

## Women in business: entrepreneurship, ethics and efficiency

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**Abstract** This article begins by reviewing some of the main theoretical approaches to entrepreneurship. We then discuss the measures proposed in the literature to benefit women, facilitating reconciliation of work and family life and examining the view of authors who consider the negative effects of these measures. Finally, we contemplate situations where the measures benefiting women are based on economic or ethical reasons. This last section qualifies the universalist approach underlying work-family life reconciliation, describing the context for interaction between women and entrepreneurial activity.

**Keywords** Women · Entrepreneurship · Universalist approach · Ethics

### Introduction

Data shows that women are important in business. The National Foundation for Women Business Owners indicated that in 1995 38% of business owners in the United States were women and they employed a quarter of the labour force. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005), 23.3% of the country's top executives are women and they account for 45.9% of executives in general. In other capitalist countries such as Spain, which can be considered to occupy an average position among the most developed countries, 29.14% of micro firms (less than 10

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workers) are managed by women and 47.21% of self-employed business owners are women. According to data from 2008, women in Spain constitute 43.51% of the labour force.

The importance of women in the world of work as business owners or employees has become a significant phenomenon in recent decades throughout the developed world, making it advisable to review the situation of women in business (as entrepreneurs) and the way that their situation in the social and family context (as conditioned by gender) facilitates or hinders their work or entrepreneurial activity.

## Entrepreneurship and women entrepreneurs

In this section we refer to the different dimensions of entrepreneurship. The *individual* dimension, related to personality traits that facilitate opportunity discovery; the *corporate* dimension, linked to the cooperation and experience obtained in an organisation; the *social* dimension of entrepreneurial activity, with its distinguishing feature of commitment to social needs; and the dimension concerning women and how (and why and under what circumstances) on the basis of their particular gender conditioning, they engage in entrepreneurial activity.

The first two dimensions, in conjunction with others such as the existence of social or family networks (Hitt et al. 2001; Wong 2008) are the basis for any entrepreneurial activity. The social or gender dimensions of entrepreneurship correspond to particular types of action, where the distinguishing characteristic of the social dimension is *commitment to society* and the special feature of the gender dimension is that the activities are carried out by *women*, a part of the population with different family and social conditioning. Ultimately, a significant part of these particular dimensions of entrepreneurship, and more so in the case of social entrepreneurial activity than in the case of women entrepreneurs, can be explained on the basis of the individual and corporate dimensions of entrepreneurial activity.

### Three dimensions of entrepreneurial activity

As we have said, the entrepreneurship literature distinguishes different fields in the study of entrepreneurial activity. The first of them, at least in logical order, corresponds to the *entrepreneur as individual agent* (E). Individual action is entrepreneurial when, on the basis of personal traits or characteristics (intelligence and intuition) it is able to discover new opportunities (Chell 2008). These characteristics are partly innate and partly a product of education and the influence of society (Nga and Shamuganathan 2010), and they lead to the appearance of unique idiosyncratic abilities that extend the discretionary nature of economic and social opportunities (Baumol 1968; Loasby 2007). Thus, the conception of entrepreneur as the discoverer of new opportunities, breaks with the rational man theory of economics, and opens the economic system to growth or the expansion of its business cycles (Schumpeter 1934, 1950).

Key contributions in the entrepreneurship literature, however, provide a broader definition. Entrepreneurship involves “the study of sources of opportunities; the processes of discovery, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities; and the set of

individuals who discover, evaluate, and exploit them” (Shane and Venkataraman 2000: 218). This concept of entrepreneurs, or the roles they are identified with, is broadly shared (Venkataraman 1997; Shane et al. 2003; Cuervo 2005; Barret and Mayson 2008) and has two dimensions: the dimension mentioned above corresponding to the individual entrepreneur as *discoverer* of *opportunities* (Cuervo 2005); and the dimension that considers the entrepreneur, in addition to discoverer, as the agent who *exploits opportunities by organising new combinations of factors* (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001; Hayton 2005).

When entrepreneurs’ fundamental characteristics stem from belonging to a company and a given economic sector and their ability to discover new combinations of factors is a consequence of the experience, relations and cooperation obtained in that company, they are known as corporate entrepreneurs (CE). The way in which CE configure their organisational context and learn from it is fundamental and is just as important as their individual characteristics and abilities (Barney and Wright 1998; Hayton 2005).

In entrepreneurial activity, discovering and exploiting opportunities through new combinations of factors are linked in a complex phenomenon that includes “innovation, venturing and strategic renewal” (Zotto and Gustafsson 2008: 97), where strategic renewal is understood as organisational change. New combinations of factors can, in themselves, be radical innovations, but small gradual marginal changes, accumulating small organisational and technical improvements can also lead to important innovations based on the CE’s ability to lead change and facilitate participation and commitment.

Another form of entrepreneurial activity is known as *social entrepreneurship* (SE). According to the initial explanation of this form of entrepreneurship “[the] individual personality of social entrepreneurs provides the impetus to high will-power that drives passion (and) innovativeness (...) to integrate social, environmental and economic aspects” (Nga and Shamuganathan 2010: 261, 263). If this motivation towards improving living conditions and distributing socially necessary goods is fulfilled (Austin and Wei-Skillern 2006; Ridley-Duff 2008), SE will contribute towards solving the problems created in social sectors or societies where government action fails and there are no incentives for private initiative.

Two questions to highlight here are first, that SE transcends what are normally regarded as philanthropic or charitable actions. SE promotes a more enduring and engaging solution to social problems, seeking to create value by discovering innovative and integrative ways (Kurucz et al. 2008). Secondly, in addition to underlining the differences between SE and individual and corporate entrepreneurship, the close relationships and complementarities between them must also be highlighted. The intuition and intelligence that enable the discovery of new ways of integrating social, environmental and economic issues, creating value for society (SE), are part of the same personality traits studied in individual entrepreneurship (E) and, furthermore, the way entrepreneurs lead the organisations they manage to achieve cooperation, new combinations of factors and exploitation of opportunities (CE), belong to the same set of problems that SE must solve.

Finally, this article examines more deeply *women’s entrepreneurship* (WE), a name that has not been coined as a distinct form of entrepreneurship but as an entrepreneurial activity carried out under clearly different conditioning factors and

circumstances in a society where the predominant ways of doing business and models for success are male (Calás et al. 2007).

### The women's entrepreneurship dimension

Women entrepreneurs must obviously have intuition to perceive opportunities (E) and be able to obtain support in an organisation from which they obtain experience and cooperation (CE), but their family and social context generally reduce the time and energy they have to perceive reality and act upon it. Furthermore, the question of whether women and men have different characteristics in terms of the way they carry out entrepreneurial activity, or whether it is all fruit of social differences, is an unresolved question that is further obscured by the radical feminist position that believes that highlighting the inherent differences between men and women can help to maintain discrimination (Calás et al. 2007).

Authors who underline the reduction of differences as the way to improve women's situation in their family and social contexts and consequently, their actions in business, include Brush (1992, 1997) and Brush et al. (2009), Konrad and Mangel (2000), Cowling and Taylor (2001), Sandberg (2003), Burke (2007), Konrad (2007) and Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2007). After correcting for unfair social differences, women do have different characteristics; and examination of the extent to which these biological and social differences can provide advantages, different skills and ways of achieving business success need to be examined. Although, as already mentioned, there has been little research on this question, it is challenged by those who believe that highlighting the differences delays progress towards equity (Calás et al. 2007).

In the literature on women's working conditions, Burke (2007: 112–114) summarises the work of various researchers (Stroh et al. 1992; Tharenou et al. 1994; Tharenou and Conroy 1994; Kirchmeyer 1998, 1999; Sturges 1999) and reaches the general conclusion that women and men need different career models if we are to benefit from women's skills and talents. Despite the wide variety of approaches and procedures in these studies it is possible to outline some overall results. According to Stroh and Tharenou in particular, the most important determinants of men and women's professional careers and the differences between them are *human capital*, *support* from interpersonal relations (relations between equals, mentoring), the *role of gender* at individual level (personality, sex) and *family status* and/or set of family obligations.

Some consequences of these factors in men and women's professional careers are: (1) A greater variance in the success achieved by men in their professional careers than in the success achieved by women (Kirchmeyer 1998). (2) Women, in general, receive lower salaries and/or promotion than men, in compensation for their educational levels and experience (Kirchmeyer 1999). (3) At equivalent or similar levels of education, women obtain less promotion than men (Tharenou et al. 1994). (4) The existence of mentors (advisors or facilitators) only has positive effects on men's salaries (Kirchmeyer 1999). (5) Women with children have a lower perception of objectives of success at work (Kirchmeyer 1999). (6) The existence of children has a negative effect on women's salaries (Kirchmeyer 1999). (7) The existence of children and caring for them reduces women's experience at work and means less

progress and promotion (Tharenou et al. 1994; Tharenou and Conroy 1994). With reference to ideas presented by Tharenou et al., according to Burke (2007: 113), women have “lower managerial advancement than men because of their lower human capital inputs of training and work experience, structural barriers in regard to promotion and training and the multiple roles of manager and mother.”

Consequently, it seems there is a need to create structural and employment conditions adapted to each situation that enable women to develop and provide their skills and knowledge at all levels of an organisation. An important related issue is the *set of family relations women assume*, especially when they have to carry out the dual role of employee and mother or manager and mother. Some aspects of the abovementioned empirical works refer to this last question and a significant part of the literature on women emphasises the need *to improve their working conditions in relation to their family obligations* (Osterman 1995; Cowling and Taylor 2001; Konrad 2007), and in particular, when their family obligations are linked to maternity (Brush et al. 2009).

Work-personal life initiatives which attempt to harmonise both worlds “encompass a variety of practices that aid workers in balancing the demands of work and personal life (...). Many of these practices are aimed in particular at helping workers to deal with family obligations.” (Konrad and Mangel 2000: 1226). Konrad (2007: 263) indicates the importance of these policies for women and points out that the dual burden of full-time work and attending to the home demands ways of reducing domestic pressure and conflicts. Generally, women suffer these pressures more, but there is evidence that the male member of a couple and his productivity are also affected (Konrad 2007: 263–664). The three significant human resource measures or practices in the literature for mitigating women’s work-family or personal life conflicts are *part-time work*, *flexible working* and in the case of the early years of motherhood, *access to child-care centres*.

These approaches, directed at reducing social differences, are required to improve the situation of women and consequently, their entrepreneurial ability and participation in business. But there is an important drawback as this approach means admitting the status quo. Women are helped to attend to their “specific obligations”, *taking responsibility*, although more flexibly and with better facilities, for the tasks “inherent” to their feminine condition.

This is the justified fear of radical feminism. That many things are changed so that everything can remain the same. That is why Calás et al. (2007: 92) point out that “Gendering, racing, sexualizing of organizations occur through ordinary, daily procedures and decisions that segregate, manage, control and construct hierarchies in which gender, class and race are involved (...), and through symbols, images and ideologies that legitimate inequalities and differences”. Recognising differences in order to mitigate them, can also be used to consolidate them, especially because men-women differences are not just a case of glaring social injustices; there are some biological and family differences in the stage of motherhood that cannot disappear. In a fair, balanced world this should, as Brush et al. (2009) point out, lead to an examination of the extent to which these differences can provide advantages, different skills and different ways of achieving success in business; but in the real world in which we live, as Calás et al. (2007: 99–100), point out “‘sex/gender differences’ are the effect and not the cause of these same structural and discursive circumstances; and, that ‘women’s ways of...’ may contribute to further exploitation

and devaluation of women's entrepreneurial activities, by advancing a 'femininity' constructed under the 'masculine gaze' as a generic managerial tool."

Thus, designing social policies to enable a better fit between women's professional and family obligations may help to perpetuate discrimination against women in the same way that, in business, these policies can help to keep women in secondary positions in the hierarchy. What, then, is the solution? How can we progress towards understanding the phenomenon and initiate a process for improving the situation of women in business?

The ethnographic approach of Bruni et al. (2004a, b), supported by Calás et al. (2009), shows that interaction between gender and entrepreneurial activity (women and business, men and business) has, beyond what is strictly biological, a mutually constituent character: "through gendered practices performed on a daily basis (...), doing entrepreneurship is also doing gender" (Calás et al. 2009: 561). But this approach, which broadens our understanding of the phenomenon, leaves the solution to historical evolution, dependent on society evolving in a way that resolves the problem. And it still begs the question of how can we begin to improve the situation of women in society and business. The following section attempts to provide an answer, showing the context in which women and entrepreneurial activity interact.

### **Women entrepreneurs. Efficiency and ethics**

As mentioned above, the three human resource measures or practices that appear in the literature for mitigating women's work-family conflict are *part-time work*, *flexible working* and access to *child-care centres*. Continuing the above discussion, the two questions we want to clarify here are: when it is appropriate to carry out these measures or why they are advisable for companies' economies; and if there are situations when work-family life reconciliation is appropriate on ethical grounds but not on economic grounds.

#### Reconciliation between work and family life, women and individual entrepreneurship

The argument that to favour employee productivity or managers' commitment to the organisation (with particular reference to women) work-family life reconciliation policies are appropriate (Konrad and Mangel 2000; Konrad 2007), is undoubtedly appropriate for a very significant number of economic sectors and businesses and in particular for managers and qualified employees. In the case of women managers who engage in entrepreneurial activities or new combinations of factors and innovations, facilitating reconciliation with family life and assuming the cost it involves for the company, is advisable for economic reasons. Also, in the case of women who carry out qualified work or work characterised by intangibles, assuming the cost of reconciliation with family life is also economically advisable. In both cases it is hard to find all the significant information on compliance with objectives and the productivity obtained, so there can be a substantial distance between optimum fulfilment and real fulfilment if the manager and or qualified worker is not provided with conditions which facilitate their commitment to the organisation.

Tsui et al. (1997) *social exchange contract* is appropriate to describe cases where the company's effort to provide ongoing employment or facilitate family life is expected to be met with reciprocal behaviour from the employee or the manager, in the form of increased productivity and/or getting involved in the problems and objectives of the company as a whole. Dedication, effort, progress in skills and concern to meet objectives are expected in return for organising work in ways that facilitate personal life. In the case of the individual dimension of women entrepreneurs (E) this approach is important because the difficulties of reconciling work or professional and family life can impair women's availability, intuition and ability to perceive new opportunities.

Therefore, in the case of entrepreneurial women considered as individual entrepreneurs there are *general or universal circumstances which always make work-family life reconciliation advisable*. That is, in the case of WE as individual entrepreneurs, the social exchange contract proposed by Tsui et al. (1997) is always advisable. In this case, we are in the realm of universalism.

### Work-family life reconciliation, women and corporate entrepreneurship

Women who perform the role of corporate entrepreneurs (CE), have an even more pressing need than individual entrepreneurs (if that is possible) for work-family life reconciliation in order to cope with their many tasks. In addition to discovering new opportunities, CE also includes organisation of the factors of production (new factors and new combinations of factors) and strategic renewal (new plans and objectives, and organisational and technical innovations linked to new combinations of factors). The question here is: How can women entrepreneurs achieve these new combinations of factors? What sort of policies and relations should they have with subordinates to facilitate CE? More specifically, and in relation to this article, what human resource policies and practices should be used in relation to the women employees they have to manage, taking into account their different levels of qualification? In economic terms, is it worth investing in work-family life reconciliation for low-qualified women employees?

The response to the last two questions is that as corporate entrepreneurs, women entrepreneurs must mobilise all their collaborators and the majority of their employees, getting them all to cooperate and converge on the same objectives, thereby broadening entrepreneurial ability. This again brings us back to the *social exchange contract* (Tsui et al. 1997), in a universalist context where these policies are always advisable.

For Konrad and Mangel (2000), programmes oriented towards better quality work life by facilitating the balance between work and personal life are advisable for economic reasons, because they enable better CE performance. The above authors emphasise that such programmes persuade employees (at different levels of qualification) to make greater effort, beyond that required simply to remain in employment; and they add that since not all companies provide such programmes for employees, those which do establish the social exchange contract will have better employee retention (of female employees in particular). Therefore, economic advisability or simply intelligent action to obtain greater efficiency, explain the application of the social exchange contract.

Furthermore, CE, in an effort to mobilise all collaborators, does not as a general rule extend to all employees, so what policies should be applied to less qualified employees who also need work-family life reconciliation, but have not been taken into account to improve CE?

In the case of simple jobs, where there are no significant problems for measuring productivity, the most advisable option for the company can be to ensure sufficient productivity levels by supervision or other forms of control (Alchian and Demsetz 1972), ignoring social problems that reduce benefits. This is a case of what Tsui et al. (1997) have called a *quasi spot contract* where the employee's relationship with the organisation "is defined in terms of specified activities for a set compensation (...); (and) the employer's obligation to the employee is confined to rewards that are defined largely in monetary terms." (Tsui et al. 1997: 1091–1092).

The *quasi spot contract* makes sense because the social exchange contract can be more expensive. The decision to establish pre-school centres to care for employees' children is generally very costly; and flexible working policies can lead to problems of meeting demand and modifications in management forms and practice which may impact productivity.

The literature mostly tends towards universalism (Tsui et al. 1997), especially in issues related to the social situation of women (Konrad and Mangel 2000; Konrad 2007; Burke 2007), but if it cannot be argued that work-family life reconciliation is advisable in all cases, then the universalist argument breaks down.

When women's jobs are low qualified and these employees are not taken into account to broaden CE by involving them in greater commitment and participation, the cost of reconciling work and family life cannot be justified for economic reasons linked to productivity. The justification in this case can only be supported by ethical reasons.

The classic contributions of Contingency Theory (CT) from the 1960s establish that different types of environment and different types of tasks or different types of work require different forms of management for it to be efficient (Burns and Stalker 1961; Perrow 1967; Donaldson 2001). Management is stricter and more bureaucratic in the case of simple, low qualified jobs, similar to the *quasi spot contract* and more flexible, based on employee participation and rewards linked to participation and recognition, in the case of qualified employees, similar to the *social exchange contract*. This is the theoretical basis for the *absence of general or universal circumstances that always make the social exchange contract advisable* and the reason why work-family life reconciliation has an economic basis in some cases and only an ethical basis in others.

When CE broadens the set of collaborators so that they consequently increase their commitment and cooperation (and their experience and education), universalism will have greater scope, contracting will be based on social exchange and the economic advisability of reconciling work and family life. When the set of CE collaborators is reduced, universalism will have less scope, the type of contract will be more like the spot contract and there will be more need to argue for the reconciliation of work and family life in ethical terms (the only meaningful terms in this case).

In companies where simple, low qualified jobs predominate, entrepreneurial action will move in more hierarchical and formalised structures, with a lower proportion of employees involved in CE; and in companies characterised by



qualified and/or creative work, structures will be more flexible, employees' contribution to CE will be more valuable and more employees will undertake entrepreneurial activities. But this does not only depend on the simple or qualified and creative nature of the work but also depends on managers' vision and their capacity for social construction, adding company members to entrepreneurial activity.

Universalism in favour of reconciling work and family life is very important, but in many cases cannot be justified in economic terms in low qualified jobs. In these cases, work-family life reconciliation is still important, but because it is ethically or morally advisable rather than economically advisable

As company structures change, incorporating more qualified work and undertaking broader corporate entrepreneurialism, the economic advisability of work-family life reconciliation is likely to lead to a better situation for women in business (as employees and managers). Where this is not the case, the situation of women in business can only be improved by public policies and human resource policies in companies that adopt a position of ethical advisability.

This is the context in which interaction between gender and entrepreneurial activity (women and business, men and business) has a mutually constituent nature. We hope that understanding of the context will help to improve the situation of women in society and business.

For other relevant aspects about the importance of women in business: Chen and Chiu (2009), Rodriguez and Santos (2009), Broadbridge (2010), Lee (2010), Lin (2010), Pardo-del-Val (2010), Rueda-Armengot and Peris-Ortiz (2010) and Tsuchiya (2010).

## Conclusions

There is an individual and social need to improve women's working conditions with measures that enable them to reconcile work and family life. When this is achieved, their activities as women entrepreneurs, in the individual and corporate dimensions, will lead to more personal success and add greater value to society.

The corporate entrepreneur dimension of entrepreneurial women or the extent to which the actions of entrepreneurial women require commitment and cooperation from their collaborators in the organisation have important implications for the economic basis (economic advisability) or ethical basis for work-family life reconciliation measures. If CE requires broad cooperation from all members in the organisation, the economic advisability of reconciling work and family life will be universal, that is, it would be advisable in all cases. Where this is not so, and there is a significant number of women with low qualified jobs who are not considered for involvement in entrepreneurial activity, work-family life reconciliation can and must be based on ethical reasons, but cannot be supported by economic reasons.

That is the context within which the relationships between gender and entrepreneurship (WE) have a constituent character.

But we could also ask: How do relations between gender and entrepreneurship act on organisations and social activities? If "doing entrepreneurship is also doing gender" and they are mutually constituent, can WE actions be expected to change

male models of success in capitalist society and through CE find economic reasons, in addition to ethical ones to make work-family life reconciliation advisable as a general rule? Is there another way to institutionalise capitalist society's models of behaviour and success from the power of WE? These questions will only be answered by historical evolution, but if women who reach power adopt different behavioural models from those of men, they can become an extraordinarily important element for social change. An unforeseen revolution could occur.

The simple answer is that the system does not allow different behaviours, but this will depend on how many women are close to power (WE) and the value of their abilities for the system. They could start a revolution based on intelligence.

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