

# Does God want female entrepreneurs to have it all?



There is a dizzying array of career and life advice available for women. Whether being told to [‘lean in’](#) or [‘let go of balance’](#) women are commonly encouraged to ‘have it all’: be devoted, glamorous, passionate wives and mothers while climbing the career ladder. In our [recent study](#), we explored how this postfeminist call to ‘have it all’ intersects with Evangelical Christian teachings of prosperity in a network marketing organisation. The ‘prosperity gospel’ as this movement is often called assures followers that God will bless the faithful with a financially prosperous life in exchange for a positive attitude and [unflappable belief](#).

This movement may have found a perfect home in network marketing, which is a type of business where independent consultants distribute goods and services and are compensated only when they build and mentor a network of others to do the same. There are over 96 million people working in over 1,000 network marketing organizations [across the globe](#), [78 per cent](#) of them women.

Our interest in feminism, network marketing, and its links to prosperity teachings began when our friend signed up for Arbonne, an emblematic US-based organization. Our friend’s success was extraordinary. Within a year of signing up, she earned enough to quit her full-time job, was driving a company-sponsored white Mercedes Benz and going on company reward trips. However, only a very few toil their way to an above-average income while the vast majority (i.e., 90 per cent) are unlikely to earn back their initial investment in the products. Despite promises of prosperity, this business model is built around [precarious](#) working conditions.

We followed our friend’s progress and attended several events, like the Arbonne Global National Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada. For three days, organisational leaders motivated a screaming crowd of nearly 25,000 mostly female attendees from around the world. The then-president of the company spoke glowingly about the women of Arbonne, calling them beautiful, praising God and the women’s commitment, assuring again and again that with the right attitude and faith, anyone can build a successful business with Arbonne. At the mention of God the crowd erupted in several minutes of applause and screams.

How does God fit into beauty products, or network marketing, we wondered? Why is the crowd so excited when the statistics for success are so dire? What kind of entrepreneur emerges from this crowd and what is her advice for others? To answer these questions, we examined stories written by senior female leaders about their journey with [Arbonne](#). We noticed that a certain kind of woman rose to the top, one astute at practicing and sharing what we call an ‘evangelical entrepreneurial femininity’.

## Go-getters for God: Empowered by a higher power

Embodying an evangelical entrepreneurial femininity involves both claiming and relinquishing her sense of agency. On one hand, the women believe it is up to them to improve their lives: *'If you cannot envision this kind of success for yourself, then you will never have it'*. But, while women are deemed responsible for their success (and failure), if do they succeed, this is God's doing: *I thank God Who is the source of my life and every good and perfect gift. I thank Him for the vision and faith He has given me, which has enabled me to experience success in life*. Women are also advised to be good Christians, who obey, defer to a higher power and, most worryingly, silence their critical voice: *You must be willing to go the extra mile without complaining. Be winners, not whiners*.

This femininity therefore 'giveth and taketh away' women's empowerment, while staying silent about the economic realities of contracting with an organization that does not offer pay, security or benefits, but instead encourages women to purchase their products.

## The gilded leash: Breaking out while staying in line

The evangelical entrepreneurial femininity reflects ideals of freedom, choice and work-life balance. Many leaders exclaim that they are *'living a dream life!'* It does appear as if these women 'have it all': they are doting and present mothers who are running financially lucrative businesses that provide security and luxuries for their family.

*I felt I was being called to stay home full time and raise my children. I never imagined that through simply talking to people and sharing the gift of Arbonne, I would not only potentially have a fabulous white Mercedes-Benz, but the freedom to do what I wanted to do, when I wanted to do it.*

However, dig a bit deeper, and this freedom is chock full of constraints. Women are encouraged to 'choose' to design their life, so long as it doesn't disrupt traditional gender roles or stereotypes. Women are encouraged to 'break out' as successful entrepreneurs, so long as they 'stay in' the home, quite literally.

## Gussied up (for God?): Aesthetic and affective trappings

Alongside being a good Christian, wife, mother and worker, women who embody the evangelical entrepreneurial femininity must look pretty while doing it. Hyper-feminized displays of beauty, wealth, luxury and consumption that privilege a white, middle-class aesthetic are important – and troubling – hallmarks of this femininity. Teeth are whitened, hair is coiffed, nails are manicured and her skin is bronzed. Jewelry adorns her body, and clothing tends towards feminine dresses and skirts.

*I love shopping in the middle of the day, mid-day yoga, and even surprising my husband, Chris, for lunch several times a month. My sons appreciate the free time this business allows me; they love it when I bring their favorite snack to school and enjoy it with them and their friends.*

Work is strikingly absent: in many ways, these accounts read as a day-in-the-life of a wealthy 'stay-at-home' mother. Indeed, women are warned not to *'over-think this business'* as it is as simple as following *'a recipe'*. We wonder why the women's intelligence, creativity, astuteness and sheer hard work aren't applauded – like in biographies of other successful entrepreneurs.

## Postfeminism, capitalism and faith: A troubling trinity

The evangelical entrepreneurial femininity can be seen as embodying some feminist ideals as women are encouraged to become financially independent, progress up the career ladder, feel a sense of self-fulfillment, and experience relational support through building businesses together. But dig a bit deeper, and this femininity is also demonstrably anti-feminist in its exclusion of struggles, denial of the importance of critique, and ignorance of inequalities as deriving from social structures or cultural norms. This femininity not only reinforces gendered ideals of women who work, it intensifies them by linking success to one's soul and relationship with God. The ideal female worker must also be faithful, subservient, pious and willing to proselytize to and 'convert' other women.

Overall, our study illustrates an image of the ideal woman that we find deeply troubling and unhelpful. As working mothers ourselves, we are all too familiar with the pressures to 'have it all'. If we pay too much attention to this mark, we experience fatigue, frustration, guilt and a fear of falling short in all domains. We trust many other men and women share in our struggles and concerns, therefore we should question the capitalist co-option of 'rugged individualism' and spirituality. Far from hopeless, the neoliberal order is in [a moment of crisis](#), and feminist projects must grapple with capitalism and its impacts on all women in order to foster more emancipatory gendered relations for all.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author's paper [A femininity that 'giveth and taketh away': The prosperity gospel and postfeminism in the neoliberal economy](#), *Human Relations*, November 2016
- The post gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Business Review, LSE Media Policy Project or the London School of Economics.
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