



How policy positions women entrepreneurs: A comparative analysis of state discourse in Sweden and the United States



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ABSTRACT

This research compares the positioning of women entrepreneurs through entrepreneurship policy over two decades (1989–2012) in Sweden and the United States. Given Sweden's uniquely family-friendly welfare state, we could expect different results, yet in both countries we find a legacy of discourse subordinating women's entrepreneurship to other goals (i.e., economic growth) and a positioning of women as 'other', reinforcing a dialogue of women's inadequacy or extraordinariness without taking full account of the conditions shaping women's work experience. From this analysis we derive a conceptual schematic of assumptions presented through the discourse, aligning and distinguishing the U.S. and Swedish approaches.

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1. Executive summary

Governments develop policies and then programs to promote business start-up and growth because the creation and support of infrastructure that encourages innovation and business development is seen as a worthwhile national investment in future economic prosperity. Women, and other demographic classes, are specifically targeted within such comprehensive policy approaches in many countries.

In this research we question how such policies position women entrepreneurs in Sweden and the United States, intranationally and in comparison. What are the stated and embedded objectives of these targeted policies, and how do they conceive of the roles of women (and therefore, men) in business and society?

Policies and programs for women entrepreneurs are routinely evaluated for design and effectiveness but not for their impact on the overall position of women in the context of life opportunities and equality. These issues are largely unexplored within business entrepreneurship and associated fields; contributions to entrepreneurial ecosystem development are generally assumed to result in positive outcomes only. However, documented historical patterns of entrepreneurial engagement by women, including industries engaged in, rates of participation, and levels of monetary success, suggest that business ownership may not be unequivocally beneficial for women.

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We selected the United States and Sweden for study because they are comparable in many ways; both are rich, innovation-driven economies that subscribe to gender equality in the workplace. But striking differences in policy orientation are present: most prominent is Sweden's state-funded commitment to provide comprehensive family care that makes it comparatively easier for Swedish women to combine work with primary family responsibility (the norm in both countries). We were interested in whether the recognition of women's gendered family role was also reflected in entrepreneurship policy, thus creating a stronger foundation in Sweden for women entrepreneurs as well.

Our research approach is based on Foucault's theory of discourse. Language is not innocent: it has implications for how objects are positioned—in our case, women entrepreneurs. Looking for how policy motivates support for women's entrepreneurship, we analyzed the discourse on women's entrepreneurship in public policy documents over two decades (1989–2012) in both countries. We consider these findings comparatively.

Our work suggests that the policy discourse on women's entrepreneurship in both countries tends to reproduce women's secondary position in society rather than improve it. Further, public dialogue in both countries treats women's entrepreneurship as a means to a wider end, rather than an accomplishment in itself. This is the result of a number of unquestioned assumptions, embedded historically and currently including the imperative of economic growth before gender equality, the male norm of entrepreneurship, the assumption of women as 'different,' the exclusion of men in the policy dialogue, the constitution of entrepreneurship as an individual undertaking, and the exclusion of family and reproductive work as part of the entrepreneur's life commitment. A welfare state system in which part of reproductive work is publicly paid for and organized – thus freeing women, who operate under gendered norms, to participate in the labor market – made no discernible difference in how women were positioned. While we expected differences in policy, we found that the discursive practices were for the most part similar, if not the same.

Our research contributes to entrepreneurship theory by showing the strong influence of underlying assumptions in policy discourse. We conclude that the value of entrepreneurship should be theorized in context as well as in the specific. One cannot ignore the full lives of entrepreneurs, including their family commitments and the societal structure in which they live. We encourage an abandonment of the individualist approach (i.e., the great man) in entrepreneurship theory and a continued challenge to the gendered male-entrepreneur norm. This research also encourages a thoughtful review of entrepreneurship policy by nations interested in both furthering economic growth and social welfare.

2. Introduction

Research showing that most new job creation comes from new business development (Birch, 1979; Eisinger, 1989; Powell, 2008; Walzer, 2007) has led governments worldwide to support entrepreneurship via public policy vehicles of law, regulation, programming, and budget allocation (Henrekson and Stenkula, 2010). Recent scholarship has questioned such support, noting negative effects such as increased financial hardship for individuals (Shane, 2008), negative effects on family well-being (Jennings et al., 2013), and even impacts considered dark and exploitative (Rindova et al., 2009). Research on women's entrepreneurship, for example, confirms that most new women owned businesses are necessity-based businesses in female gendered occupations with low earnings potential (Arum and Müller, 2004). Further, entrepreneurship practices reify traditional gender roles (Gurley-Calvez et al., 2009; Marlow and McAdam, 2012). The common assumption that entrepreneurship benefits women by advancing economic health for women themselves (Gatewood et al., 2014) does not always hold. Such findings motivate a critical, feminist study of public policy to explore how entrepreneurship may not be the social and economic panacea for women it is often held out to be.

In this article we analyze and compare policy for women's entrepreneurship over a 20-year period in two select countries. We define public policy as the action taken by government to address a particular public issue to protect and benefit the population (Johns Hopkins, 2014). We have chosen Sweden and the United States since they are in many ways comparable: both are rich, innovation-driven economies (GEM, 2013), both have policies and programs for women's entrepreneurship, and both subscribe to gender equality in the workplace. But Sweden does the latter in a different way than the United States. Many traditional women's responsibilities such as child care are to a larger extent organized by the state and paid for by tax money, making it comparatively easier for a Swedish woman to combine work and family. We are interested in whether this is also reflected in entrepreneurship policy, thus creating better conditions for women entrepreneurs in Sweden.

While studies on entrepreneurship policy are typically concerned with design, implementation, and impact (Audretsch, 2013; Lundström, 2008) or on the policy process (Arshed et al., 2014), we offer a new perspective by focusing on policy formulation itself. Using a discourse analytical approach (Foucault, 1972b), we explore policy texts to identify discourses produced and reproduced that have power implications for women. Our research question is: How does the discourse on women's entrepreneurship in policy in Sweden and the United States position women and their entrepreneurship?

The study contributes to an emerging body of constructionist/feminist research on entrepreneurship discourses. Scholars have, for example, analyzed media (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011; Iyer, 2009; Wallis, 2006), business periodicals (Gill, 2013), popular narratives (Smith, 2010; Smith and Anderson, 2004), teaching material (Ahl, 2007b; Jones, 2011) and entrepreneurship research (Ahl, 2004; Bruni et al., 2004). All results point to the male gendering of entrepreneurship and the stereotyping and second-ordering of women. Will government policy specifically aimed at supporting women break this pattern?

The following section sets the context for our study. We describe the two different welfare states in order to clarify why, from a feminist perspective, we expect their policies to be different, with different outcomes delivered for women entrepreneurs. The ensuing methodology section discusses discourse analysis as theory and method. In our findings we first give an overview of programs and policies in each country, then we compare the discourses in both countries, and finally, we synthesize the findings across countries.

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