WOMEN’S ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN GNOSJÖ, SWEDEN

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The locality of Gnosjö in Småland, Sweden, is often seen as a successful model of entrepreneurship. The model is referred to as ‘the Gnosjö spirit’, where the large amount of small businesses is accompanied by the lowest rates of unemployment and the highest rates of employment among women and immigrants in the country. In order to benefit from the positive associations that Gnosjö evokes, many other municipalities have started to allude to, or compare themselves to Gnosjö in their public relations. When studying Gnosjö from a gender perspective, Katarina Pettersson has come to call these images into question. According to her, many of these idealised descriptions are built upon blindness for the importance of gender. Men and women are stereotypically described and distinctly separated in the discourse. Women’s labour market is narrow, consisting mostly of service sector jobs in the municipal system and jobs as unskilled workers in assembly line production. What is seen as ‘women’s work’ in Gnosjö is narrow as well, implicating employment in the areas of nursing, caring or other services.

In order to try to understand what ‘the Gnosjö spirit’ is about and why the businesses in that area are so successful, Birgitta Wendeberg has interviewed a large number of entrepreneurs in Gnosjö. While doing that, she noticed that many entrepreneurs in Gnosjö are women, but still very few think of them as entrepreneurs. Since these small business owners seem to be invisible in the community, as well as among other business owners, she calls them the non-existent. In spite of this, the proportion of

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1 This paper draws on an essay in social and economic geography, Kvinnors företagande i Gnosjö, in which 21 interviews were conducted. The author is still working with similar issues within the scope of her Ph.D. studies in social and economic geography at the University of Uppsala.
women entrepreneurs is approximately eight percentage units above the average of the country (33 percent versus 25 percent).  

With this background, I was inspired to find out what the entrepreneurial women thought of themselves and their entrepreneurship, and what the business community as a whole thought about them. I also wanted to find out if these women face some kind of resistance emanating from the business community or from separate individuals and how this potential resistance, if it exists, is expressed. The scope of the study is delimited to deal only with contemporary women, living in the municipality of Gnosjö, and the empirical material will be analysed solely from a gender perspective.

There is no consensus concerning the way in which the concepts of entrepreneur and small business owner should be defined. A distinction between the concepts is sometimes made, on the grounds that the entrepreneur is seen as more of an innovator or a starter of businesses, whereas the small business owner has a role that is more all-embracing. Nevertheless, in this paper the concepts will be used synonymously, referring to a person who takes an active part in, as well as leads and/or owns a small business.

**Theory and method**

This part deals with the dualism masculinity/femininity, Yvonne Hirdman’s gender system theory and the masculine bias of the entrepreneur concept. Subsequently the method of the study on which this paper is based, as well as the selection of interviewees, is explained.

**The masculinity/femininity dualism**

A dualism is founded on a pair of opposite concepts, in which one of the concepts is placed above the other. The search for opposites is, in the words of Linda McDowell, “deeply embedded in our sense of ourselves as individuals, in daily interactions, in institutional structures and in Western intellectual thought”⁸. The binary division between masculinity and femininity affects the way research is, and has been, conducted as well, resulting in the prestige of a tradition being dependent on its masculine identification. One consequence of this is that objects of study associated with femininity have been grossly underrepresented. McDowell also claims that “economics is arguably the most masculinist of the social sciences, distinguished by an insistence on scientific rationality and objectivity in certain

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guises and its grand claims to truth in others." (Masculinist is a term originally created by Michèle Le Doeuff. By that she refers to “work which, while claiming to be exhaustive, forgets about women’s existence and concerns itself only with the position of men”.) Neoclassic economics as well as economic geography are founded on that same binary division, and, drawing on the research by Helene J Ahl, I conclude that the same critique can be applied to research about entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. The economic subjects are often described as scientific, rational, rigorous and ‘hard’, being based on facts, mathematical representations and quantitative modelling. All these traits have masculine connotations and, as stated by Julie A Nelson, these in turn are used to separate economic subjects and areas of interest from other, ‘softer’ social sciences. When compared to mathematics or the natural sciences, however, economics, too, appears to be ‘soft’, which is understood as relating to human behaviour.

The masculinity/femininity dualism is associated with many other adjectives, which are split in pairs of opposites, in which one is joined to masculinity and the other to femininity. These concepts stand in a hierarchical relation, in which the words connected to femininity carry less prestige than those connected to masculinity. McDowell explains the way this binary thinking is embedded in Western thought and the Cartesian science tradition, singling women out as emotional, irrational, private, dependent and closer to nature and their bodies, in comparison with men, who are seen as scientific, rational, public, independent and cultured, transcending their body with their minds. Men are thus not defined principally by their sex, which women are reduced to, but viewed as a symbol for what it means to be human. McDowell also compares the binary distinctions connected to masculinity and femininity, respectively, in a table, which is quoted in full below:

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<th>The masculine</th>
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Nina Björk has made concrete how the hierarchization works and that the dualism itself is founded on the shared ground of separation and dominance.\textsuperscript{15} She writes:

\begin{quote}
“Furthermore, it is impossible to \textit{simultaneously} keep what we call ‘femininity’ \textit{and} give it equal status with what we call ‘masculinity’ – for femininity gets its meaning only in relation to masculinity and both of these concepts in turn get their meaning through being in a hierarchical order, in which the masculine is superior to the feminine. If ‘femininity’ would be given the same status as ‘masculinity’, it would no longer be ‘feminine’.” [My translation, original emphases.]
\end{quote}

The Cartesian science tradition, on which the binary thinking described above is founded, also legitimizes and upholds the trust in the possibility to gain objective, untainted knowledge, knowledge that is independent of the social position of the researcher. Thereby, Gillian Rose maintains, the individual is seen as disconnected to society, to her body and her emotions, and thus appears to be objective, independent and free of context. In this line of reasoning an aspect of power is hidden. To allow oneself the kind of rationality which proclaims itself as universal, is identified by feminists as a typical trait of the \textit{master subject} \textsuperscript{16}. The promise of universality is upheld by what Le Doeuff terms “the exhaustiveness of masculinist claims to knowledge”\textsuperscript{17}, that is, the prospect of knowledge being exhaustive, objective and the only possible. This “objective rationality” is connected to a masculine subject position and a denial of one’s own subjectivity. The authors of universal knowledge, thereby, through the master subject, may produce and reproduce their position of power, which is grounded in their sex as well as in their whiteness.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{The gender system}

In her theory of the gender system, Yvonne Hirdman demonstrates how the unequal relationship between the sexes is sustained through two mechanisms, the separation of the sexes and the male norm. To exemplify, the separation of the sexes is expressed in the labour-market, where men and women to a large extent work in different sectors, with different tasks, and the effect of the male norm is the tendency to consider women’s work to be of lesser value than work performed by men. Because of this separation, the different fields of work are seldom compared, which keeps the male norm relatively invisible and unquestioned. The male norm does not preclude women from gaining power or appreciation, but it demands of them to stay in line with the socially accepted behaviour of a woman. Women, when breaking into male dominated contexts, are regarded as a problem and source of

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\textsuperscript{18} Rose, Gillian (1993) p. 4-10.
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conflict. To qualify, they have to change themselves, they have to keep themselves to the fore (like men do), learn to occupy space (the way men do) and make decisions (in the manner of men). Men, on the other hand, have no obligations to change at all. Due to the male norm, the work places, as well as the society, are already founded on their premises. In a gender contract, according to Hirdman, the relationship between the sexes is regulated. Obviously, the contract is never formalized, but it is, all the same, the foundation on which the place of men and women in society is based and negotiated. As the place of women and men alters, the gender contract is altered as well. Although the gender system never is free from exceptions or deviations, it plays an important part in our social reality.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Entrepreneurship and masculinity}

Women have, to a large extent, run businesses during all of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{20} Nowadays, there are approximately 100 000 women entrepreneurs in Sweden, the farmers excluded, and their firms make up one fourth of the total number of small businesses in the state.\textsuperscript{21} Eva Javefors Grauers calls attention to the fact that research on entrepreneurship and small businesses regularly has neglected women who are actively involved in family businesses, as well as entrepreneurs in traditionally female trades.\textsuperscript{22} The male bias of the entrepreneur concept, according to Inger Danilda, explains why the women, despite their rather large numbers, have received so little research attention, compared to men and men’s businesses. Implicit in the entrepreneur concept is the fact that the entrepreneur is a male, and concepts like female entrepreneurship and female entrepreneurs imply that these are deviating from the norm. They are not entrepreneurs, but female entrepreneurs.\textsuperscript{23} Pettersson states that men, consequently, are not termed male entrepreneurs, but simply entrepreneurs.\textsuperscript{24}

The male bias is also reflected in the kind of adjectives that are associated with the concept. This is pointed out by Elisabeth Sundin as well as by Helene J Ahl. By means of different ways of reasoning, they both show that words commonly associated with entrepreneurs and small business owners also to a large extent are associated with men and masculinity, but not with women and femininity.\textsuperscript{25} Ahl

\textsuperscript{21} Forum för småföretagsforskning(a), at: www.fsf.se/fem/faq_middle.html, 011217.
even shows that words associated with women and femininity often imply quite the opposite of terms associated with entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship.26

**Ideas of female entrepreneurs**

As an effect of the male bias of the entrepreneur concept, there is a whole range of ideas about the typical female entrepreneur, developed in contrast to the dominant, ‘gender neutral’, but in effect male, model. Simplifying it a bit, I want to argue that there are five different ways in which female entrepreneurs are portrayed, analyzed, and understood (always in relation to male entrepreneurs), namely as: *invisible, good, essentially different, similar or diverse*. These ideas presuppose the perspective of the observer, and have often little or nothing to do with the way women business owners actually are or behave. A lot more could be said about this, but in this context the discussion is confined to a model in which these ideas are broadly outlined.27

![Diagram of Female Entrepreneurs](image)

**Method**

The empirical material consists of information from telephone interviews with women from different parts of the trade and industry sectors in Gnosjö municipality. Through interviews with 16 women who are business owners, I try to capture how women, who are business owners in Gnosjö, experience their situation. To find out which images of female entrepreneurs that are dominating among local business promoters in Gnosjö, five spokesmen of and representatives for the trade and industry sectors in Gnosjö with, among themselves, differing perspectives, have been interviewed. All the interviewees live and work in the municipality of Gnosjö.

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*For a more elaborate discussion of these ideas, their assumptions regarding the characteristics of female entrepreneurs and the way these ideas are implicit in studies of female entrepreneurship, see: Saarinen, Ylva (2002) Kvinnors företagande i Gnosjö, *Arbetsrapporter* nr 468, Uppsala Universitet.*
The research of Sundin & Holmquist shows that there is great variation in the entrepreneurship of women. They are of all ages, from all over the country, in almost every line of business, and they work everything from a couple of hours in the business to almost constantly. Therefore, I considered it important to grasp this diversity also among my interviewees. Consequently, I used what Hanne Haavind calls a strategic selection, the purpose of which is to secure a wide range of people as well as phenomena in the study. Steinar Kvale highlights the importance of protecting the privacy of the interviewees. After consideration, I chose, with the consent of the interviewees, to quote them with name and position. For the quotes to serve their purpose, it is essential for the reader to have access to certain kinds of background information, such as the company’s line of business and approximate number of employees. But, since Gnosjö is a small community, where it is easy to recognize each other’s stories, these simple facts would make it quite uncomplicated to learn which company and person is the source of the quote. To satisfy the ethical demands, the interviewees were thus encouraged to acquaint themselves with and, if necessary, change the quoted passages.

Experiences of the business owners

In the analysis of the interviews several themes stood out. The invisibility of these women is a common feature, for a start. Only one of the women identify herself as an entrepreneur. On a direct question, more of them, but far from all, state that they are small business owners. Answering the question *Do you see yourself as a small business owner*? they, among other things, said:

“No, I don’t think like that. I haven’t thought about it. I feel like someone working at Reklambiten [the name of the firm]. But I am of course very much aware of the fact that I’m the owner and responsible for it and so forth.”

It is worth noticing that it is considerably more common among women working in traditionally male businesses to think of themselves as small business owners. In these companies, the woman can be one out of several partners and still feel like an entrepreneur. In firms with a traditionally female activity base, on the other hand, she has to run it all by herself, or together with other women, without much interference from any man, in order to think of herself as an entrepreneur. However, the fulfilling of

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31 The interviews were conducted in Swedish, and the word *företagare* was used instead of small business owner or entrepreneur. The connotation of företagare is similar, but not quite the same as either one of the other two concepts.
32 Mårinka Petersson, 53 years old, president and sole owner of *Reklambiten i Gnosjö AB*, with three employees, 020422.
these prerequisites does not guarantee that she will see herself as an entrepreneur, but without them, she most certainly will not.

Another example of women’s invisibility as small business owners is highlighted when the interviewees are asked to describe a good entrepreneur. Several describe this person as a man and some of them portray the entrepreneur in gender neutral terms, but none of them depicts this person as a woman. They replied to the question *What characterises a good entrepreneur?* for instance, by saying:

“He must be positive, and trying to make the most of everything. He obviously has to work a lot and he has to be interested in what he does.”

This is, in my view, one explanation why many women experience that it is difficult to obtain recognition from others. One of the characteristics a good entrepreneur has to be endowed with is, basically, to be a ‘man’. This has been shown in research on managers and leadership, and the ascribed quality of being a ‘man’ is the very essence of the phenomenon usually termed the *glass ceiling*. The glass ceiling is the invisible process that impedes women’s careers and renders them ineligible for the top positions of the organisation. Although the glass ceiling is to be found on different levels in different organisations, it is always there, and its existence means that the impediment is the female sex of the person, not her competence or disposition. These results may not be directly transferable to the conditions of entrepreneurship, but they still show that gender and presumed competence can be closely intertwined.

In general the women that are small businesses owners have plenty of useful contacts and a diverse network by which their firms can benefit. They give the impression of having positive, go-ahead attitudes, strong self-esteem and good relationships with their employees. Nevertheless, quite a few feel the lack of a network for women entrepreneurs, in which they could discuss their experiences of special treatment and of not quite fitting into the entrepreneur template. Several women are, all the same, not in favour of a network exclusively for women. First and foremost, for the sake of the business, they intend to use their networking to expand their competence and, consequently, the knowledge held by their male colleagues is understood as significant.

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33 Irma Svensson, 71 years old, member of the board, treasurer, and volunteer worker at *Marieholms Handels Ekonomiska Förening*, which is run by volunteer workers solely, 020425.

According to the interviewees, to be entrepreneur and woman is not always that easy. They have a harder time obtaining recognition, not least because they are not expected to be able to perform as well as male entrepreneurs. The women get to feel that they deviate from the norm, that they are somewhat special. The frustration this creates is obvious in their narratives.

“There’s a bit more distrust in women, that we wouldn’t be able to handle it, or that we don’t know what we’re talking about. They might wonder ‘Who’s helping you with it then?’ As if we have to have a man up our sleeve to help us with the business.”

When they talk about their business contacts, the fact that women are seen as less knowledgeable is highlighted. Several women describe how they are offered less advantageous deals than their male colleagues. It also happens that their business contacts are asking for him, the boss, although the president of the company is the woman standing right in front of them. Sometimes, though, they are instead brought forward, with an emphasis on how good they are, for having the ability to run a business in such a masculine trade.

Adjustment in different shapes is a central ingredient of an analysis of women’s entrepreneurship. To my interviewees, the adjustment has to do with the restrictions that their responsibility for home and family places on their entrepreneurship. The men, in general, have more time to meet others, do things together and in a natural way make contacts for the benefit of their firm. The women often do not have the possibility to accompany them in the same way, since it falls on their lot to take care of the kids and see to it that the daily chores are done.

As shown by Tora Friberg, women, in general, adjust their lives in order to have time for children and family. She discusses this from the perspective of what she calls organizational stumbling-blocks (organisatoriska stötestenar). These imply, shortly, that there are occasions when one wants to do a number of things, but has to prioritize between them, since there is no possibility of doing them all. To the women in her study, three goals were superior to the rest, namely, 1) to be sure that the kids are doing well, and 2) to use their time and 3) their strength in such a way that they are able to do all the different chores that have to be done. The prioritizing of the women were often determined by these superior goals, which in turn meant that other things, that they also wanted to do, constantly had to be deferred.

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35 Agneta Ottosson, 46 years old, member of the board and soon the sole owner of AB Sol och Hår i Gnosjö, with four employees, 020423.
“It seems as if the women feel the need to legitimize their actions with reference to what is best for the children. The understanding of the role that the women indirectly supply is that a ‘real’ mother puts the children first, above themselves.”38 [My translation.]

However, this adaptive strategy also has to do with the way in which the entrepreneurs have to learn to deal with special treatment or with being overlooked, and with how they change their behaviour to overcome the resistance they face when it comes to being, and acting like, entrepreneurs. A majority of the interviewees assert that women have to struggle more than men in order to be acknowledged as entrepreneurs. In the eyes of their environment, it is not natural for a woman to be an entrepreneur, which might make the working environment, for those women who in fact are entrepreneurs, tougher. Through their entrepreneurship they violate the gender system. Some face resistance, some do not. But the experience of having been overlooked, exposed to special treatment or to sexual harassment, or of knowing someone who has, is shared by most of the interviewees. If they want to be visible and have a say, they have to fight for it. The adaptation lies in the fighting itself, in the need to exert themselves more, to achieve better and in the refusal to give up. It lies in the necessity to harden themselves against the silent, and perhaps unconscious, resistance from the environment. The question *Do you think that there is a difference between women and men in what it means to be an entrepreneur?* illustrates this:

“I think it’s tougher when you’re a woman. We have to fight more to be successful. Even in Gnosjö most of the business owners are men. As a woman you have to be tougher, tough but still straightforward. When you want something, you have to fight, that’s the way it is.”39

“It’s all about structures. A man in his middle fifties could call me ‘old girl’, but he would never call a man ‘old boy’. So, of course you’re treated differently when you’re a woman. Sometimes I get totally frustrated, but then you have to stop and think. He could respect my competence and still call me ‘old girl’. It doesn’t have to be disparaging, it’s structures. You have to be humble and reflect over behaviours, not just think that every man is a male chauvinist pig.”40

The last quote shows yet another aspect of the adaptation that women that are small business owners may have to endure. In my interpretation, the underlying implication is that, when she is subjected to special treatment, it is her own responsibility to see to it that she is not upset or offended by it. She has to dissociate herself from such treatment, and acquire enough self-esteem to be able to cope with it.

39 Anna Grahn, 29 years old, member of the board and owner to 50% of *Anna Grahns Handelsservice AB*, with no employees at the moment, 020425.
40 Ingegerd Gréen, 42 years old, president of *Industriellt Utvecklingscentrum i Gnosjöregionen*, with eleven employees, 020507.
Berit Ås has identified five methods, which she calls techniques of domination (härskartekniker), that can be used consciously or subconsciously to obtain power over other people. These are rendering invisible (osynliggörande), ridicule (förlöjligande), withholding of information (undanhållande av information), damned if you do – damned if you don’t (dubbelbestrafning) and levying of guilt and shame (påförande av skuld och skam). The first two techniques, rendering invisible and ridicule, emerge very clearly from the narratives of the interviewees. To be rendered invisible means not to be seen or not to be treated with interest. The effect on the person exposed is often feelings of insecurity and insufficiency. When someone is subjected to ridicule, her status or competence, in the eyes of others, is diminished. Ridicule may also involve disparaging or belittling of her persona or work. The target of ridicule commonly feels depreciated, embarrassed, stupid, ashamed, or that she appears to be a boring person with no sense of humour. The ridicule can be brought about by specific words and expressions as well as by gestures, mimic and jests.41

The narratives of the interviewees have been analysed in the light of Hirdman’s gender system theory. As mentioned earlier, Hirdman claims that an integration of the sexes only happens on men’s terms. Women may step into male dominated areas, but only if they act as men expect them to act. Women are seen as a problem and are, consequently, the ones who have to change to fit into male scenes. Women have to learn to grab what they want (like men do), to make themselves heard and have a say (like men do) and to be decisive (the way men are). Men, on the other hand, have no obligation to change at all, since the society already is built on their premises.42 In the narratives, it becomes obvious that the responsibility for change is placed on the individual woman. She is the one who has to fight harder to be acknowledged. Not once during the interviews did anyone mention men’s responsibility for opening up the world of business and ‘making room’ for the women. Then again, there is nothing strange about the exclusion of women; that is one of the fundaments of the gender system.

The business promoters’ notions of female entrepreneurs

The group, which I call business promoters, consists of five spokespersons with different views on the Gnosjö industry. Two work, or has until recently worked, at the municipal office for trade and commerce. Two are representatives of the Gnosjö Association of Merchants and the Gnosjö Manufacturing Industry Club respectively, and one is the president of the Centre for Industrial Development in the Gnosjö Region.43 Despite these various perspectives, a common ground is their undertaking to foster, advance and promote the industries of Gnosjö.

42 Hirdman, Yvonne (1990) p. 79-84.
43 This is my translation of the Swedish names of these alliances, namely Gnosjö Köpmannaförening, Gnosjö Industriella Föreningen and Industriellt Utvecklingscentrum i Gnosjöregionen.
Among the business promoters, the entrepreneurship of women is relatively invisible as well. Their ignorance is significant, and a striking example of this is the gross underestimations of the number of women that are business owners in Gnosjö, that all of the business promoters are expressing. To the question *How many women are business owners in Gnosjö?* one answered:

“Ten or so. After all, there might be more of them, I can think of something like ten or twenty female entrepreneurs. In a firm, obviously, there might be several owners, entrepreneurs. Gnosjö Automatsvarvning, as an example, ha four owners, mum, dad and two daughters. Out of the [female] business owners, ten or so, I would say, are merchants or own a pizzeria.”

All in all, their answers differ, but they all indicate that the number of women business owners in Gnosjö is between 10 and 35. According to the data base Affärsdata there are 490 businesses in the municipality, and at the official website of the Census Bureau, it is stated that a third of the business owners in Gnosjö are women. On a rough estimate, there would, thus, be a lot more women who are entrepreneurs in Gnosjö, than the 10 to 35 that the business promoters are suggesting.

The invisibility is also reflected in the business promoter’s way of regarding women in family businesses as assistants rather than partners. Women are not seen as entrepreneurs, but are dismissed as some kind of shareholders. That this does not imply the same status is revealed by the following statement:

“Entrepreneur to me is when you own all or part of the business as well as take an active part in it, to own, lead and run it. […] There aren’t that many women in the management in the family businesses. The man has the leadership and the woman has an administrative role. But many decisions are, all the same, made around the kitchen table. If you’re about to buy something huge, of course, it’s affecting the family as well. There may not be a holiday that year, and in that case the woman, too, would have something to say about that.”

The predominant presumption among the business promoters is that women mainly run businesses in the service sector. Men, on the other hand, are acknowledged for running businesses in all trades. The question *What kinds of businesses are run by women in Gnosjö?* is answered by:

“Women are primarily found in shops and in the service industry. In typical manufacturing industry there is, obviously, not that many. Women might also be insurance and real estate brokers and run

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44 Inge Johansson, chairman of *Gnosjö Industriförening*, 020423.
46 Ingegerd Gréen, president of *Industriellt Utvecklingscentrum i Gnosjöregionen*, 020507.
Most women entrepreneurs are, indeed, retail traders or hairdressers, but most male entrepreneurs are in retail trade as well. In fact, only eight percent of the male entrepreneurs in Sweden have businesses in manufacturing (in which mining is also included), and the same percentage holds for the women as well. Additionly, Sundin and Holmquist have shown that there are women entrepreneurs in practically every line of business (in 216 out of 232 sub-industries). In those few industries where there are no women, the reason regularly is a total lack of private enterprise in that industry, because of governmental monopolies. In spite of this, the business promoters believe that men run businesses in every line of business, whereas women, with a few exceptions, only run businesses in the service sector. Furthermore, a large part of the companies in Gnosjö are family businesses and, as Wendeberg points out, in family businesses the wife is regularly just as involved in the business as her husband is. The difference is that he is presumed to be an entrepreneur, and she is not.

The interviewed business promoters believe that there are many differences in men’s and women’s business qualities. Women are seen as softer, more cautious, social and flexible than their male colleagues. Women are also regarded as good listeners, and as superior to men when it comes to discussions about feelings. The ability to talk, however, is not viewed as entirely positive; it is described in terms of ‘making a fuss about nothing’ as well. It must be said, however, that the image described by the business promoters is not unambiguous. One of them has a distinct constructivist perspective. She, too, mentions that in contemporary society there are differences between the sexes, but she focuses on the similarities between them and on the general demands that running a business makes on the individual, regardless of sex.

Overall, the business promoters consider contacts between small business owners to be a good thing. Contacts specifically between women entrepreneurs, on the other hand, they find doubtful or even negative. The constructive aspect of contacts between women, in their view, is that women who are business owners in that case would have someone to talk to. Besides that, the promoters believe that it is the line of business, not gender, which ought to guide the choice of business contacts and networks.

47 Inge Johansson, president of Gnosjö Industriförening, 020423.
There are different views among the business promoters regarding the kinds of resistance that entrepreneurial women may have to face. Some describe in specific terms how the resistance is manifested and what the reasons for it are. Others claim that there is no resistance at all. To the question *Do you think that women who are entrepreneurs may feel unwelcome in certain associations of business owners in Gnosjö?* one responded:

“Yes, there may be some laddish environments, but in most circles of small business owners you appreciate the women. I have learnt to appreciate them. There may be individual entrepreneurs who don’t, but that’s nothing I know anything about myself. What’s needed is getting the women out in the production among the men. Seeing pictures of scantily clad women on the lockers isn’t that fun, of course, but that the pictures are there, though, is due to the fact that there aren’t any women.”51

Despite many business promoters rather straightforward images of the kinds of resistance that they think that women who are business owners may be subjected to, no one feels any responsibility for trying to enhance equality in this arena. Their answers differ, but none of the organisations undertake any kind of active measures to deal with those kinds of resistance that they themselves mean that women entrepreneurs may face. Drawing on the research by Ingrid Pincus about equality work in Swedish municipalities, I interpret this as resistance from the organisation itself.52 The Centre for Industrial Development is the only party that gives the impression of working actively with issues of equality all along the line; the president of this organization throughout the interview expressed a distinctive gender perspective. The centre, among other things, develops methods and systems that will give women in the manufacturing industry more possibilities for competence growth. In her narrative I find no mention of tangible resistance, instead, she puts the responsibility and the blame for the unequal situation on the women themselves. The question *Do you think that female entrepreneurs may feel unwelcome in certain associations of business owners due to their being women?* she answered as follows:

“Yes, but the reason might be that you feel uneasy when you’re odd. […] Irrespective of how you diverge from the large majority, it happens easily that you feel unwelcome. Then you have to start thinking about WHY you feel unwelcome. Is it because I’m a woman? Is it because they aren’t used to having women around and therefore don’t consider that I have other interests and habits? Of course there are male chauvinist pigs too. The best thing to do then, as a woman, is to speak your mind and then don’t give a damn about the association.”53

51 Inge Johansson, president of *Gnosjö Industriförening*, 020423.
53 E-mail from Ingegerd Gréen, president of *Industriellt Utvecklingscentrum i Gnosjöregionen*, 020503.
Implicit in this line of reasoning is that women, if they feel unwelcome, have to learn either to put up with the situation or change it. Both alternatives for them mean an adaptation. If the individual woman neither can bear the situation nor has the ability to change it, she is the one, too, who cannot stay. To leave the organisation appears to be her own, free choice, although it is the resistance of the environment that, indirectly, has forced her to make that decision.

**Closing discussion**

The analysis of the interviews indicates that there is a lot to do regarding gender equality and entrepreneurship in Gnosjö. In a majority of the narratives of the interviewees, there are statements that point to there being a resistance against women who are business owners in Gnosjö. They are not considered to be as competent as their male colleagues, and some feel that they have to keep proving, over and over again, that they are good enough, for others to take them seriously.

In Gnosjö, women’s entrepreneurship is characterized by adaptation to family and to patriarchal environments. Since they generally bear the main responsibility for homemaking and children, the time and effort that they can devote to the business is limited. In addition, they have to fight and constantly prove themselves to be at least as good as the male entrepreneurs in the community, in order to be admitted into the male-dominated associations of small business owners.

When mentioning in an earlier section of the paper that there are different images of female entrepreneurs, I specified five such images: the good, the intrinsically different, the similar, the invisible and the multifaceted. The interviews have given me reason to believe that the image of the invisible female entrepreneur dominates in Gnosjö. Among the interviewed business owners, the invisibility is primarily manifested by the women’s hesitation to identify themselves as entrepreneurs. In the group of business promoters, the invisibility instead is expressed by the fact that they do not recognize women as one of the partners owning the firm, but regard them as assistants or shareholders. Another sign of invisibility is the business promoter’s belief that women, with a few exceptions, only are to be found in service businesses.

The different images of female entrepreneurs suggested above are, of course, a simplification to facilitate the analysis. Even though the images are identified from the perspective of the observer, there are probably few people whose ideas of female entrepreneurs can be characterised as belonging to one, and only one, of these images. Nonetheless, it is rather simple to categorize individual statements. In addition to invisibility, I have found the image of the good entrepreneur in the statements by the business promoters. Several describe women as being flexible, softer and
more social, than men are. Women are also portrayed as being good listeners and better than men when it comes to talk about feelings. All these traits carry a positive tone, and they are connected to the feminine side of the dualism. Through the positive tone, the cherished femininity and motherhood, which has become the utopia of the essentialists, is emphasized, and this all has been incarnated in the image of the good entrepreneur.

The image of the good entrepreneur, which is described above, also has a reverse, from which it cannot escape: the intrinsically different entrepreneur. The image of the intrinsically different entrepreneur, too, is founded on the masculinity/femininity dualism, but in this case the emphasis is on the aspects of the dualism that carry a negative tone. The image appears, for example, when the positively charged characteristic of being able to talk about feelings, suddenly is transformed into a trait that carries a negative tone, by referring to it as ‘making a fuss over nothing’.

The image of the similar entrepreneur is also present in the narratives of the business promoters, although it rather seldom appears, compared to the other images. One example of this is the way one of them answers a question about whether there are differences between women and men who are entrepreneurs, by declaring that in contemporary society there are differences, but thereafter switching the conversation over to the similarities between the sexes and the general demands that running a business makes on the individual, regardless of sex.

The only image that I cannot find represented in the statements of the business promoters in Gnosjö is the image of the multifaceted entrepreneur. Nevertheless, I think this image best describes the reality of women who are business owners. Just as Sundin and Holmquist, I have not been able to find any all-embracing template for the way women who are entrepreneurs are and behave. They do indeed share a lot of experiences, but there is even more that separates them. Most likely, men and women who are entrepreneurs resemble each other in many ways. The women’s experiences of living and working in a patriarchal society, however, men are not able to share. The women simultaneously are similar and dissimilar to each other, and the same probably goes with respect to their resemblance to men who are entrepreneurs. The image of the multifaceted entrepreneur, however, is dependent on a rejection of the masculinity/femininity dualism altogether. But before we get to the point where we finally can free our minds of this dualism, I believe that we have a long way to go.
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