

Women Entrepreneurs in Finnish ICT Industry

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INTRODUCTION

The Nordic countries—Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden—offer interesting material to investigate gendering processes. In these societies, gender equality policy has long traditions and many propagated goals have been researched: women and men participate in paid work almost to the same extent; women make a significant contribution to family income, because it rests on a dual income model; public, low cost day-care is available to all children over one year of age; women's level of education is exceeding that of men's. Yet, the labour market is notoriously segregated both horizontally, meaning that men and women work in different occupations, and vertically meaning that men hold high ranking positions in public and private organisations. The focal phenomenon of this article, entrepreneurship shows even more profound segregation with women and men enterprising in different lines of business and within the same lines of business in different branches (Kovalainen, 1995; Spilling & Berg, 2000).

Nordic experience shows that gaining access to men-only spaces does not bring the same prestige, make women equally influential, and powerful as men. Thus, the question remains what are the processes which hinder women entrepreneurs from achieving a significant position? The article offers one possible answer by reporting a study by Pietiläinen (2002) who set out to investigate what kinds of spaces for entrepreneurial action women business owners are offered in the Finnish information and communication technology (ICT) industry.

BACKGROUND

Since the early 1980s, academic interest in women entrepreneurs has increased steadily due to the increasing impact businesses owned by women have on society and the economy. Presently female entrepreneurship research is a subfield of entrepreneurship studies (Carter, Anderson, & Shaw 2001). In this field, scholars are united in their view that women's unequal access to economic power needs to be changed.

Within the field, researchers differ in their views about the sources of gender inequality and the means to analyse and battle it. This, of course, is based on the presumption that inequality is undesirable. In Pietiläinen's study the different views were categorised into three broad empowerment agendas in female entrepreneurship literature. Table 1 displays the three feminist lines of inquiry. The first two lines of inquiry provided the study with analytical concepts which aided the interpretation of gendering processes in the empirical material. The third approach "doing gender," was followed throughout the research process.

Gender Equality

The overwhelming majority of research is inspired by "gender equality." Researchers following this line of inquiry believe that overt discrimination prevents women from realising their full entrepreneurial potential (Fischer, Reuber, & Dyke, 1993). Over the years they have devoted much research into identi-

ying what kinds of barriers women have to overcome before, during, and after a business start up. Results point to gender differences and cultural prejudices. The latter have been identified as the biggest obstacle for entrepreneurial women. Repeatedly, they encounter gender-based stereotyping and suffer from lack of credibility and support (e.g., Carter & Kolvereid, 1998; Fabowale & Orser, 1995; Kolvereid, Shane, & Westhead, 1993).

Voice to Women

Researchers who are interested in investigating women entrepreneurs’ “own voice” and experiences start from the assumption that the source of inequality is women’s lifetime experiences of subjugation. These studies represent the second empowerment agenda. Socialization into a woman’s position results in uniquely female worldview, and consequently, in different entrepreneurial behaviours than men’s (Ahl, 2002). This research has excelled in revealing that women’s entrepreneurial choices are greatly shaped by the overall pattern of women’s labour market behaviour, life style, and stage of life (e.g., Brush, 1992; Goffee & Scase, 1985; Green & Cohen, 1995; Sundin & Holmquist, 1989).

Doing Gender

Recently, a growing number of European researchers claim that inequality in entrepreneurship is a result of gendering processes which privilege male-typical behaviours and values. Their proposition is to make use of the concept “doing gender” (West &

Zimmerman, 1991). These scholars suggest that researchers of female entrepreneurship need to take a critical look at their own empowerment agendas to move forward. Critical assessment of research inspired by “gender equality” thinking shows that gender equality, in fact, diverts attention away from deeply masculine connotations of entrepreneurship. “Voice to women,” in turn, suffers from searching for unique female behaviours, which does more to mystify female experience than to give space for real life women entrepreneurs with their differing aspirations, possibilities, and life strategies. The proponents of “doing gender” approach suggest that effort should be put into exposing the gendered power relations at work in entrepreneurship (Kovalainen, 1995), and move toward change in gendered social and symbolic arrangements governing entrepreneurial activity (Ahl, 2002).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Pietiläinen’s study (ibid.) applied qualitative methodology to identify what kinds of spaces for entrepreneurial action women business owners are offered in ICT industry. Textual analysis was used on a city’s strategy documents, media articles about one female-owned new media company Nicefactory Ltd, and transcribed interviews with the company’s female owner-entrepreneurs. Empirical material covered the years 1997-2002. As to the theoretical background gender was examined as doing. “Doing gender” approach was chosen because it allowed for studying gender as a process, not as individual

Table 1. Three lines of feminist inquiry in female entrepreneurship literature

Line of Inquiry	Source of Inequality	Analytical Concepts	Empowerment Agenda	Examples of Research
Gender equality	Overt discrimination of women	Gender stereotyping; gender differences	Removal of obstacles; incentives to women; change of attitudes	Kolvereid, Shane, & Westhead, 1993
Voice to women	Women’s experiences of subjugation	Female typical qualities and characteristics; Female typical experiences	Creating women-only opportunities and spaces; raising consciousness; change of attitudes	Brush, 1992; Sundin & Holmquist, 1989
Doing gender	Gendering processes which give power to men and male typical behaviours	Gendered social and symbolic arrangements; gendered power relations; hidden masculine connotations	Exposing gendered power relations; change in social + symbolic arrangements; change of attitudes	Ahl, 2002; Kovalainen, 1995

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