ABSTRACT This paper points to the danger of the neoliberal instrumentalization of feminism in promoting family entrepreneurship as an emancipatory practice for women. It criticizes the key myths of neoliberal feminism about the freedom of choice that women have and their empowerment through family entrepreneurship. To that end, and through empirical research, it explores the benefits of women's participation in the management of small-scale family entrepreneurship and business in 30 micro and small-sized firms in the traditional sectors, during the post-socialist transformation of Serbia. The aim of this article is to show that the process of women's emancipation does not rest on these myths, but rather on the possibilities to change power structures based on the logic of capital and the neoliberal state in the semi-periphery of the world system, as well as the patriarchal gender regimes, that reproduce the strong subordination of women. The economic, social and moral benefits of entrepreneurship for women are debatable and limited by the interests of big capital and the neoliberal state. The possibilities of transforming gender relations through gender policies remain limited, because they do not derive from critically situated feminist discourse and do not correspond to the structural dispositions of a semi-peripheral economy and society like Serbia.

KEY WORDS: Feminism, neoliberal myths, small-scale family entrepreneurship and business management, women's roles, Serbia.

APSTRAKT U radu se ukazuje na opasnost neoliberalne instrumentalizacije feminisma u promovisanju porodičnog preduzetništva kao emancipatorske prakse za žene. Kritički se raspravljaju mitovi neoliberalnog feminisma o slobodi izbora koju žene imaju i o njihovom osnaživanju putem porodičnog preduzetništva. Putem empirijskog istraživanja analiziraju se koristi koje proističu iz ženskog učešća u upravljanju porodičnim preduzetništvom i poslovanjem u 30 firmi mikro i male veličine u tradicionalnim sektorima sitnog porodičnog preduzetništva u periodu postsocijalističke transformacije Srbije (nakon raspada ex-Jugoslavije.

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Small-scale family entrepreneurship and business (from now on: SSFEB)² is a complex phenomenon that can be illuminated from a variety of theoretical perspectives and research methods, and with different actors and goals. In recent decades, a number of scholars have studied the intersection of the entrepreneurship and the family business research field, in an attempt to generate a new field of family entrepreneurship research (Poutziouris, Steier and Smyrnios, 2004:7–11). According to Bettinelli, Fayolle and Randerson (2014:164), family entrepreneurship is defined as the research field that studies entrepreneurial behaviors of family, family members, and family businesses. Family entrepreneurship and business is a field in which gender relations in the private and public spheres are strongly interlocked and which are gender biased, affecting both family and business (Marlow, 2014:102–120; Al-Dajani et al. 2014: 218–230). Family business itself can be defined in multiple ways according to different criteria (Tarja, 2003: 60–61; Peruffo et. al. 2017: 9–40), but as Harms noted (2014: 282) a commonly accepted definition has not yet been found. In this article, among a broad range of definitions where some criteria are too rigid, the very broad definition of family business as business “influenced by a family or by a family relationship, and perceiving itself to be a family business” (Leach, 2015:2) is accepted as appropriate.

Although family businesses have recently attracted an increasing amount of attention in academic, public and policy discussions due to their entrepreneurial character (Overview of Family Business Relevant Issues, 2008, Final Report of the Expert Group Overview of Family Businesses, 2009) and their contribution to economic development (To have and to hold. 2015:1–14; Global Family Business Index, 2016), a paradoxical situation has arisen. While there is a great percentage of MSFF in Serbia, the research and institutional preference revolves around

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² Small scale family entrepreneurship and business operationally refers to micro and small size family firms (from now on: MSFF) according its: income, property and number of employees (Vodič za korisnike o definiciji malih i srednjih poduzeća, 2015; Zakon o računovodstvu, 2013).
medium and big family businesses. Besides an increasing number of research projects in the field of entrepreneurship and business, and with some exceptions (Babović, 2014; Hughson, 2015; Blagojević Hjuson, 2013), developmental and managerial gender-blind approaches still prevail. Specifically, the feminist perspective on women’s role and gendered power relations in SSFEB has not been a topic of academic inquiry in Serbia. In this article, I use a feminist economics approach to deconstruct and discuss two key neoliberal myths: the freedom of choice, which women are supposed to have and the opportunities for their emancipation through family entrepreneurship and business. Starting from the understanding that “the sex/gender system as a fundamental and organic social variable [is] expressed in differing intensities and forms in different cultures and classes” (Harding, 2004:312), I rely on theory of semi-peripherality (Blagojević, 2002: 311; Blagojević, 2009; Hughson, 2015). It provides a useful apparatus for gaining new insights into the empirical findings of qualitative research conducted by Đurić Kuzmanović and Markov from 2014 until 2016, in 30 MSFF in Serbia in traditional sectors of production and service and awakened my curiosity about developing a contextualized feminist approach for further research. The previous research focus was on: the bargaining process between spouses in intra-household allocation of resources and the assignment of their roles in business (Đurić Kuzmanović et al. 2016a: 190–208); the interconnectedness of gender regimes and biases in SSFEB with processes of forced neoliberal transformation (Đurić Kuzmanović et al. 2016: 190–205; Đurić Kuzmanović, Fischer and Mandić, 2016: 32–42); and the comparative legal analysis of the key operational laws in the EU and Serbia that standardize the management of SSFB (Đurić Kuzmanović and Ljubojević, 2016, 2: 95–110).

In this article, my key hypothesis is that the freedom of choice that women have and their empowerment through SSFEB are myths used by neoliberal capital and the state in order to maximise profits and to ensure social stability through women’s unpaid and low-paid work. In that sense, MSFF are not primarily encouraged to develop their business and to contribute to economic and social development, but left to the vagaries of the market or destroyed if they become an obstacle to big capital. In the semi-periphery of the world system, processes of women’s emancipation are limited by the (im)possibilities to change gendered power structures based on the logic of capital and the neoliberal state in the semi-periphery of the world system. Looking back at the specific patriarchal gender regimes of “self/sacrificing micromatriarchy“ and „the masculinity crisis“ (Hughson, 2015: 142) in Serbia shows that they changed not only as a result of the post-socialist transformation of Serbia, which was institutionalized state directed non-development during the 1990s (Đurić Kuzmanović, 1997), and more general operating processes of de-development (Blagojević Hjuson, 2015), but also due to the global neoliberal shifts.

This article has multiple aims. The main goal is to show that the process of women’s emancipation is based on the possibilities to change gendered power structures and the patriarchal gender regimes in the semi-periphery of the world system that reproduce the subordination of women. Another intention is
to explain that women’s involvement in family business, defined in the widest sense as “any act or process whereby women take part in the life of a family firm” (Campopiano et al., 2017), is used by a state and big companies as a means of maintaining economic, social and political stability during the forced and tumultuous neoliberal post-socialist transformation. In that sense, a further aim of this article is to highlight the importance of developing a feminist holistic and contextualized economic development approach to the SSFEB in the semi-periphery by exploring the relationship between: a) gender regimes and b) neoliberal business and the institutional environment. Hence, this article adds to the existing literature deepening feminist insights— that is, how women in MSFF contribute to the local and wider community by “creating and maintaining businesses where other investors would not” (Sindambiwe, 2017: 211–223) and shows possible spaces of intervention in the social transformation. Finally, it expresses a demand for further feminist focus on the SSFEB as an emerging field of research and a teaching domain.

Building on the previous arguments, this article is structured in three parts. The first part offers a short review of the main international and Serbian-language literature in the field, issued as theoretical background for the development of a methodological frame in further sections of the article. In the second part, several neoliberal myths are deconstructed and discussed, using the corpus of my own empirical findings. The third part explains the impact of the gendered business and institutional environment by considering the roles of big capital and the state. The arguments presented lead to the conclusion that the economic, social and moral benefits for women in SSFEB as well as the possibilities of transforming gender relations through gender policies are strongly limited by the interests of large-scale capital and the neoliberal state.

**Literature Review**

Neoliberalism has become a dominant ideological economic and political project throughout much of the world from the 1970s, spreading to the socialist countries by the end of the 1980s. It emphasizes the belief that a single world market and a radical change in the organization of capitalism, focusing upon individualism through entrepreneurship and new managerialism, will bring citizens benefits (Friedman, 1962). Different theoretical approaches and increasing empirical evidence deny the idea that a reconstitution of state powers through privatization, finance and market processes are ethnic, class and gender neutral (Razavi, 2012: 423–437; Bedford and Rai, 2010: 1–18). In the context of neoliberal policies of austerity it is also well documented that neoliberal ideology and the nature of neoliberal ‘faith based policy’ (Stedman, 2012) ignore the deeply gendered fissures in society (Hall and O’Shea, 2013:9).

Different feminist approaches have explored the ways in which various practices of neoliberalism incorporate and reinforce existing gender inequalities (Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson, 2008; Kováts, 2016; Sweetman, 2008), including with regard to entrepreneurship and management (Ahl and Marlow, 2012:
Feminist economists have warned for years that debates about globalization, neoliberalism and new managerialism need to be liberated from many myths, and that feminists need to stop neoliberal policies from further undermining women’s agency (Boersma et. al, 2002). Contrary to the neoliberal myth that entrepreneurship is an open and accessible domain where personal effort alone determines rewards and status, feminist research demonstrates that there is a persistent gender bias within the entrepreneurial discourse.

Women in SSFEB have a diversity of dynamic, complex and often invisible roles (towards their husbands, partners, mothers, grandparents, nurses etc.) in business-owning families. The variety of their roles includes: women who were/are holding a leadership position, women married to founders, widows of founders, women “outsiders” who marry into a family business, women shareholders who are not working in the family business, girls and women who will be future shareholders or managers etc...Hence the family business literature often accepts a broader approach that recognizes that among the multiple roles that women play “some of their most significant contributions are made not inside the business but in the family” (Dugan, M. et al. 2011: 2). Since the ‘80s, women's involvement in family business has become an increasingly important topic of the academic inquiry. Gupta and Levenburg (2013: 346–367) identified three generations of women's contributions so far: from women's invisibility; to their contributions when their roles are more visible; to their different roles and opportunities within specific cultural contexts.

The inclusion of women's contributions enriches the family business literature and can help policy-makers to draft and implement better and more efficient policies and interventions, gender and culturally sensitive one. However, even the recent family business literature stays within managerial theoretical frames, abundant with gender-blind narratives (Dugan et al. 2011), and rarely moves beyond conventional assumptions. For example, “the family unit” and the “appropriate role of women“ in the economy and society presupposes a traditional concept of family and assumes women to undertake unpaid care work. Many career-minded women bump into the glass ceiling, or into informal barriers (Galiano, and Vinturella, 1995:177–188), and sacrifice career advancement in order to reduce gender conflicts (Marshack, 1993:355–369). So far, the ideal of the modern “entrepreneurial woman”, as an urban, autonomous person (Einstein, 2009) who employs her talents to achieve material wealth, is derived from the myth of the neo-liberal ideal citizen (Evans, 2015:148).

The relationships between feminism’s different forms, e.g. the so-called left and right feminists, are often antagonistic (Bowden and Mummery, 2010) and their divisions are reflected in different theoretical and ideological (neoliberal, socialist, Marxist, radical...) concerns (Evans, 2015; Fraser, 2013). At the core of all feminist discourse, however, independently of its historical waves, different contextual dynamic and mechanisms, influential moments and problematizations of specific issues, is the women's struggle for rights and their belief in the possibility of social transformation. Without entering into deeper debates on the historical trends of feminism and its contemporary differences,
it should be pointed out that Western feminist theories and approaches often
do not reflect on the situation at the semi-periphery. Hence, in this article, a
contextualized feminist theory of semi-peripherality (Hughson, 2015) is used
as an epistemological tool, which because of specificities of the semi-periphery
establishes the necessary link between global gendered experiences and
locality, and points out “how theories divert from semi-peripheral realities in a
fundamental way” (Blagojević, 2009:12). This work justifies and encourages my
intellectual effort to deconstruct two neoliberal myths, about women’s freedom
of choice, and about their emancipation, with the intention to show that women
SSFEB are abused as a means of support to the neoliberal state and big capital to
preserve economic survival and social stability of the country.

Research Frame and Findings
– Neoliberal Myths at the Semi-Periphery

In this article, I use analytical description of the literature in the field,
combined with my own empirical findings. The empirical data were collected
through 40 interviews and questionnaires (37 questions) in 30 MSFF lead by
couples and/or lead by one or more family members: 20 in-depth interviews
were conducted in 10 MSFF run by couples; and 20 in-depth interviews were
conducted in 20 family firms with men or women leading or involved in family
business. In-depth interviews and the separate interviewing were chosen as a
method to obtain independent opinions of individuals about family and business relations. These firms operated in 10 towns of different size in Serbia in the
traditional sectors of production and services: the production and purchasing
of food, bread and pastry, wine, water, animal feed stuffs, plastic packaging
and cereals, selling of bathroom interiors and tools, and the manufacture and
marketing of concrete products. Almost a quarter of the MSFF in the sample
were unregistered, i.e. operating in the informal/grey market economy.

The information and data obtained revolves on their socio-demographic
characteristics, educational level, previous working experience, motives for
starting the business, the sources and property structure of their start-up capital
and business success, whether or not they used professional or other forms of
support in business, business decision making, family and business balancing,
conflicts etc. The differences between “entrepreneur” and “manager” which
matters greatly in the managerial and entrepreneurial literature (Pekkala Kerr,
Kerr and Xu, 2017:18–47), here turned out to be rather inadequate. A majority
of the respondents see their role in MSFF as any act or process whereby they
take part in the life of a family firm through capital, labor or informational and
emotional support. They define themselves as the founders, the owners, the
managers, the employees, or the supporting and invisible family members. The
women from the survey sample are predominantly married to founders, widows
of founders, daughters of founders, supporting and invisible female family
members.
The collected data shows how they personally perceive various aspects of the establishment, management and development of the SSFEB, business, legal and institutional environment and feminism. Here I discuss only those aspects that show women’s freedom of choice and their empowerment through MSFF to be myths, which are not grounded in Serbia’s semi-peripheral reality. The main hypothesis is that women within SSFEB are used as an invisible means of support to big capital and the neoliberal state, through their unpaid household work and mainly supportive, mostly unpaid and low paid work within MSFF. Hence, these myths are deconstructed through the following two questions: 1. To what extent, if at all, do women have freedom of choice regarding the decision to enter and choose the role in household and business? 2. How do the women perceive their benefit of participation in family entrepreneurship?

The myth about women’s freedom of choose is explored through their perceived motives to enter and take up roles in the household and SSFEB. As Envick and Langford note (2000: 6–17) entrepreneurs who run small businesses tend to exhibit very different characteristics depending on whether they are self-employed or growth-oriented founders. However, the vast majority of the respondents do not primarily intend to innovate or expand their business, but to secure economic survival or maintain a certain standard for the family. Among the numerous factors that motivate all of them to take the risk and start, lead or follow on a family business, they emphasize the economic reasons as primary. In other words, motivation to earn money and a lack of other employment options (because of high unemployment), prevail. Non-financial reasons like, desire for autonomy, independence, flexibility, self-fulfillment, etc. remain secondary. Women are less likely than men to be attracted to the possibility of gains from family risky ventures.

Usually, women participate in family-run entrepreneurial ventures with two key motives. The first motive is to ensure the survival and financial stability of the family, and raising and educating children. The second one is to achieve the entrepreneurial ambitions of the family, their spouses or their own. In both cases, a strong gender bias is present in the form of a gender split within both family and business. The household work and care activities belong more to the wife and the business part and property belong either to both of them or exclusively to the husband, and/or to male relatives. Women’s role within the household can be seen through their position in the prevailing model of household resource allocation. Bargaining power within couples in the processes of intra-household allocation of resources (care work) predominantly follows a unitary model, then following bargaining non cooperative and cooperative model at least (Đurić Kuzmanović et al., 2016a: 190–208). Within the business, wives, daughters and other female siblings also face several gender biases in arriving at powerful positions because their parents, husbands and or relatives may be skeptical and sexist about their roles. For example, women are not readily accepted in managerial positions and are often willingly channeled into staff positions such as human resources and customer services with (in)direct supervision of men. The majority of women from the sample is seldom consulted on major business decisions and is rarely considered as successors to firm leadership if there is a male alternative and even
the sons in laws have more chance to take up business decision-making power. Hence, freedom of choice regarding the motives and decisions to enter a family business, as well as freedom to choose their role in SSFEB, is a myth.

Emancipation practices for women in SSFEB are estimated through women’s perception about their position at home and within the firm, their potential benefits or damages and their attitude towards feminism. Dominant proportions of the women from the sample consider the role that they have in home and business “normal”. They predominantly answered that in their lives it’s in the “normal order of things that a mother/wife should be devoted firstly to the family and then to the business”. Their prevailing answer was that they have “more than enough of household and caring work to do” and that “a supportive role for husbands also requires a lot of effort and time”. The fact that they usually manage the household budget give them the impression that they manage money, and often they experience being at home with the children and doing caring work as a benefit. However, about one third of women are unsatisfied with their position mostly both within the family and the firm and a few of couples were separated and/or divorced during the period of the research. Usually, the business would not improve their material status, but give them “a peace in personal life and opportunity to start from nothing again”. A few women, who were involved in the family business as daughters of the owners of firms, were seeking for possibilities to change power structures but only if they were/or are interested in being involved in family business; otherwise that “is not their business”. However, even the term feminist is not recognized within their narratives as “a part of their story, but of some other modern women, not ordinary women”.

Women in MSFF face the double challenge of bargaining with men who are both private and business partners and relatives. Gender power regimes strongly shape their business opportunities. The process of women’s emancipation does not rest on these myths, but rather on the possibility to change the dominant pattern of the specific patriarchal gender regime of “self-sacrificing micromatriarchy“ and „the masculinity crisis“ (Hughson, 2015: 142; Blagojević Hjuson, 2013: 35) which reproduce patriarchal and authoritarian relations and their strong subordination.

Business and Institutional Environment
- The Destructive Role of Big Capital and the State

MSFF in Serbia to a great extent cope with survival on the market due to an unfavorable business and institutional environment. This context is shaped by the neoliberal agenda and the forced strategy of deregulation, privatization and austerity which has been applied over the year in order to attract foreign direct financial investments. However, improvements in regulatory reforms to make it easier to do business (Doing Business 2018: 124) still leave questionable what the economic efficiency of business investments is. The economic, fiscal and taxation policies favor foreign capital and big companies, while labor and social
policies are used as an incentive for business efficiency through the free labor market reducing workers’ rights and increasing job insecurity (Dokmanovic, 2017). Such neoliberal macroeconomic strategy has led to new forms of social inequality, mainly due to the following: 1. differences in actors and their mode of acquisition of business capital; 2. changes in family insecurity due to socio-economic dynamics; and 3. specific gender dynamics. A successful family business is mainly based on two or three actors and capital acquisition processes, linked to the socialist and post-socialist period, which also includes the 1990s war through which Yugoslavia disintegrated. The first are the previously already existing entrepreneurial actors with pre-existing economic capital, professional knowledge and competence, as well as previously existing social connections and family business traditions. The second comes after the violent break-up of Yugoslavia and the subsequent post-socialist transformation of Serbia, with powerful new actors who obtained capital through newly institutionalized privatization of the social/public property. Regarding family insecurity, the third are new actors who entered the field. Those are people, who lost their jobs and who, without new employment opportunities, start “entrepreneurial ventures” in MSFF as a – largely unsuccessful – survival strategy.

After the 2008 financial crisis, family business was specifically addressed by various national and international institutions as a new life strategy, a preferred way of providing income, be it for subsistence or for a higher standard of living. Institutional support in Serbia was partially set up to accompany this new strategy, primarily in the areas of issuing building permits, execution of contracts and registration of property (Schwab, 2016). Those institutional reforms, however were more led by the interest of powerful “big men” and tycoons within the state and big companies in order to redistribute social wealth (Đurić Kuzmanović. 2014: 65–86) and less to create a friendly institutional and business environment for MSFF. The institutional promotion of MSFF as a tempting self-employment option, spread wide the illusion that individual actors are responsible for their own well-being and that a free market and minimal role of the state in that market are positive, as it serves as motivation for individual achievement. Actually, MSFF are used as a means of maintaining economic, social and political stability during the forced and tumultuous neoliberal post-socialist transformation. If it happened that such firms enjoy business success they often face the additional risk that within the corrupted milieu they are forced to pay additional (il)legal tax to stay in business, or else are forced to close. In such a context, the numerous small firms have small chances of surviving in the market having to battle with giants – as evidenced by the massive opening and closing of MSFF. Rather than being supported, they are slowly being destroyed. There is a strong need to redefine and reshape economic policies from only profit-driven to the kind that will be more oriented to the well-being of individuals, families and communities (Đurić Kuzmanović, 2010: 69–81). In that case, even small governmental incentives can help individuals who are risk tolerant to exit unemployment by starting their own business, instead of looking for paid work (Hombert et al. 2017). The first insight and a sketch of key legal issues in the field confirm that institutional framework still fails to respond to the specificities of family firms...
(Đurić and Ljubojević, 2016). Furthermore, current (de)engendering and (de)politisation of gender issues do not encourage the hope that gender equality is an important issue for the Serbian neoliberal state.

Widespread perceptions that the business and management domain is gender-neutral ignore how gender, capital and the state are mutually constituted. In the semi-periphery of the world system, gendered power structures based on the logic of capital and the neoliberal state, as well as patriarchal gender regimes reproduce the strong subordination of women. The subordination of women is not primarily due to a lack of women’s potential, but because of gender-biased treatment and inappropriate gender and economic policies. The possibilities of transforming gender relations through gender policy remain limited because policies do not derive from feminist critical contextual scientific discourse and do not correspond to the structural specifics of a semi-peripheral economy and society such as Serbia. The changes in gender regimes in Serbia are the result not only of state-directed non-development (Đurić Kuzmanović, 1997) and de-development (Blagojević Hjuson, 2013), but also of deeper and more long-term global neoliberal shifts.

Concluding remarks

The lack of feminist approaches in the domains of economy, entrepreneurship and family business is strongly visible in family entrepreneurship research. This field, at the intersection of family, family business and entrepreneurship, is still in its early developmental phase. Family entrepreneurship and business is a field in which gender relations in the private and public spheres are very strongly interlocked and gender-biased, affects both families and businesses. The outcome of our survey, despite the small size of our sample, indicates that gender blindness conceals a widespread patriarchal and authoritarian historical heritage and the reproduction of stubborn gender inequality. Empirical findings confirm that neoliberal ideas about the freedom of choice, which women are supposed to have and the opportunities for their emancipation through family entrepreneurship and business are myths. Male dominance and female subordination in SSFF are based on an economic system of semi-peripheral capital(ism), and patriarchy.

Key challenges for women's emancipation are fighting power structures based on the logic of capital, the neoliberal states of the semi-periphery of the world system, and their inherent patriarchal gender regimes, which virtualized the role of women in accordance with the needs of capital and reproduced the strong subordination of women. Without breaking patriarchal power relations and male domination, and without overcoming the interests of capital on which they are based, encouraging women's role in SSFF has not been sufficient to render them equal to their male colleagues. Nevertheless, the personal challenge that women face is to take their own responsibility for their life. It means to start to realize that they travel through life single, married, divorced, remarried, and widowed. In business, it points to their need to pull together all the information they can to start to plan and manage these processes, to think about
good advisors and to figure out the team. At the same time, their emancipation obviously needs socio-politico-economic empowerment and should be followed by wider solidarity, aid and support.

More research is needed with respect to all these issues. Large studies will likely yield a clearer picture about the long-term reproduction of patriarchal and authoritarian relations, but also show the emergence of new types of gender regimes among the younger generations entering family business. Deconstruction of the reproduction of the patriarchal matrix indicates the need to articulate a strategy aimed at encouraging the democratic and emancipatory potential of both women and men. The research findings show that possibilities of women’s emancipation and their entrance in SSFEB are limited by gender regimes, property relations and institutional conditions. It is a good base for further researching and theorizing the opportunities, obstacles and limits for emancipation of women through SSFEB.

Literature


