ABSTRACT

THE INVISIBLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP OF WOMEN IN GNOSJÖ, SWEDEN

Ylva Saarinen, Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University

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The locality of Gnosjö in Småland, Sweden, is often seen as a successful model of entrepreneurship, characterised as it is by many small entrepreneurs and a low unemployment rate. Nevertheless, studies grasping the model from a gender perspective indicate that although fully one third of the entrepreneurs in Gnosjö are women, they are not included in the representations. This can partly be understood as a consequence of the male bias of these concepts, which in turn has implications for female entrepreneurs. The paper is based on an interview study in the municipality of Gnosjö, in which female entrepreneurs and local business promoters have taken part. The invisibility of women in the discourse of Gnosjö is prominent also in the women’s narratives. In the paper, this invisibility is discussed in terms of some interrelated aspects. One of these is the women’s hesitation towards seeing themselves as leaders or entrepreneurs, which is analysed in relation to the masculinistic connotations of these concepts. Descriptions of ‘the good entrepreneurs’ are strongly male based as well. Thus, women become deviants and they have to accommodate to the entrepreneurial (male) world. The responsibility to settle down and feel comfortable in entrepreneur organisations is theirs, since there is no questioning of the dominating gender structures in the core of the entrepreneurial world. This invisibility also manifests itself in family businesses, where the husband, in the eyes of the business promoters, stands out as ‘the entrepreneur’, while the wife is reduced to ‘his assistant’. Besides a numeric underestimation, female entrepreneurs are expected to be found mainly in the service sector, while business promoters seem to believe that men are represented in every business sector. Finally, the empirical results from the Gnosjö study presented in the paper, are understood in the context of feminist theory.