

Up Close and Inspired: Local Agency as Women-Led Entrepreneurship in Transitioning Rural Regions



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Describing rural regions as “left behind” has never sat comfortably with me. The term has become popular in policy circles over the past two decades as a way to articulate geographical inequalities, but it tends to be used uncritically, lumping together very different types of places and economic trajectories (Pike et al., 2022). Yet my discomfort with this language goes deeper than its conceptual fuzziness. *Left* behind. The verb feels wrong.

A place that is “left” is passive: it has been left, it has ceded the agency of movement to others. In this metaphor of regional relationships, some places move, in some way, “forward” while others are left without motion, without

agency. From my perspective as an anthropologist working on the ground in rural regions around the world, this is nonsensical. No one here stands still.

As an anthropologist of development, I have spent years observing change agency up-close in rural regions. I have seen change done to rural places by extractive external actors and peripheralising policies; I have also observed the change that actors in rural places create for themselves. Regional studies colleagues' growing interest in the role of agency in regional development (e.g. Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023) has opened valuable spaces for interdisciplinary dialogue.

For me, this space allows me to share insights from anthropology about how the micro-level actions of people and organisations can contribute to regional development paths. In seeking to answer the practical question that many of us care about, *What can be done to improve economic options in places where these are lacking?* different disciplines start from different angles and reveal different views. The anthropological lens focuses up close, on the ground in particular places, documenting what people in those places do and why and how they do it.

Currently, I am exploring how people manage economic change on the ground in two different rural regions: North West Tasmania, Australia and the Susquehanna River Valley of Pennsylvania, USA. Some of this work is being supported by a RSA-funded research project (MERSA scheme) through the project, "Women's Entrepreneurship and Rural Regional Revitalisation - Comparative Study". This study was sparked by years of observing a quiet but persistent phenomenon: that efforts to improve economic opportunities in rural places were often led by women.

I set out to explore this empirical phenomenon through an initial piece of in-depth, qualitative, comparative, ethnographic research. I crafted the project to explore the questions, *What role does women's entrepreneurship play in the development of economic paths in transitioning rural regions?* And, *What kinds of economic paths are women entrepreneurs seeking to create?* For my field sites, I chose two regions on opposite sides of the world from each other, but with a few key similarities.

North West Tasmania and the Susquehanna River Valley are both predominantly rural, agricultural and low-income regions in wealthy countries. Both have strong manufacturing and mining histories, and both are struggling with post-industrial

transitions as major employers downsize, close, or move offshore. Both have seldom-acknowledged legacies of colonisation and extraction that reverberate into the present. And in both of these regions, women are active as entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurs identify opportunity and configure resources in new ways to create value. They are typically founders of firms, but may also work across firms as institutional entrepreneurs (Baumgartner et al., 2013). Data collection via focus groups, observations, and in-depth interviews is still underway, but preliminary results from both regions confirm that women are active in both firm-foundation and institutional entrepreneurship. Further, the data are revealing some inspiring preliminary findings about women's role in the development of new economic paths in transitioning rural regions.

First, locally embedded women entrepreneurs are innovating across a range of industries in both regions; however, they are not very visible. While known and admired in particular circles, these entrepreneurs appear to operate largely under the radar. They are seldom visible in the press or public discourse. Further, women in these regions are often marginalised in high-level regional policy conversations, for instance on major infrastructure investments and new industry development. Such visible and high-status activities tend to be dominated by men.

These findings suggest that gendered cultural expectations may be limiting rural women entrepreneurs' "room to manoeuvre" (Hutchinson & Eversole, 2024), and thus their visibility and policy influence. Rural women are peripheral actors in peripheral places. Yet this research shows that rural women are, nevertheless, active agents of change in regional economies. Through firm-foundation, cross-organisational community organising, and less-prestigious leadership roles, women entrepreneurs are finding room to manoeuvre in order to influence the economic trajectories of their regions.

Preliminary results also suggest that women-led entrepreneurship is playing a distinctive role in economic path development for these regions. Specifically, entrepreneurs in this study appear to be embedding an explicit social and environmental sustainability focus into existing regional industries. New path creation is less evident, as creating entirely new economic paths requires a level of investment and influence generally unavailable to rural women. Instead, these women's influence on regional economies can potentially be theorised as *path*

renewal, which leads to – “major changes of an existing regional path into a new direction based on the infusion of new analytic or symbolic knowledge” (Hassink et al., 2019).

Armed with knowledge and insights, even without significant capital and influence, rural women entrepreneurs are reimagining regional industries such as agriculture, property development, and knowledge services, as vehicles for regional sustainability. Their ventures are promoting economic and social revitalisation, green industry transitions, and social and cultural empowerment, in and beyond their home regions.

As my student researchers and I conclude our data collection, we are feeling inspired by our up-close view of entrepreneurial agency in so-called “left behind” rural places, and what this can teach us about regional development possibilities.

References

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