being their true selves. Research supports this: people tend to seek identities that align with how they perceive themselves.

Taken together, this means that women entrepreneurs are often forced to walk the tightrope of “performing” masculinity at work to meet entrepreneurial expectations, whilst still juggling co-existing expectations, linked to social roles (e.g., daughter, mother, spouse). This makes it harder for them to find, create, or modify an entrepreneurial identity that fits how they see themselves. And, as most of us have experienced, feeling like you don’t fit can be debilitating!

Rejecting the Default, Re-Making the Mould

To understand how women navigate such tensions while pursuing entrepreneurship, I conducted a qualitative study. Through interviews with over 40 women entrepreneurs based in the UK, I found that these versatile individuals came up with specific ways in which they figured out their entrepreneurial selves. Despite pressures to conform to stereotypical expectations, these women very clearly rejected the “default” role model, and instead created their own, better-fit versions of entrepreneurial identities.

I was able to identify some processes that they used to navigate conflicting expectations. I found that, as expected, some women emphatically identified with stereotypical entrepreneurial traits and characteristics. Others, however, strongly rejected these expectations, and refused to identify themselves as entrepreneurs, instead preferring to refer to themselves as business owners, creatives, researchers, board members, etc.

What was most surprising, though, was that a significant portion of these women identified themselves as “accidental” entrepreneurs. Irrespective of whether they were in high- or low-tech industries, whether they were early- or late-stage, and whether they had small- or large-scale ventures, these entrepreneurs were much more comfortable with this identity that they had chosen for themselves. They wished to not be associated with the “ruthless” image of entrepreneurs they saw popularised in industry and the media. They mentioned building their “own version” of this identity, selecting or defining elements they felt were authentic.

Why Is This Important?

The findings from my study show that we need to make room for more ways of being an entrepreneur, and of doing entrepreneurship. We are only beginning to study and understand the mechanisms behind how diversity and intersectionality interact the entrepreneurial journey. Many outdated assumptions about entrepreneurship are still taken for granted, not just in academia, but also among practitioners and policy-makers. This reinforces structural obstacles and issues.

If an individual does not feel comfortable with some of the expectations that come with being an entrepreneur, they may struggle to figure out their entrepreneurial selves. Wonderfully talented individuals with the ability to create significant impede in their communities may be impeded in their attempts at entrepreneurship, or may be discouraged from even trying to start.
Given the significant, global economic impact that entrepreneurs can have, it is crucial that we redefine our collective expectations of who is “allowed” to be a successful entrepreneur, and how that process “should” look. Understanding the entrepreneurial experience of minoritised groups can help us redefine these expectations, and make them fairer, and more inclusive.

**CONTACT:** Aardra Chandra Mouli; aardra.mouli.19@ucl.ac.uk; UCL (University College London); Gower St, London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom.