GUEST EDITORIAL

Studies on women's entrepreneurship from Nordic countries and beyond

Leona Achtenhagen
Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping, Sweden, and
Malin Tillmar
Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to direct attention to recent research on women's entrepreneurship, focusing on Nordic countries.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper encourages research that investigates how context, at the micro, meso and macro level, is related to women's entrepreneurship, and acknowledges that gender is socially constructed.

Findings – This paper finds evidence that recent calls for new directions in women's entrepreneurship research are being followed, specifically with regard to how gender is done and how context is related to women's entrepreneurial activities.

Originality/value – This paper assesses trends in research on women's entrepreneurship, mainly from the Nordic countries.

Keywords Gender, Women, Entrepreneurialism, Context, Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Research work

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

The emergence of women's entrepreneurship as an academic topic is often traced back to the 1980s (Goffe and Scace, 1985; Hisrich and Brush, 1986). Since then, the phenomenon of women's entrepreneurship has triggered considerable interest, both from policy makers and academic researchers around the world. In Sweden, a pioneering study on women's entrepreneurship was conducted by Sundin and Holmquist (1989, 1991). Provoked by statements that there were no women entrepreneurs, these researchers traced and studied the total population of women business owners through empirical fieldwork. Their work was ground-breaking in developing the field in Nordic countries[1] and beyond (Spilling and Gunnerud Berg, 2000). At the international level, the Diana Project (initiated in 1997 by US-based professors Candida G. Brush, Elisabeth J. Gatewood, Nancy M. Carter, Myra M. Hart, and Patricia G. Green) has, of course, played a crucial role in developing the academic field (Holmquist and Carter, 2009) and for creating commitment among researchers to the women's entrepreneurship research agenda. Since its establishment, the Diana Project has developed into an

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international research project involving scholars from 23 countries, including several Nordic countries (Alsos *et al.*, 2010).

Several scholars have highlighted the relevance of context for studies of entrepreneurship in general (Johannisson and Monsted, 1998; Welter, 2011), and women's entrepreneurship in particular (Hytti, 2005). This special issue of the International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship focuses on women's entrepreneurship research from the Nordic context, with papers mainly drawn from the "Gender and Entrepreneurship" track of the 2011 annual International Council for Small Business conference in Stockholm. In addition to three papers in this special issue from the Nordic countries, a fourth paper takes a worldwide perspective. Therefore, we, as guest editors, take this opportunity to focus on research findings from Sweden and other Nordic countries to set the scene for these later contributions[2].

Sundin and Holmquist (1989) studied the phenomenon of women's entrepreneurship in a country which, according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2011, is characterized by a comparatively small gender gap (ranking fourth after Iceland, Norway and Finland) (Hausmann *et al.*, 2011). Sundin and Holmquist's study found a total of 65,000 women running businesses in Sweden, representing around 25 percent of the business owners[3]. Yet, they concluded that women's business ownership could be characterized by three key terms: "invisibility", "diversity", and "adjustment". Namely, they found that despite the relatively high percentage of women owning and running businesses, these women entrepreneurs were largely invisible in many contexts. These female-owned businesses, similar to their male-owned counterparts, displayed a diversity of characteristics, depending on the industry, size, legal form and geographical area. However, female entrepreneurs typically adjusted their businesses to the family situation. The authors identified clear patterns in the women's choice of business sector depending on whether or not they were single, married/in a partnership or running a business together with their partner. This led them to question the common assumption that women entrepreneurs tend to prefer "typical female sectors" per se, rather suggesting that women entrepreneurs self-select into those sectors partly because of their adjustment to the family situation.

Moreover, more recent studies have confirmed that the three key terms identified by Sundin and Holmquist (1989) still appear valid 20 years later (Sundin and Tillmar, 2010a). Research by Swedish scholars has confirmed the invisibility of women's entrepreneurship in various practices (Javefors-Grauers, 2002; Tillmar, 2007), discourse (Pettersson, 2002) and in research (Ahl, 2004). If women entrepreneurs remain invisible in a country often praised for its gender equality, it is not surprising that similar patterns emerge in other countries. Achtenhagen and Welter (2011), for example, found that women entrepreneurs are greatly under-represented in German newspaper reporting. The heterogeneity of women's entrepreneurship has also been confirmed in international studies, illustrating that there is not one generic kind of woman entrepreneur (Gatewood *et al.*, 2003). This contradiction between the general perception of gender equality in Sweden, and other Nordic countries, and the persisting gender-based (i.e. largely male-dominated) power structures and discourses, might very well have contributed to the great interest in gender studies and women's entrepreneurship within these national contexts. This research interest was further fueled by Swedish scholar Ahl (2004, 2006), who directed attention to the gendering of entrepreneurship research through her discourse analysis of international research texts.

In Sweden, Carin Holmquist and Elisabeth Sundin continue to be important drivers of the research focus on women's entrepreneurship through their "Female Entrepreneurship and Management" research program, funded by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth. The program engaged around a dozen researchers in the field, putting Sweden firmly on the women's entrepreneurship research map (Sundin and Holmquist, 1996, 2002). This research program has also worked actively with complementing (women's) entrepreneurship theory with gender theory (Javefors-Grauers, 2002; Lindgren, 2000; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006) as well as with policy, practice and support systems. The continuing tradition at many Nordic universities to write PhD theses in their respective languages makes a bulk of the highly interesting findings that have emerged from this research program not accessible to an international audience, thereby limiting its impact on developing the field internationally, although they of course inspire theory-building efforts in the Nordic countries (Dareblom, 2005; Javefors-Grauers, 2002; Hedfeldt, 2008; Ljunggren, 2003[4]; Näsman, 2000; Pettersson, 2002).

The Swedish research results led the country's government to invest (this time via the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems "Vinnova"), in a large-scale research program "Research on women's entrepreneurship" (Forskning om kvinnors företagande). Between 2007 and early 2011, this research program comprised ten different research projects at different Swedish universities. The government's aim in sponsoring this program was to revitalize research and increase knowledge on women's entrepreneurship in order to enable the development of better policy measures and, eventually, increase the numbers of women entrepreneurs (Government Decision N 2007/5532/ENT). The government was driven by the assumption that there was untapped potential for increased women's entrepreneurship in the country and that existing policies to foster entrepreneurship were oriented to men's entrepreneurship and male-dominated industries. Therefore, the need for research which would unmask (hidden) challenges for women entrepreneurs was identified (Government Decision N 2007/5532/ENT). Indeed, research comparing self-employment preferences among women in the different Nordic countries has found that, despite the similarity of these countries in terms of gender position, differences in factors influencing women's involvement in new venture formation exist (Arenius and Kovalainen, 2006), in part due to differing national state support systems based on different paradigms and rationales (Pettersson, 2012).

In an anthology presenting findings from the different projects, Blomberg *et al.* (2011, pp. 31-2) identify and discuss three different dilemmas which politics and policy-making face related to women's entrepreneurship:

(1) The first dilemma refers to how women's entrepreneurship is portrayed as a "problem", in that it is perceived to be happening too little and in the "wrong" industry sectors, namely those displaying too little growth and creating too few jobs. Men's entrepreneurship, in contrast, is rarely portrayed is such terms. Women entrepreneurs are thus constructed as a "problematic" group in need of specific support and help, and whose entrepreneurial activities are seen as not innovative and productive enough.

(2) The second dilemma refers to "gender segregation". While the Swedish government prioritises both the labor market and entrepreneurship in its recent action plan towards gender equality, it is not questioning the segregated labor

market per se. Thus, the action plan encourages women to become entrepreneurs – but expects these activities to take place within the "traditional" confines of health and care services, transferring low-income employed positions into low-income self-employment.

(3) The third dilemma refers to women as a "means", e.g. as an available, relatively "untapped" resource to spark economic development through entrepreneurial activities.

While Sweden is characterized by relative gender equality when compared to most other countries, gender issues remain present in Swedish public debate and are frequently covered by the mass media. Despite the public awareness of the topic which this debate fuels, power structures (and discourses) in the country continue to be somewhat gendered and unbalanced. In the 1970s, Sweden introduced a number of reforms which facilitated labour market participation: married couples were no longer taxed jointly, but individually; maternity leave was changed to parental leave; and childcare facilities were expanded. Thus, the country has already removed a number of the formal institutional bottlenecks commonly identified in empirical studies as obstacles for women's entrepreneurship (Holst, 2001; Winn, 2004, 2005). An informal gender system however remains. Gender segregation within the labor market is still strong, with vertical segregation also evident from national statistics (SCB, 2010). Not only professions but also industries remain sex-typed (Lindgren, 2008). The same applies to entrepreneurship which continues to be gendered "male" (Ahl, 2004; Ljunggren and Alsos, 2007; Sundin, 2002). This gendering continues to be reproduced in the media, though women entrepreneurs contribute to discursive change (Berglund, 2006). Naturally, the gendered structures and discourses can be assumed to have an impact on the fact that women entrepreneurs still represent only around 25-30 percent of business ownership in the Nordic countries.

In an analysis of the Swedish welfare state, Bourne (2010) shows the difficulty of dealing with issues of hierarchical ordering, where policies which were intended to break down gender barriers appear to reproduce asymmetrical gender systems and a gendered labour market structure. The impact of the welfare state on women's entrepreneurial activities is complex. Among other things, public childcare and elderly care facilitate women's participation in the labour market, and these welfare states have been termed "women friendly" (Hernes, 1987; Ahl, 2011). Yet, adjustment to women who are owner/managers has not been sufficient. For example, in the case of Denmark, Neergaard and Thrane (2011) illustrate how though it had been taken for granted that public childcare would facilitate increased women's entrepreneurship, this might not necessarily be the case, as there appears to be a schism between welfare models that facilitate employment and those that facilitate entrepreneurship.

In Sweden, women's entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in social and health-care has been supported by the government in a number of ways, for example by the National Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (Berglund, 2006; Tillmar, 2007 for analyses of such projects from a gender perspective). In the political debate, the deregulation of the public sector was presented as an opportunity for women, who represent the majority of employees in welfare sectors. As we know from established research that a majority of entrepreneurs start businesses related to their previous occupations (Shane, 2000; Sundin and Thörnquist, 2006), the hope that women would act on newly

emerging entrepreneurial opportunities was not far-fetched. The process of deregulation has involved outsourcing of publicly funded education, healthcare and social care, and customer-choice systems are currently being implemented in many municipalities. In these systems, the user decides which organization to use to access the publicly funded service. In an official report of the Swedish government, it was stated that "In those municipalities and county councils that introduce customer choice, small businesses and in particular female entrepreneurship will be favored . . . " (SOU, 2008, p. 15). Unfortunately, research results assessing the outcomes are, to date, contradictory and inconclusive (Sundin and Tillmar, 2010b). If a fulfillment of the political ambition described above is the best-case scenario from a gender-equality perspective, the worst-case scenario is that the gender system is reproduced in business ownership with a resulting "masculinization" of parts of the health and care operations (i.e. predominant male ownership of newly founded businesses in the sector). In elderly-care, this situation seems to be emerging, partly due to economies of scale and competition from international corporations (Sundin and Tillmar, 2010a). However, an ongoing mapping study is exploring how women's entrepreneurship has evolved in different parts of the (previously) public sector and in different regions of the country (Sköld, 2012).

Despite a number of new policy-related partnerships emerging in recent years (for example, the EU-funded Regional Structural Funds) their potential contribution to support women's entrepreneurship seems to have been largely lost as women with power in politics and the economy did not manage to effectively join forces (Hedlund, 2011). However, as Hedfeldt (2011, p. 158) concludes from a study of the representation of women in Regional Structural Funds processes and projects, the question is whether women interested and/or active in entrepreneurship actually could join forces to formulate a shared agenda (despite their diversity, cf. Sundin and Holmquist, 1989), and which issues they would in that case want to raise.

This special issue: background and contributions

In the summer of 2011, the guest editors of this special issue organized a track on "Gender and Entrepreneurship" at the International Council for Small Business (ICSB) Annual Conference in Stockholm, Sweden. We received close to 100 contributions, from many corners of the world, but with a high representation of Swedish and other Nordic scholars. This large number of submissions confirms the recent claim that the field of women's entrepreneurship has left its "early childhood stage" (de Bruin *et al.*, 2006), and rather is "at the brink to adolescence" (Hughes *et al.*, 2012).

Based on Ahl's (2006) critical review, Hughes *et al.* (2012) summarize three areas of criticism of the literature on women's entrepreneurship accumulated through the time of publication of Ahl's review. The first criticism states that the popular view on women's entrepreneurship as an untapped resource for economic growth has triggered much research documenting and explaining the performance and growth of women's ventures, while silencing other types of research questions (including research focusing on other possible outcomes of entrepreneurial activities) (Berglund and Johansson, 2007)[5]. The second criticism addresses the highly individualistic orientation of entrepreneurship research in general, and women's entrepreneurship in particular. Building on Ahl's (2006, pp. 605-7) arguments, Hughes *et al.* (2012, p. 3) point out how due to this individualistic focus rather little attention has been paid to, for example, contextual and historical variables, and little explicit use has been made

of feminist perspectives to explain gendered power structures. As a result, there has been a tendency to attribute the "shortcomings" of female entrepreneurs to individual women, rather than social or institutional arrangements (Hughes *et al.*, 2012, p. 3; Ahl, 2006, p. 606). The third area of criticism is the objectivist stance, which by presuming the existence of inherently "male" or "female" attributes and their measurability, contributes to the production of gender differences.

Ahl (2006, p. 611) concluded in her review that new directions are needed in research on women's entrepreneurship, namely towards an expansion of the research object and a shift in epistemological position. As the author points out, researchers do not necessarily have to abandon an objectivist perspective, but argues that it would be an improvement to account for factors "outside" the individual entrepreneur and her business, such as policies, social norms or legislation. She suggests that internationally-comparative and contingency studies could, for example, study relationships between family policies and women's entrepreneurship as well as how these are related to different contexts (Ahl, 2006). A shift in epistemological position would imply a shift from considering:

> [. . .] gender as something that is to gender as something that is done and from gender as something firmly tied to bodies to gender as tied to anything – concepts, jobs, industries, language, disciplines – or to businesses (Ahl, 2006, p. 612).

She suggests that studies on how institutions are gendered could make important contributions, for example investigating the institutionalization of support structures for women entrepreneurs.

How do the contributions in this special issue relate to these concerns? The paper "Entrepreneurship within social and health care – a question of identity, gender and professionalism" by Anne Kovalainen and Johanna Österberg investigates how entrepreneurial identity is adopted and how it is constructed amongst female entrepreneurs in small businesses within social and health care in the Nordic context of Finland. The authors have managed such an epistemological shift, as outlined earlier, discussing how gender is "done" by analysing the emergence of an entrepreneurial identity and position in an occupational group that is historically and presently embedded in paid employment patterns and practices. Kovalainen and Österberg make an interesting contribution in elaborating on the interrelatedness of different levels of context for women entrepreneurs in this specific industry sector. Namely, the authors discuss the intersectionality of gender, identity and positions in professions and occupations development.

An earlier version of the paper by Susan Clark Muntean "Wind beneath my wings: policies promoting high-growth oriented women entrepreneurs" received the ICSB-IJGE-NWBC Best Paper Award 2011 (for more information on this award, see Weeks and Duffy, 2011). In this paper, Clark Muntean investigates how countries' stance towards gender equality (in terms of women's legal and social status, institutional presence and economic empowerment) is related to opportunity-driven women's entrepreneurship. Analyzing cross-sectional data across a large number of countries, she finds support for her assumption that gender equality is positively related to opportunity-driven entrepreneurial activities by women. Though maintaining a largely objectivist perspective, this paper makes a relevant contribution by pointing out the systematic impact of contextual factors beyond the influence of individual female entrepreneurs on women's entrepreneurial performance. Thus, it addresses

one of the research directions on women's entrepreneurship called for by Ahl (2006, see above).

The paper by Maria Bogren, Yvonne von Friedrichs, Øystein Rennemo and Øystein Widding "Networking women entrepreneurs – fruitful for business growth?" explores how women entrepreneurs, in two rural areas in Sweden and Norway, utilize various kinds of networks related to their business growth ambitions. This paper draws attention to the relevance of the personal context of women on their entrepreneurial activities and finds that women entrepreneurs in both country-contexts perceive personal networks as more supportive than business networks for their entrepreneurial endeavors.

The paper "Women's business ventures in Swedish university incubators" by Åsa Lindholm Dahlstrand and Diamanto Politis investigates the role of university incubators in women's academic entrepreneurship. The authors take the vantage point that it is important to develop an understanding of how women entrepreneurs in various industries differ. They attempt to move beyond the individualistic focus discussed above by applying a multilevel design that takes into consideration the relationship between individual firms and the incubator environment (de Bruin *et al.*, 2007; Rothaermel *et al.*, 2007). Their study of academic women entrepreneurs starting up their ventures in incubators refers to a knowledge-intensive context where men and women entrepreneurs possess fairly similar levels of human capital, thereby avoiding a typical sampling bias (Brush *et al.*, 2009). Their analysis of over 1,400 ventures across 19 Swedish incubators, of which 210 ventures involved women entrepreneurs, shows that there are large differences between women's ventures in the incubators.

Finally, the research note by Sylvain Max and Valérie Ballereau proposes a bridge between the field of women's entrepreneurship and social psychology by introducing a method to identify stereotypical thinking, which could be employed to unmask even latent discrimination of women (or other groups of entrepreneurs). Making use of the experimentation method discussed by these authors could support theory-building, for example, regarding the question of whether and how female entrepreneurs are discriminated against by those who might have a say in evaluating their businesses, such as banks (Holmquist, 2008, p. 16), which is an area where research results to date deliver inconclusive results (Carter *et al.*, 2007; Eriksson *et al.*, 2009; Fay and Williams, 1993).

Concluding remarks

Recently, Brush *et al.* (2009) argued for the need to acknowledge that institutionalized social structures at the micro, meso and macro levels can have a significant impact on women's entrepreneurship. The papers included in this special issue clearly demonstrate that the understanding of entrepreneurial processes and realities of female entrepreneurs can be enhanced by employing different perspectives. At the micro level Kovalainen and Österberg explore how individuals make sense of their entrepreneurial identity; at the meso level we have contributions exploring the role of business networks (Bogren *et al.*) as well as that of incubators (Lindholm Dahlstrand and Politis), and finally, at the macro level the influence of different national and institutional contexts (Clark Muntean).

Judging from the range of papers submitted to our conference track mentioned above, we are not witnessing a revolution towards new directions in research

on women's entrepreneurship, but rather an evolution. This special issue is attempting to contribute by further exploring the relevance of context for women entrepreneurs. Thereby, we follow in the footsteps of a previous special issue published in this journal, which had focused on the role of context in international studies and comparisons to illuminate the role of context, e.g. in terms of culture and socio-economic situation (Ashe and Treanor, 2011). The papers in this special issue also illustrate the multitude of women's entrepreneurship. This diversity is contingent not least on the different industry sectors where the entrepreneurs operate as well as the business models applicable in these contexts. As entrepreneurship theory has to date dominated over gender perspectives in studies on women as entrepreneurs, there is a risk that women are squeezed into the theory which has evolved around entrepreneurship (Berglund, 2007). A promising trend for current and future studies is the increase in articles integrating gender theory with entrepreneurship (Mirchandani, 1999), challenging and contributing to entrepreneurship theory from a gender perspective (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011; Ahl, 2007; Bruni *et al.*, 2004; Calas *et al.*, 2009). Research on women's entrepreneurship can be further strengthened by employing gender perspectives – with contributions utilizing a social constructivist perspective offering the promise of illuminating "how gender is done" (Ahl, 2006).

Notes

1. The term "Nordic countries" comprises Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.
2. In this review, we have searched for and included articles on women's entrepreneurship drawing on empirical material from the context of the Nordic countries and published in the following entrepreneurship journals: *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice*, *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, *International Small Business Journal*, *Journal of Business Venturing* and *Small Business Economics*. In addition, we have included relevant publications on the Nordic context where available to us.
3. In 2004, women represented 24.8 percent of all self-employed in both Denmark and Sweden, 32 percent in Finland and 26.7 percent in Norway (Arenius and Kovalainen, 2006).
4. This dissertation contains articles also in English.
5. This body of research also contains performance comparisons between men's and women's entrepreneurship, for the Swedish context, e.g. regarding self-employment among immigrants (Hammarstedt, 2004) or studies, which employ gender as a control variable (e.g. for a study on effects of unemployment on firm formation in Finland, see Ritsilä and Tervo, 2002).

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About the authors

Leona Achtenhagen, PhD, is Professor of Business Administration, with a special focus on entrepreneurship and business development, at Jönköping International Business School in Sweden. One of her main research areas focuses on entrepreneurial and strategic aspects of small firm growth, often with a focus on media industries. Other areas of her research concern the portrayal of (women's) entrepreneurship in media, as well as ethnic minority and transnational diaspora entrepreneurs. She has published in journals such as *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice*, *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development* and the *International Journal of Media Management*.

Malin Tillmar, PhD, is Associate Professor in Business Administration and Deputy Director of the Helix Vinn Excellence Centre at Linköping University in Sweden. Her research focuses on less illuminated kinds of entrepreneurship, often with a gender perspective. In 2002, she defended her dissertation "Swedish Tribalism and Tanzanian Agency: Preconditions for Trust and Cooperation in a Small Business Context". Since then, she has studied (women's) entrepreneurship in the area of public sector transformation and societal entrepreneurship. In 2005, she won the FSF-Nutek prize for young entrepreneurship researchers. Her research results have been published in *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, the *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* and the *Scandinavian Journal of Management*. Malin Tillmar is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: Malin.tillmar@liu.se