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A warm welcome? Access to advisory services for men and women

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ABSTRACT

In politics, broadly stated ambitions such that a service should be available to all are fairly commonplace. However, evaluation access to service in a broader sense is often difficult and expensive. In this study we use a field experiment to investigate if the reception from the business development community differs contingent on the gender of the client. In the experiment, identical email requests were sent to actors in the enterprise promotion system. The result is that response frequency and time were independent of the gender of the sender. However, the male sender was more often given an explicit invitation to book a time slot. To delve further into the responses, we use sentiment analysis, a 'big data' method, to analyse the replies. The analysis reveal that replies to the female sender is more positive. Our conclusion is that even if there are some gender differences we would not consider it to be a systematic discrimination. However, the unconsciousness from public servants should be included in training to increase awareness of this issue.

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1. Introduction

There is a broad political consensus in Sweden that publicly provided services for businesses should be available for all who need them, irrespective of their gender. However, it is notoriously difficult to achieve this ambition. Evaluations often take the form of simple performance metrics, which convey little about the quality. Desk research on legislation and formal barriers to the use of services focuses mainly on the legalistic issues of availability and less on the practical availability. The data gathering for qualitative evaluation is often costly, and the actors studied are for this reason often restricted to a few actors invested in the research process. We propose an alternative method in this paper. The purpose of the study is to determine whether men and women are welcomed on equal terms into the business promotion system in Sweden. To fulfil this purpose, we perform a field experiment in which we study whether the responses to requests for a service from publicly financed business advisory services differ depending on whether the person requesting the service is a male or a female business manager.

The study extends the literature within the field in three ways. Firstly, while there are a number of field experiments for example in labour economics, to our knowledge this is the only study to use the field experiment setting to investigate publicly provided services and gender equality. Secondly, the use of big data methods in the form of sentiment analysis makes it possible to extend the field experimental applications to allow the analysis of more information from the responses than was possible previously. Thirdly, and more connected to the policy evaluated, a number of studies target the allocation of

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resources and services provided by actors in the public business promotion system (BPS) (see e.g. Nilsson, 1997; Stanger, 2004; Robson et al., 2008; Hansson et al., 2010). This study extends that literature on gender equality in business promotion by switching the object of study from the delivery system to the client's experience. There are to our knowledge no previous studies concerning the effect of gender on the client experience in the BPS.

Inclusive entrepreneurship, including women's entrepreneurship, is a current topic in the policy debate. Entrepreneurship and business creation are increasingly seen as being central to sustainable and inclusive economic growth. The topic touches on the industrial policy, labour policy and policy for regional development. It is widely observed that women and other disadvantaged groups are less likely to be firm managers or even self-employed. Policies that aim to increase entrepreneurship and business ownership in groups that are underrepresented as business owners are a priority in several European countries; see for example OECD/EU (2016) for a list of examples of policies in this area.

There are some indications that female entrepreneurs in Sweden are underserved by the public business promotion system, mainly in the area of financial support (see e.g. Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, 2008; Widerstedt, 2011). There is less evidence in the field of business counselling. Even so, politicians have implicitly raised the question of gender equality within the business promotion system by introducing a range of initiatives with the objective of improving services for female entrepreneurs. Between 2007 and 2014, the Government directed the Swedish Agency of Regional and Economic Growth to implement a programme focused on business counselling, entrepreneurship education and innovation grants directed specifically and exclusively towards female entrepreneurs. The justification for the programme was that women are underserved by the business promotion system. In this paper, we set out to study this implicit assumption.

The focus is the first encounter with agents in the business promotion system. These agents serve as information providers and as a gateway to access a wider range of services in financing, network building and enhanced business development. To answer the question of whether there is equal access to business counselling, a field experimental approach is used. A (fictitious) man and woman approach publicly funded advisory services with the same request for a service. The outcomes studied are whether the responses differ with respect to the response rate, the response time and the content of the responses. To investigate the contents of the replies, we apply sentiment analysis, a branch of computational linguistics and natural language processing developed for the analysis of big data.

The paper is organised as follows. In Section 2 the business promotion system is presented and the arguments for why gender equality could be an issue in the provision of services are discussed. In Section 3 we present the experimental design and the implementation of the design. The results of the experiment are provided in Section 4. The results indicate that there are no differences in the response rate or response time dependent on the gender of the sender of the original message. There are subtle differences in the content of the replies, in which requests for a service from a male entrepreneur more frequently gain a suggested time slot for counselling. The length of replies does not differ depending on the gender of the original sender, but replies to women are more positive in tone. Conclusions and concluding remarks are presented in Section 5.

2. The business promotion system

'Business promotion system' (BPS) is a collective name for a loosely defined collection of services for nascent entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises. The BPS generally refers to business advisory services, business incubators and growth labs as well as public financial assistance, such as investment grants, subsidised loans and venture capital. There are both public and private actors in the business promotion system, and the public actors are expected to serve market segments that (presumably) are not well served by private agents. These include female entrepreneurs.

The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (*Tillväxtverket*) received a special commission from the Government to devise a strategy to ensure that the BPS is accessible 'on equal terms' for men and women. The strategy was presented to the Government in April 2015. The agency identified three challenges for a business promotion system on equal terms: (i) the allocation of resources to firms led by men and women, respectively; (ii) the lack of a coherent and clear vision of what access 'on equal terms' means in this context; and (iii) the fact that the concept of entrepreneurship is defined from a masculine norm.¹

The Swedish labour market is relatively segregated, both in a sectoral and in an occupational sense. Women work to a greater extent in education, health care and social care, activities that are predominantly undertaken by public providers. More men than women work in manufacturing and industrial services, which are predominately produced in the private sector. This spills over to business management and ownership, since most people start firms connected to their field of expertise and industry experience.

2.1. Gender differences in the usage of the BPS

Yazdanfar and Abbasian (2015) note that female entrepreneurs are more positive towards external business advice in the firm start-up phase and use more business counselling. The number of clients and the proportion of female clients for the largest business promotion actors in Sweden are presented in Table 1.

¹ The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (2015).

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