



## In the name of women? Feminist readings of policies for women's entrepreneurship in Scandinavia



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 30 May 2016

Received in revised form 13 January 2017

Accepted 19 January 2017

Available online 9 February 2017

#### Keywords:

Feminist approach

Women

Entrepreneurship policy

Scandinavia

### ABSTRACT

Policy actors seeking to stimulate entrepreneurship sometimes give special attention to women. It is not given, however, that policy initiatives for women entrepreneurs necessarily contribute to gender equality, to social change for women – such as enhancing entrepreneurship as a means to women's well-being and financial or other independence – or to gendered change of society. We claim that the outcomes depend on the premises behind the policies. The purpose of this paper is to conduct an analysis of the feminist approaches that are taken in policies for women's entrepreneurship in the Scandinavian countries. We analyse how these policies argue for women's entrepreneurship, how they position women, and what assumptions they hold with respect to women and their businesses. We analyse and compare state-level policies that have been implemented by the national governments in three Scandinavian countries; Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, during the period 2005–2015. A comprehensive analytical tool, building on six different feminist theoretical approaches, is developed. We find that, even if a liberal feminist perspective is present, along with elements of other feminist approaches, policies give precedence to economic growth in a non-feminist fashion. Over time, economic growth becomes the key focus, while feminist approaches are silenced. We observe that, in the name of supporting women, the actual aim of policies for women entrepreneurs often seems to be economic growth, and women are seen merely as an untapped, and yet not fully adequate, resource.

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### 1. Introduction

The recognition of new ventures as the 'engine of economic development' (Birch, 1979; McCloskey, 2010) has motivated much research on entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006; Davidsson & Wiklund, 2001) as well as research on entrepreneurship policy (Acs & Szerb, 2007; Audretsch, Grilo, & Thurik, 2007). As a consequence of its importance to economic development, actors at various geographic and policy levels seek to promote entrepreneurship (for example, the IEG World Bank Group, 2013), and, sometimes, lend special attention to women and entrepreneurship (for example, the European Commission, 2013). The reasons for this special attention vary, but have included: (i) women are an unused resource for economic development; (ii) women and men should

be supported to an equal extent; and (iii) there is a need for a support system that is more gender equal.

It is not given, however, that policy initiatives for women entrepreneurs necessarily contribute to gender equality, to social change for women – such as enhancing entrepreneurship as a means to women's well-being and financial or other independence – or to gendered change of society. For example, whether the policy is feminist, or not, and whether it seeks to improve women's standing in society, or not. And, if the policy is actually feminist, the outcomes of the policy may depend on which kind of feminist perspective informs the policy and its implementation. A liberal feminist approach, for example, will focus on equal opportunities, whereas a socialist feminist approach may address the gendered divisions of labour.

The purpose of this paper is to conduct an analysis of the feminist approaches that are taken in policies for women's entrepreneurship in the Scandinavian countries. We analyse how these policies argue for women's entrepreneurship, how

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they position women, and what assumptions they hold with respect to women and their businesses. We analyse and compare state-level policies that have been implemented by the national governments in three Scandinavian countries; Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, during the period 2005–2015.

The article does not investigate gender equality *per se*, but rather it investigates the image of Scandinavian countries as being the most gender-equal in the world, and gender-equal in similar ways (for example, UNdata, 2012). By comparing policies on women's entrepreneurship, we are able to identify similarities as well as differences between the countries.

Our study is situated within a post-structuralist feminist approach which enables an analysis of how entrepreneurship concepts, theories, and practices construct gender and position women (Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2007). It views language and texts (e.g. policy documents) as producing gender and allows for an analysis of how social orders are gendered and of how (women and men) entrepreneurs are represented. The post-structuralist approach is congruent with the assumption made in policy framing analysis, namely: "that a policy (proposal) will always contain an implicit or explicit representation of a diagnosis, connected to an implicit or explicit prognosis and a call for action" (Verloo, 2005:22).

We develop and employ a novel analytical tool using an array of feminist theoretical lenses, responding to Ahl's (2006) call for gender research on support systems for entrepreneurs. The analytical tool was developed by 'translating' the outlines of six different feminist theoretical perspectives on organizations, which in various ways seek social change for equal societies, as developed by Calás and Smircich (1996), Calás et al. (2007) and Calás, Smircich, and Bourne (2009) (see Table 1). We supplement this tool with an element of 'visual analysis', as called for by Galloway, Kapasi, and Sang (2015). Our analytical tool is the first contribution made by the present paper. The second contribution is the application of the tool and a concurrent, comparative, feminist examination of state policies for women's entrepreneurship in the

Scandinavian countries. We reveal the feminist approaches that are used (or not used) and how women are positioned in the relevant policies. These two things can guide future research, allow for the posing of new research questions, and enable policy makers to formulate and critically evaluate policy proposals.

The paper is organized as follows. The following section presents the theoretical background. It includes a discussion of the presence, or rather absence of feminist theory in research on women's entrepreneurship, a definition of feminist approaches to entrepreneurship, an overview and analysis of policy for women's entrepreneurship, and an overview of gender (in)equality in Scandinavia. Next we describe our material and research method, including the analytical tool that we developed for the purpose at hand. We subsequently present our policy analysis, country by country. The results are then presented and discussed comparatively. The paper ends with a summary of our conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. The absence of feminist theory in research on women's entrepreneurship

Women's entrepreneurship became a scholarly issue in the early 1980s. Early studies were largely descriptive, and were typically cast in a 'gender comparative' framework. Women were found to be underrepresented as business owners, and were concentrated in the service sector (care and retail). Women ran, on average, smaller, less profitable, and more slowly growing businesses than men (Brush, 1992; Hisrich & Brush, 1984; Sundin & Holmquist, 1989). Women's so-called 'under-performance' was then a problem that needed to be explained. We find some traces of liberal feminist theory (which claims that women's subordination is due to discrimination) in studies that claim that discrimination by loan officers is a reason, for this 'under-performance'; but such discrimination has not been confirmed (Coleman, 2000; Fabowale, Orser, & Riding, 1995). Most other studies focused on the personal

**Table 1**  
Feminist approaches to entrepreneurship.

**Liberal feminist theory** sees men and women as essentially similar, equally capable, and as rational human beings. It builds on 19th Century liberal political theory which envisioned a just society as one where everyone can exercise autonomy through a system of individual rights. Liberal feminism has aimed for equal property and legal rights, women's suffrage, and equal access and representation. Liberal feminist theory explains any differences between men and women's achievements by organizational or societal discrimination. Research, (including research on entrepreneurship), that is conducted within this theoretical framework thus investigates barriers, like a lack of access to resources. But focus is often directed towards differences between men and women (including demographic, behavioural, and cognitive differences), instead of problematizing institutional practices. Even though liberal theory purports to represent all 'women', the typical woman is white, middle-class, and heterosexual.

**Radical feminist theory** can be characterized as a feminism of 'difference'. It takes the subordination of women as its point of departure and views patriarchal structures as a system of male domination. The subordination of women is due to male privilege and power, and men and women are seen as essentially different. The approach is women-centred, and includes consciousness-raising and proposes alternative (and sometimes separatist) social-, economic-, and political arrangements which challenge the conditions of a male-dominated society.

**Psychoanalytic approaches** imply an appreciation of women and men's unique sex-role socialization. In women's entrepreneurship, focus is placed on certain traits, like a 'feminine ethics of care'. These approaches claim that the patriarchal family and educational system produce unequal gender development and disparage female traits. Psychoanalytical feminism views women's unique sex-role socialization and their different traits as advantages for organizations.

**Socialist feminist theory** implies an analysis of the relations of power and inequality within a capitalist economy. The gendered divisions of labour are of concern in this theoretical approach. Critical studies of men and masculinities, and intersectional analyses are addressed, including the 'doing gender approach'. Research practices within this approach ask how 'doing gender' might also be characterized as 'doing entrepreneurship'.

**Post-structuralist/post-modern feminist approaches** are concerned with language as a system of difference. Texts and language are seen as a 'politics of representation' that produces gender. Universal and objective knowledge claims, and related epistemologies, are called into question. Deconstructive studies that employ these approaches analyze concepts, theories, and practices of entrepreneurship, and how they construct (women) entrepreneurs.

**Post-colonial feminist theories** critique Western feminist approaches, and question the privileging of white, heterosexual, middle-class representations of gender. Post-colonial feminist theories investigate the function of 'the nation' in gendering and racializing 'others'. Entrepreneurship could be called into question, as it has become a mantra for economic development, following a Western neoliberal recipe for such development.

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