

Notions of gender in contextual interviews

Workpackage 4 - Milestone 3



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by Pia Levin, Åbo Akademi University

The themes presented in this framework are based on data collected in qualitative interviews conducted by WP4 in May-June 2010. The interviewees consist of 19 entrepreneurs – 6 from Estonia, 8 from Finland and 5 from Sweden.

The main purpose is to receive a perception of how the entrepreneurs consider themselves affected by the gender difference in the cultural environment in which they run their enterprise. The focus is put on the significance the entrepreneurs give gender in explaining resistance or support they have met in connection to their enterprise.

Different types of entrepreneurs – background & sector in which they run their business

The majority of the entrepreneurs interviewed worked in the tourism sector, a line of business dominated by female workers. Some national differences occurred, not necessarily due to nationality, but rather due to the sample of entrepreneurs varied. The entrepreneurs in Finland and Sweden were small enterprises (often with no employees besides the entrepreneur) while the Estonian sample also included some entrepreneurs that were employees of enterprises or regional organizations with more employees. This difference can be seen particularly in the entrepreneur's perception of her ability to make her own decisions in her conducting of business. (At the moment the draft reflects mainly the results from interviews conducted with entrepreneurs in Finland and Sweden. The Estonian results show some differences to these.)

Reasons for starting an enterprise

The voiced reasons for making the decision to become an entrepreneur followed three different explanations.

Firstly, some women stated that being an entrepreneur was self-evident to them, that they had always wanted to start up a business, that their parents were entrepreneurs or that they would have difficulties working in any other way than with their own business, since they felt the need to make their own decisions.

Secondly, many entrepreneurs explained that they started their business in order to make a life-style change. Several were unhappy with their previous occupation – often in a completely different field – or felt signs of an approaching burnout. Some women explained that they were so unhappy with their previous work that they were willing to do any other job except the one they were involved in at that moment.

Thirdly, the perceived necessity of entrepreneurship was also a common explanation for entrepreneuring. For some women, especially involved in arts or handicraft, starting their own business seemed like the only way to turn their product into profit. Some people made the shift to starting their own business after they had been laid off from their previous work, or simply because there were very few jobs in the area they lived.

Time spent for the business:

Much of the work within the tourism sector is seasonal, which reflects the hours spent on the enterprise for those entrepreneurs who sold their products to tourists. Part-time work, or another source of a more stable income are methods that the entrepreneurs use to guarantee their livelihood.

Although most entrepreneurs said that they spend very much time working, including evenings and weekends, there were differences in their attitudes towards their business. While some women said that growth in their business was very important to them, some described their enterprise as something similar to handicraft or a hobby. Entrepreneurs in the latter category generally worked part time with their business.

Collaboration

Most of the collaboration the women entrepreneurs take part in is local and consisted of a small network of a few other women entrepreneurs, often within the same field or sector (tourism) as they work in themselves. For the majority of women, the value of collaboration lay in increased visibility. Most women, who do collaborate, evaluated the collaboration as positive or valuable. Still, many expressed a desire to increase either the level of collaboration or expanding into different fields. The possibility and desire of transnational collaboration was also raised by several entrepreneurs. The reciprocity in the collaboration was valued highly.

Many entrepreneurs also stated that there are not very many entrepreneurs who they could form a cluster with. Some considered that their business idea was so unique that they have no competition and therefore no “natural” partners for clustering. Some also said that the environment in which they were conducting their business was not very open to collaboration.

Views on gender

Women considered the difficulty to receive financial support as the main, and often even the only, obstacle for being female entrepreneur. The problem was considered as a structural one, where the system does not support fields where women work or does not give starting money to seasonal entrepreneurs. Some women also had the opinion that female entrepreneurs were not taken seriously when starting companies. Many women explained that in order to receive the best benefits, they had to learn how to “work the system” and adapt the business accordingly to the rules.

Many women knew that there are social and cultural differences in what type of behavior is expected from a person, and that these expectations are gendered. Many entrepreneurs had applied one of two different approaches to meet this interpretation, so they would not be affected (negatively) by gendered expectations.

The first approach meant that although they acknowledged that discrimination based gender does exist in their society, they themselves were not affected by it. Rather, they were strong enough to push through any obstacles simply by not paying attention to gender based discrimination, or decided not to interpret hindrance as anything to do with gender.

Where gender based discrimination had actually taken place, the discrimination was explained as something connected to the personality of the discriminator, and interpreted it as something individual rather than something structural. Women who reported having experienced their gender being an obstacle usually said that it had happened only that one time, and since they had ended the contact with that one person, they also did not expect anything similar to happen again.

The second approach to cultural differences on expected behavior was to just go with the flow and be aware of how to make the best of one's role as a woman. This view considers women as different from men, but still equal to men, and knowing one's own spheres and tasks becomes important.

Even though many of the female entrepreneurs would not call it discrimination, several women said that they had experienced demeaning comments, such as "little friend", "little girl, don't you understand?". Many had also experience ignorance by men, not being able to have their opinions heard. For several entrepreneurs it also seemed to be important to not see any special treatment that would be gendered. Some explicitly said that they don not WANT to notice any difference in treatment.

Even though other categories (such as age, ethnicity or education) that might be important in seeing the different interpretations of gender are not included in this analysis, it becomes evident that age plays an important role. Some female entrepreneurs said that they do not care to be portrayed as an older woman who complains all the time (tjatkärring).

Attitudes towards technology

Many people felt that they would like to and need to receive more education in ICT and especially social media. None of the entrepreneurs considered technology as being gendered, but rather neuter (an interpretation that was also partly left unproblematized by the researchers conducting the interviews).



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