

**THE ROLE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL NETWORKS: THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER
AND ETHNICITY IN BRITISH SME'S**

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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of networks for SMEs has been reported as a factor influential in the developmental process of entrepreneurial activity (Baines & Wheelock, 1998). It has been demonstrated that differences exist in the experiences of combining work and family, where these networks are established and maintained, on the basis of gender and ethnicity factors (Carter, 2000; Dhaliwal, 2000; Rana, 1999; Chell et al, 1991).

The following paper will discuss preliminary findings of research on the usage of networks by and for Asian and white indigenous female entrepreneurs living in the West Midlands of the United Kingdom. The sample of female entrepreneurs comprises those working in the following sectors: clothing, jewellery, food, IT and management consultancy. The latter two sectors were particularly selected in order to reflect the emerging pattern of self-employment amongst white and Asian women in non-traditional growth sectors at the turn of the century.

In-depth interviews in focus group sessions will be conducted with Asian female entrepreneurs and also with white women-owned businesses in each of these sectors and groups in order to explore the following issues:-

- each groups awareness of relevant networks for their business
- the use of existing networks for business purposes
- the potential benefits as perceived by these two minority groups
- gaps in the provision of networks as required by the groups
- potential for new network development

A working model is posited in order to reflect new and innovative directions for the development and progress of networks which address the needs and requirement of both Asian and white female entrepreneurs. Practical implications and suggestions for further research will be given which may aid those concerned with developing networks to support female entrepreneurs.

Introduction

Women Entrepreneurs and SMEs

Most of the studies examining the demographic characteristics of female entrepreneurs, have done so in comparison with male business owners (e.g. Schiller and Crewson, 1997; Hagen et al, 1989). They have highlighted that the demographic predictors of entrepreneurial success have been identical for male and female entrepreneurs (Herron and Robinson, 1993). One substantial difference between business men and women is that women entrepreneurs often integrate multiple organizational roles and multiple dimensions of their lives, such as balancing work and home, together with a leadership role (Rana, et al, 1998).

In the UK, South Asians account for only 2.7% of the population (South Asian Population Report for Great Britain, 1992), yet the participation rates of South Asian women in self-employment are higher than those of white women. Nevertheless, there is a tendency for some South Asian women entrepreneurs to be ‘invisible’, not only in the business world, but also from a research perspective (Dhaliwal, 2000; Ram and Jones, 1997; Ram, 92; Phizacklea, 1990).

The increasing use of networks for SMEs has been reported as a factor influential in the developmental process of entrepreneurial activity (Baines and Wheelock, 1998).

Networks and SMEs

According to Curran et al (1995), ‘networks’ usually consist of firms, owner-managers, support agencies, voluntary associations and other bodies through which small firms connect to the wider economy. The process of ‘networking’ usually involves participants engaging in activities “which brings the network into existence and sustains it through time” (op. cit.). Academics and policy

makers have acknowledged that confusion exists over the meaning of the two terms in relation to small firms, this has resulted in a number of competing definitions and perspectives (e.g. Carter and Jones-Evans, 2000; Grandori and Soda, 1995)

It has been demonstrated that differences exist in the experiences of combining work and family, where these networks are established and maintained, on the basis of gender and ethnicity factors (Carter, 2000; Dhaliwal, 2000; Rana, 1999; Chell, 1991). The importance of networks in the survival and success of individual firms has been an area that has received very little research attention (Olm et al, 1988; Aldrich, 1989; Rosa and Hamilton, 1994; Baines and Wheelock, 1998). It has already been highlighted that gender differences exist in the way that networks are created and used, which in turn have an influence on certain aspects of the management process (Carter and Rosa, 1998).

The impact of gender and ethnicity on networking for SMEs

The limited research that exists on the experiences of networking has revealed that gender differences exist in the accessibility of these, for women in particular during different stages of their business (Brush, 1997). The obvious implications for female entrepreneurs in comparison to their male counterparts has been discussed by Omar and Tan-Wong (1997):

“unlike the old boys’ network, there is also a shortage of peer support networks for women to support, encourage and advise women entrepreneurs. Even when women’s business associations exist, women may not join them if they are overloaded with business and family responsibilities, as is often the case. Such isolation limits the women entrepreneur’s ability to tap sources of peer financing and informal advice as well as the information networks needed for survival and growth”.

This reflects the long-standing tradition of male executives having access to associations, networks and clubs (business, social or sports clubs) where they discuss business and negotiate

deals. Generally, women have been excluded from these influential 'old boys' networks' and informal business networks and are therefore increasingly setting up their own networks. Findings from the OECD Issues Paper (2000) have highlighted that women have progressively learnt to use different types of networks, which serve different complimentary purposes. The following broad categories of networks have been identified: institutional networks; business networks; informational networks; scientific and technical networks; profession networks; user networks; friendship networks; and recreation networks (OECD, 2000; Conway, 1997). Increasingly, women entrepreneurs are forming associations in order to increase their access to technology, increase familiarity with business cultures in foreign markets and to access these markets more effectively (OECD, 2000). These associations also provide mentoring and training, and catalyse the process of building networks with government and corporate procurement officials. Networking/partnering can be an extremely valuable tool for expanding and internationalizing activities, it provides value added to women-owned businesses by increasing the flow of information. The combination of these developments assists in promoting a pro-active entrepreneurial culture for women. However, women entrepreneurs may not fully exploit the benefits that come from networking with other women entrepreneurs and owner-managers working in similar sectors and at different levels in the supply chain around the world.

Research has highlighted that women network to build a support system. These networks are used as strategic alliances for specific purposes, including: to manage the business, to access resources, to develop ideas, and cultivate social support (Moore and Buttner, 1997). Networks are primarily used for sounding boards and support, as opposed to resource acquisition. Baines and Wheelock (1998) have identified 'growth enthusiastic' groups of female entrepreneurs who have a high involvement and participation with network activities (co-ownership, formal employment,

or daily practical support). Even though these networks have been reported to be very important to women entrepreneurs, they often feel they do not fit with the existing male networks. Networking activities have been found to affect the way in which organizations learn and increase their knowledge base. In particular, by having external collaborative links, there is a greater likelihood of future innovation taking place. Where women have become entrepreneurs after leaving their organizational careers, and have not established an extensive network, they feel isolated at the top, until a more appropriate network is established. The lack of networking opportunities for women has been predominantly highlighted as a problem for start-up businesses. This has also been found to affect established firms. Martin's (2001) study of women entrepreneurs highlights that the main barrier for female owner-managers to identify with existing business associations, clubs or networks, is the lack of time. Findings from her study also suggested that if these networks were developed, female entrepreneurs would perhaps gain significant competitive advantage over their immediate male-run counterparts (ibid).

An area of contention amongst academics is the debate as to who benefits from networking more – female or male entrepreneurs? Rosa and Hamilton (1994) point out that networking is more critical to female entrepreneurs than their male counterparts. In contrast, it has been argued by Aldrich (1989) that the networking levels of women are lower than those of men. A study that has specifically examined the influence of gender on networking has reported that the greatest differences in social networking activities are more attributed to the employment status, as opposed to being based on gender (Katz and Williams, 1997). Starr and Yudkin's (1996) review of research into entrepreneurial networks has concluded that differences between networking activities between women and men business owners are reflected in the composition of these networks. The issue that has not received adequate attention is how (in terms of the the quantity

and quality) women and men use these networks. It is these issues that the present research attempts to address, in relation to women coming from different cultural groups.

The role of networking for ethnic minority businesses and indigenous UK entrepreneurs has revealed differences relating to informal and formal types of networks. For ethnic minority group entrepreneurs, networking has been found to provide practical support in situations where they are confronted with structural disadvantages, such as racial discrimination (Ram, 1994). The importance of social networks for ethnic minority businesses, in the form of informal assistance from friends, relatives, and other members of the community, and as a source of finance for start-ups has been well recognized by previous research (Basu, 1998; Werbner, 1990). For indigenous UK entrepreneurs, research has pointed out that they seem to be less dependent on such informal assistance (Ward, 1987). For ethnic minority businesses, research often highlights the importance of social networks, also defined as ‘weak-tie’ networking (Katz and Williams, 1997). These social networks include the ‘personal network’ which the owner manager has with certain individuals, and the ‘cultural dimension’, with an overall inclusion of the ‘family’ and ‘community’ (Ram, 1994). These types of networks are either formal or informal in their nature. Links of a formal kind are those established and developed with co-ethnic membership business associations and other organizations. In comparison, those of an informal kind reflect personal (friends and extended families) or community (co-ethnic, tribal, religious, socio-cultural organizations) links (Fadahunsi, et al, 1999).

There is a need for research to move beyond depicting negative images of the experiences of female Asian women in business (Rana, 1999; Werber, 1999), to portray the positive experiences of these minority groups operating in different contexts and dimensions (e.g. network usage). For

South Asian women, being a businesswoman can provide them with the opportunity to be independent, with the freedom to network and make contacts, and ultimately can be viewed as a way of enhancing their social status (Dhaliwal, 2000).

The following study attempts to address some of the gaps in existing research literature on small firm networks by using the small firm as a unit of analysis using qualitative methodology and empirical data, investigating networking during the development of businesses, focusing on certain sectors with more in-depth understanding, focusing on the interaction (rather than structural) dimensions of networking by examining the perceptions of female entrepreneurs concerning the contents and outcomes of interacting in network relationships in relation to their environment. The paper will discuss preliminary findings of a study on the usage of networks by and for Asian and white indigenous female entrepreneurs living in the United Kingdom.

Sample and Methodology

In-depth interviews in focus group sessions were conducted with Asian female entrepreneurs (belonging to the Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim community) and also with indigenous women-owned businesses working in the West Midlands region of the UK in the following sectors: clothing, jewellery, food, IT, and management consultancy. The latter two of these sectors were particularly selected in order to reflect the emerging pattern of self-employment amongst white and Asian women in non-traditional growth sectors in the turn of the century. The participants were either self-employed or owners of small businesses employing between one and thirty-five employees. The age range of all of the participants was between thirty and sixty five years.

The methodology adopted for this research was focus group discussions and interviews. Qualitative methodology approaches have been demonstrated to be particularly appropriate for

conducting gender-based research (Rana, 1999). Focus groups are very useful in exploring issues affecting SME's as they offer the opportunity to gather rich qualitative group through the group process from individual participants directly, as well as through their interactions around the specific area of discussion (Morgan and Krueger, 1998). These informal semi-structured focus groups were composed of 5-8 participants exploring the topic through six core questions. The focus group interviews centered around the following discussion areas:

- definition of networks
- awareness of relevant networks in relation to business (for them and by them)
- existing networks used
- perceived benefits of networks (personal and professional)
- gaps in provision of networks (problems and difficulties)
- suggestions for improvements and awareness of new networks

After describing themselves and their firm, participants answered each question. To ensure that each of the participants took an active role in this process, one member of each group acted as the questioner, while another recorded the responses. In addition, a university representative acted as a mediator/facilitator and managed group dynamics, to support the process of group interaction between participants with different confidence and experienced levels.

Results and Discussion

From these focus group discussions, white indigenous and Asian female entrepreneurs gave different definitions of networks and networking activities. These business owners seem to share the difficulties expressed by academics and policy makers in defining these two concepts. Confusion was also apparent when trying to establish whether a network met in reality (with a venue etc) or whether a network was digital (i.e. internet, or phone based). There was therefore no single agreed definition, mainly as the intention of the research was to highlight their

subjective views and perspectives. A disparity existed between participants concerning their understanding of what a network was, together with what they perceived its' purpose was. Their responses overall related to the structural and interactional dimensions of networks (Conway, 1998; Mitchell, 73): an interactive exchange regionally, nationally and internationally; a meeting place to talk; a method of putting third parties in touch with each other; a way of working in partnership and sharing information; involving individuals, organizations, and computer technology. One Asian female entrepreneur gave an interesting perspective of what she defined a network to be, encapsulating a number of features: “a forum where people have some degree of synergy, a match in business sector work, a match in gender, ethnicity and age. A place where they share ideologies, methodologies, providing progression for individuals, finding other links for their working life, personal development and their education.”

Most of the white indigenous and Asian female entrepreneurs were aware of existing regional and national networks that related to their business and family life, these included: Women in Business, the Chamber of Commerce, the Institute of Directors; Institute of Business Advisors, Economic Regeneration Network, Entrepreneur Exchange and non-executive directors of NHS Trusts, and Soroptomist International, UK Asian Women's Center. An interesting similarity between the two groups of women was the inclusion of religious forums for networking, this is perhaps not so surprising for Asian women, but is not so common for white indigenous women to mention churches as a forum for networking. For some of the women from both groups these networks extended to the European Union. In the era of new technology, most of the women in both groups had a limited awareness of digital networks. Some of the Asian women entrepreneurs discussed the usage of digital networks existing in Milan, Belgium, Brussels, France, Antwerp, and Portugal. Some of the Asian and white indigenous women discussed the

importance of associations similar to rotary clubs existing specifically for professional and executive women aiming to raise funds for charity, “it’s a chance to meet like-minded women who want to progress in the long-term”.

The benefits of networks were discussed by both groups in a similar way, (largely depending on the ‘type of network’), in terms of the following perceived advantages: as a good method of getting to know new people and building relationships, “seeing the bigger picture”, being informed about third party referrals and useful recommendations being made by others, and an appropriate way of reaching a joint and agreed consensus relating to their businesses activities, by way of “getting support and information from an established group in your field”.

For both groups of women, the main perceived benefit of networking was so that they would “become part of the boys club”; it would also increase their confidence; be emotionally and mentally rewarding for them; and would provide them with chances to be offered business leads, rather than being given to someone else. It was also recognized by most of the women that “networking should always be going on in the background as the benefits are not always immediate but more long-term”. One Asian female entrepreneur believed that there were certain useful ‘networking tools’, an example was to send Christmas cards to other companies and business groups as a way of “reminding people who you meet along the way who you are”. Another discussed the structured approach of networking, “getting your face recognized you have to build up the trust, have an accessible mechanism where people feel comfortable coming to you, this increases your credibility you should never say no to anything” .

In terms of the gaps in the provision of existing networks, Asian female entrepreneurs identified problems and difficulties which were applicable to women in general and those which were specific to this cultural minority group. Networks were perceived by the white indigenous female entrepreneurs to be accessible to everyone and there were no inherent fear of networks. In stark comparison, Asian women believed that “networking opportunities are very limited because you are led by who you make the contacts with”, but were also limiting because of the time and costs involved to participate in the networking activities. In addition, it was recognized that some of the women only networks (e.g. Women in Business Association) mainly exist for ‘high profiled’ women, which means that other groups of women who do not fall in this category are excluded. The women interviewed believed that this segregation was mainly created by the women themselves, rather than by the association. The main problem identified by the Asian female entrepreneurs was that most of the existing business groups consisted of “white 50 plus males who have the time to talk about issues more in-depth as they have no domestic commitments, I therefore have to be more direct and focused”. The main barriers of existing networks discussed by the Asian women were attributed to their gender, cultural background, and their lack of confidence as a result. In particular, the difficulties in attempting to network with others in the business groups were related to their domestic responsibilities and culture not permitting them to attend meetings in the same way that men were able to. This was discussed in great length by one Asian female entrepreneur, “business groups not very welcoming to Asian women, they are male dominated which makes it very difficult for women to network with them. There is a tendency for males to be attracted to the males in these business groups, they are curious about the Asian woman entering the group to begin with, it is difficult for the women to establish their credibility. It is difficult for women in general to attend meetings because of domestic responsibilities after hours, they have to think about family and cultural commitments. It is also harder for Asian

women because these men go to the pubs to network with each other. Asian women are constantly trapped in guilt, it is inbuilt into our culture, heritage, it's baggage that we carry around with us, we are programmed to be caring”.

It was recognized by most of the women that the process of networking involved a great effort and time outside of their business, the importance of having spousal support was discussed by one Asian female in particular, “it is very important to have a good husband behind you and work in a partnership so that you can share the childcare responsibilities and attend these meetings”. There was also a common awareness that networking did not offer any immediate benefits at the initial stages, but was the responsibility of the entrepreneurs themselves to follow this continuously. In this way, the importance of networking on a one to one basis, rather than over phone or in a group, was pointed out.

The needs of white and Asian owner managers were not perceived to very different as it was recognized that all businesses were confronted with the same issues (e.g. marketing their products and services). However, problems existed in the ways that Asian female entrepreneurs were approached, “for Asian women these problems need to be approached from a cultural perspective, the first hurdle for them is that they are a woman, an Asian woman, where everyone else wants to know about your personal life”.

The lack of existing business groups run for and by Asian female entrepreneurs was also discussed. “there are no Asian women’s business groups that exist in Birmingham”. An example was given of an association called ‘Gingerbread’ existing for lone parents, but was mainly for and used by white indigenous mothers, the need for a similar group to exist for Asian lone

mothers was perceived, “the importance of interest and faith community groups is underestimated, there isn’t any work to consolidate these groups of lone parents by the temples Asian women should be encouraged to start up social enterprises in the same way as white women, this requires training and the availability of appropriate services.” However, it was also pointed out that problems were likely to exist between Asian business women themselves when networking with each other, “in situations where they feel that they do not need to network as they are successful already”.

In view of the existing gaps in the availability and provisions of existing networks, suggestions for overcoming these were discussed, in terms of all women being encouraged to recognise the importance of networking, as this positively affected the course of their business, and consequently had an impact on the economy. The lack of awareness of certain networks, such as business owner networks and self-employed networks, still appeared to exist, this was perhaps attributable to the limited use of digital networks. For Asian female entrepreneurs, in light of the perceived barriers based on their gender and culture, suggestions for improvements pointed to the need for specific networks existing for and run by these groups of entrepreneurs themselves, “there is a need for a pool of Asian women entrepreneurs, aspiring towards the same goals, having a leader, getting funding There is a need to encourage Asian women physically to go ‘hand holding’, by emphasizing that the only input is their time, not money. There is a need for these women to speak to business clubs and to be viewed as potential members”. The lack of support available to these women after starting up their business was also frequently mentioned, “once Asian women start up their businesses, there are no mechanisms or stepping stone groups which has an enabling role from a practitioner level, for example an enterprise agency”.

Given the demands and comments emanating from the women surveyed, combined with their views on existing provision, a working model has been posited for ‘physical’ networks, as opposed to ‘digital’ networks. This is with a view to influencing policy and assisting practical implementation of physical network development for female entrepreneurs (see figure one). The model is an attempt to encourage debate over the form, content and appropriateness of the current network provision available to existing and prospective female entrepreneurs in the UK.

Figure one begins by showing the access points for a number of women seeking networks within their local community. The square box in the center of the diagram represents the network development, with particular focus given to the practical factors for consideration in women’s Network Development. The small boxes around the central inner box illustrate the various business forms which can be developed by the entrepreneur. Arrows linking the model are shown as two way. This is because the process is iterative and inter relational. For example, those involved in business networks inform others, who subsequently join the group. Within the core of the model are a group of considerations for the development of women focused networks. These include:

- **Outreach/marketing strategy** – from discussion within both groups, it appears to be important to have a clear marketing strategy for reaching the target group of women. The need to outreach into communities, using cultural and gender sensitive workers has been proven by those working within the field of women’s business support (WBDA 2000, Richardson & Hartshorn, 1993).
- **Cost** –This was viewed as more of an issue for the Asian women than the white women sampled. Costing is important. Some networks charge an annual membership fee and

charge for participation, (the professional women's Network, for example) whereas others are free of charge.

- **The timing of network activity is also important for women.** Many women share self-employment with domestic or caring responsibilities. 'Breakfast Clubs' and late night meetings can be difficult for women, both from safety and convenience angles.

- **Language.**

Appropriate and sensitive languages can be used, both in order to advertise the network, and within its documentation. The idea is to encourage participation, and as such targeting information in relevant languages should not be overlooked. The importance of offering such support has been highlighted in the paper by Fadahunsi, Smallbone and Supri (99).

- **Relevance.**

Capture and maintain interest through keeping networks relevant and contemporary. Different groups of women require different types of approaches.

- **Cultural sensitivity and venue**

Again, particularly amongst certain women's groups, there is a necessity for women to meeting a venue where men are precluded

- **Hand holding/mentoring.**

All of women were particularly keen that they have someone to accompany them to the first network meeting that they attend. Pre meetings are also useful, in order to rehearse entering a meeting and role-play in order to overcome awkwardness and nervous behaviour.

- **Agenda.**

Involve participants in setting and establishing their own agenda of activities.

- **Informality with respect to difference**

Many women sought to find a group in which they felt safe and comfortable to talk with others, who could be competitors.

- **Dietary requirements**

Ensure that relevant dietary requirements are adhered to.

- **Childcare/caring facilities**

Consideration will need to be given to assisting the needs of women with domestic responsibilities. Both groups of women mentioned the additional time factor required for networking, given their often 'dual role of working both inside and outside the home. In order to ensure that women participate, it is important to examine how it can be possible to ease the caring responsibility for a time.

- **Incorporate diversity**

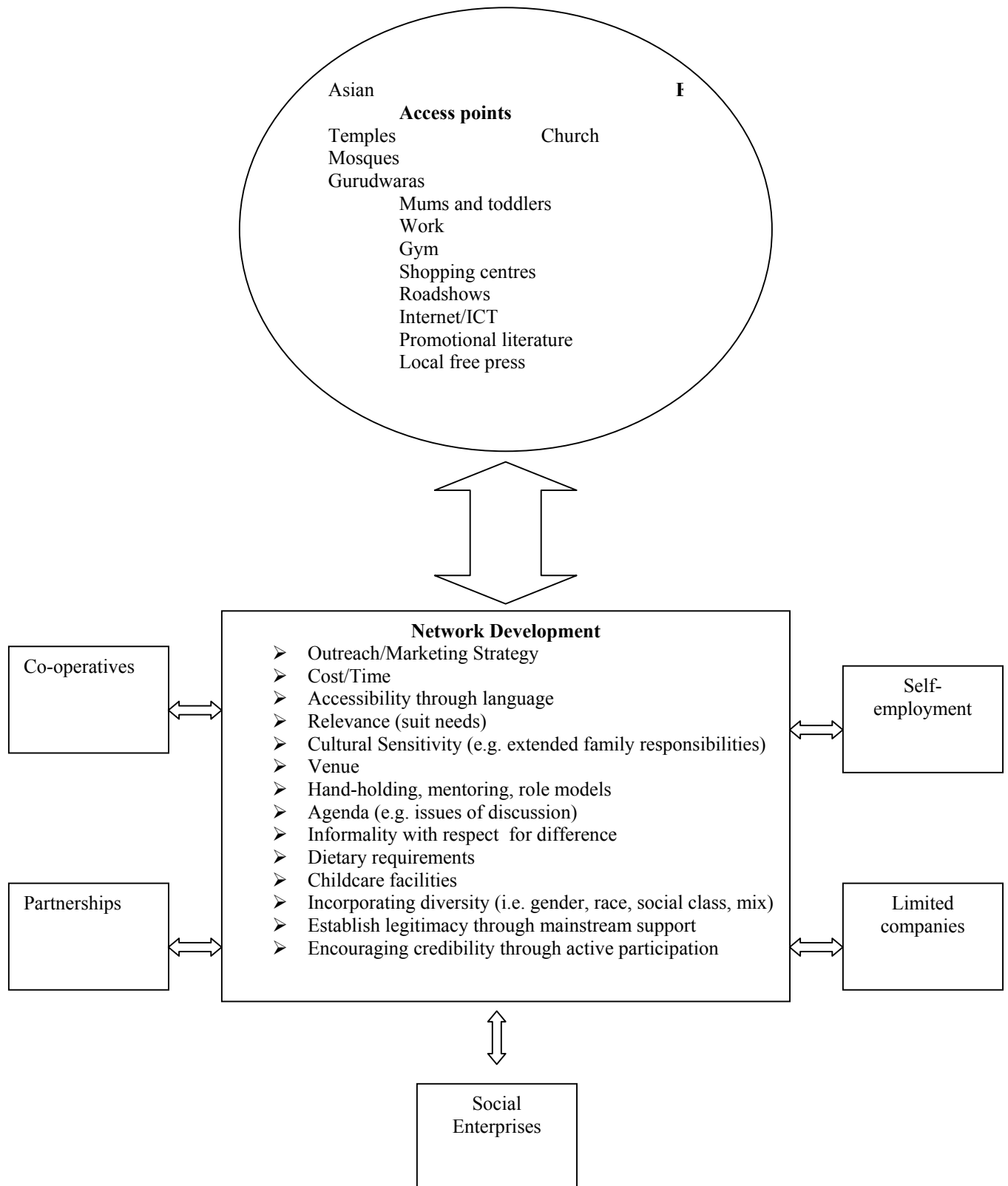
Whilst some women sought single sex networks, they were keen to meet with women from different backgrounds, cultures and industrial sectors.

- **Promote legitimacy of group**

'Why specifically women's networks?' is a question that has been asked throughout the course of this research. The legitimacy of women's business groups sometimes has to be espoused to those who seek to undermine the activity of developmental support.

- **Encourage credibility**

Figure 1: A Working Model of Women’s Entrepreneurial Network Development for British SMEs (physical networks).



The UK Small Business Service is establishing a number of womens business support activity. Through the mainstream adoption of womens initiatives, the credibility of such independent groups is heightened, which in turn raises the profile and the collective confidence of the group to network further and wider.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present exploratory study has pointed out that a number of policy and research implications. In the main, it has highlighted that amongst Asian and white indigenous female entrepreneurs there is still a lack of awareness of some existing mainstream business support institutions. However, for Asian women business owners in particular, existing networks are not always readily accessible or appropriate for their specific cultural requirements (see also Fadahunsi et al, 1999; Kaur and Hayden, 1993).

With increased interest and activity in Women's Enterprise development (currently being undertaken within the new Small Business Service in the UK), the initial findings and working model should contribute to the debate over the needs and requirements of networking groups for different businesswomen within the UK economy.

From an academic perspective, there is clearly a need for more rigorous and extensive research, monitoring and evaluation of the usefulness and appropriateness of not only women-only networks, but also mixed-gender networks (see also Carter and Jones-Edwards, 2000). There is a need to reconceptualise and redefine many existing mixed gender entrepreneurship networks and women-only network provisions to incorporate diversity of gender, ethnicity, age, cultural and socio-economic background so that a 'heterogeneity of entrepreneurs' is recognized in existing

networks. This is clearly a move from viewing SMEs in a traditional way towards new and more innovative modes of interacting in the new era of the 21st century. The next stage of the research will be to investigate in greater depth the reasons for choosing certain networks, the outcomes of these different relationships, the impact upon business creation, development and growth, and mostly importantly, to focus on the influence of gender and ethnicity by comparing the experiences of a large number of Asian female and white indigenous female entrepreneurs with Asian male and white indigenous male entrepreneurs.

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