

Impact of gender on difficulties faced by entrepreneurs

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Abstract: *During the last decade, women have been recognized as successful entrepreneurs, and the constantly rising number of women-owned businesses all over the world has led to an increasing number of studies on the differences between male and female entrepreneurs and their businesses. Women's entrepreneurship is characterized by structural constraints such as family responsibility and a relative lack of relevant resources such as social capital. Following the resource-based perspective, this study investigates whether women entrepreneurs face different difficulties from their male counterparts and are indeed disadvantaged as to resources such as management experience, business and technical skills, raising capital, etc. The results of the study show that women's ventures are smaller, service-oriented and 'cheaper' to finance. Compared with their male counterparts, women entrepreneurs perceive their lack of management experience and business skills as a major constraint.*

Keywords: *women entrepreneurs; gender; management experience*

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Business start-ups are evidently a critical driving force of economic growth and development, creating jobs and generally increasing national productivity. Small companies are characterized as sites of 'economic dynamism', creating for example in Canada 90% of all new workplaces. Thus, the investigation of the causes of entrepreneurial success and failure is of major interest. About 20% of all start-ups entering the market disappear at the end of their first year, and about 60% do so five years after establishment. Given these data, it is important to investigate difficulties faced by entrepreneurs in the course of creating their businesses.

Women-owned businesses contribute significantly to economic development worldwide. In the USA, Denmark and Germany about a third of business owners are women (Lerenthal, 1996). In France, the UK and the Netherlands about 25% of business owners are women, and women initiate 20% of all ventures in Greece, Spain, Italy and Ireland (Lerenthal, 1996). Data collected

in Canada show that the rate of male self-employment has increased by 74% during the last 20 years, whereas female self-employment grew by 265% (Mirchandani, 1999). In the USA similar statistics indicate that women's entrepreneurship doubled between 1975 and 1990, with one out of 10 American women over the age of 35 being self-employed. The entrepreneurial activity rate in Israel in 2001 was 6.0%, which is below the average of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor – GEM countries (Reynolds *et al*, 2001). According to the same report, the gender gap between entrepreneurs remains significant all around the world, with Israel representing one of the highest disparities between men and women entrepreneurs in 2002 (Reynolds *et al*, 2002). This may be due to the fact that the economic activities of many Jewish and Arab women in Israel are limited due to traditional and religious cultural constraints. The ongoing conflict in the region causes economic instability, an overall market downturn and a continuing

decrease in capital investments. With closures and laying-off of staff in many of the large organizations, the role of entrepreneurship in Israeli society is of increasing importance. It is therefore of major concern to understand the difficulties faced by entrepreneurs in general and by women entrepreneurs in particular.¹

The gender issue with regard to entrepreneurship raises a number of important questions: are women entrepreneurs different from men entrepreneurs? Are women entrepreneurs driven by different motivational impacts from their male counterparts? Are there systematic differences between the ventures established by men and women? This paper focuses upon differences concerning the difficulties faced by female and male entrepreneurs. The literature provides a number of models dealing with difficulties faced by entrepreneurs. Some models stress the industry and environment as the main explanatory factor, and others focus on the difficulties during the various stages of development of the business. In general, three groups of variables can be identified as explanatory frameworks for entrepreneurial difficulties: social capital, personal characteristics, and industry and product-related issues.

There is empirical evidence that indicates women entrepreneurs are less successful than their male counterparts (Loscocco, Robinson *et al*, 1991; Lerner and Almor, 2002). This may be related to a number of causes, such as the type of businesses typically established by women, for example; it also may have to do with the difficulties that appear at various stages of the venturing process. Gender-specific differences in constraints and problems appearing during the process can help to explain success and failure and then apparently point to possible practice solutions. Facing the fact that failure rates of new ventures are high, and given the important contribution that small and medium-sized businesses make to social and economic development, the investigation of the causes of entrepreneurial success and failure is of major interest.

My attempt to detect gender-specific difficulties is based upon the theoretical agenda perceiving structural constraints, such as family responsibility, relative lack of relevant resources and deficit in social capital, as explanatory factors for gender-based differences. Following the resource-based perspective, this study investigates whether women entrepreneurs face difficulties other than those faced by their male counterparts and are indeed disadvantaged as to resources such as management experience, business and technical skills, raising capital, etc.

A sample of 462 Israeli entrepreneurs (145 women and 317 men) responded to a questionnaire including 61 closed questions concerning the entrepreneur and his/her environment, the venture and the process of venturing.²

The investigation of constraints, problems and difficulties faced by entrepreneurs throughout the process of venturing is important for practical as well as theoretical reasons. Taking into consideration that about 90% of failures in start-ups are due to lack of business and managerial skills and seeing this fact alongside the results of this study, a possible explanation for the fact that women entrepreneurs are less successful than their male counterparts may become evident.

Difficulties faced by entrepreneurs

An overview of the literature dealing with constraints and difficulties faced by entrepreneurs at various stages of the process of venturing reveals five main groups:

- (1) difficulties associated with the external economic environment;
- (2) difficulties associated with the life-cycle of the venture;
- (3) difficulties associated with the product and its industry;
- (4) management problems; and
- (5) difficulties associated with the entrepreneur's personality.

(1) Chunchi and Young (2002) stress the impact of the external economic environment, particularly upon small firms at the time of start-up, such as formal and legal constraints of the institutional as well as national finance policies. When examining the USA and Croatia, Lussier and Pfeiffer (2000) consider the impact of the general economic and business environment upon difficulties and upon the chances of the venture's survival.

(2) Some research concludes that organizational problems are primarily dependent upon the life-cycle of the firm. Kouriloff (2000) for example, checked pre-start-up constraints and found that in this particular phase social constraints such as unsupportive family members and friends were the most serious, followed by business-oriented constraints such as internal operational issues and psychological ones such as lack of confidence or self-esteem. Kuratko and Hodgetts (1992) state that marketing and economic problems characterize the first stage of the venturing process, whereas administrative, strategic and management problems occur at the growth stage. Terpstra and Olson (1993) on the other hand, found that early-stage problems connected with product and service development were predominant, whereas management and organizational problems occurred at the growth stage. Empirical evidence as to the relationship between the stage of the firm's life-cycle and type of organizational difficulties to be faced by the entrepreneur is not clear cut.

(3) According to Chunchi and Young (2002), the immediate industry environment of the product determines technology, type of competition, etc. and therefore the product and market-oriented problems of the venture. Dun and Bradstreet (1986)

mention the problems of fast-ageing products and low productivity. Terpstra and Olson (1993) add product development and technology constraints to the difficulties connected with the product and its industry.

(4) Difficulties of distribution, marketing and sales, financing, human resources, etc are often attributed to management problems (Terpstra and Olson, 1993; Chunchi and Young, 2002; Kouriloff, 2000).

(5) Factors concerning the entrepreneur's personal characteristics include attributes such as the need for achievement (McClelland, 1961) and risk-taking propensity on the one hand, and demographic data, family situation, human relations and social capital on the other (Loscocco and Robinson, 1991; Kouriloff, 2000).

Women entrepreneurs and gender-specific constraints

During the last decade women have been recognized as entrepreneurs, and the constantly rising number of women-owned businesses all over the world has led to an increasing amount of research on the difference between male and female entrepreneurs and their businesses.

Two theoretical perspectives are involved when elaborating on the differences between male and female entrepreneurs: 'social feminism' stresses internal structural factors as explanatory variables for gender-based differences. Established social structures determine socialization, experiences and motivations and lead to differences between women and men. Female v male entrepreneurs then adopt different business approaches that may or may not lead to differences in effectiveness. 'Liberal feminism' based on the concept of rationality presumes women and men to be equal. This approach stresses external structural factors rooted in open discrimination and social structures that prevent women from acquiring the necessary resources (Fischer, Reuber and Dyke, 1993). Within the entrepreneurial framework this approach states that new ventures initiated by women will perform less well than those of their male counterparts because of open discrimination in the financial market, for example, or because of systematic deprivation with regard to resources such as management skills and business experience.

Theorists assuming structural barriers to women's entrepreneurship argue that 'women's lack of industry experience and family situation (in particular responsibility for childcare) explain part of the differences in income' (Mirchandani, 1999, p 227). Gender differences are expressed in the characteristics of women's businesses, with a relatively high percentage being in less competitive industries such as the service and retail

sectors, smaller in size, growing more slowly, if at all, and demanding much lower rates of investment (Loscocco and Robinson, 1991). Aldrich (1989) states that women tend to form networks, characterized by a larger number of strong, overinvested ties, establishing a disadvantage in the business world. Hisrich (1989) advises women entrepreneurs to invest in the resources that are necessary in order to succeed in the business world, such as management experience and financial education, thereby assuming a potential lack of these resources.

The resource-based perspective

The resource-based perspective maintains that 'a firm may be perceived as an aggregation of resources and capabilities, which are translated by management into the strengths and weaknesses of the firm' (Lerner and Almor, 2002, p 110). The traditional view of entrepreneurial orientation focuses on the importance of resources and their availability. Some researchers stress the impact of resources on the determination of entrepreneurial motivation (Covin and Slevin, 1991; Gartner, 1985), while others maintain that a lack of resources limits growth-oriented entrepreneurial activities and constrains growth (eg Kirchoff, 1994). Access to and availability of resources are perceived as important contextual factors explaining differential rates of venturing in various environments (Chandler and Hanks, 1994; Bruno and Tyebbee, 1982) and resource availability constitutes the basis for a firm's ability to take risks, to choose between strategic options, to deal with environmental impacts, etc. The interrelationship between resources and performance has been the subject of a number of studies (Miller and Shamsie, 1996; Brush and Artz, 1999). Human and social capital constitute resources discussed in the context of entrepreneurship and wealth creation in family firms (Sirmon and Hitt, 2003), with social capital providing access to markets, information and complementary resources.

In the gender context, the lack of relevant resources is of major interest. Management experience, business-related skills, technical knowledge and experience in the field of financing constitute major resources throughout the venturing process. The importance of these resources stems from the fact that an extremely high number of business failures is due to a lack of management and business skills and experiences (Loscocco *et al*, 1991; Loscocco and Robinson, 1991).

Loscocco and Robinson (1991) maintain that this lack of management and business skills and experience is gender-specific and that, especially in the start-up stage of the business, but also throughout the process, it has an important impact upon the venture. Theoretically the

relative lack of relevant resources of women entrepreneurs can be attributed to labour market segregation, to socialization processes pushing women in occupational directions that are neither technical nor business- or management-oriented, and to the 'glass ceiling' in the organizational arena.

Difficulties faced by women entrepreneurs can be related to three structural barriers, namely family responsibility, relative lack of relevant resources, and deficits in social capital. Following the resource-based perspective this study investigates whether women entrepreneurs face different difficulties from those of their male counterparts and are indeed disadvantaged as to resources such as management experience, business and technical skills, raising capital, etc.

As the empirical part of this study concentrates on the lack of resources, the issues of family responsibility and social capital will be subject to discussion in a future framework.

The study

The data for this study were collected in Israel during the years 2000–2002 by means of a comprehensive questionnaire that included 61 closed questions investigating the entrepreneur, his/her environment, the venture and the process of venturing. University and college students administered the questionnaire to 462 entrepreneurs from all over the country. Since the profile of the entrepreneurs and their businesses is very similar to samples of studies conducted during the last few years in Israel (eg Zemach, 2000; Lernthal, 1996; Lerner, Brush and Hisrich, 1995; Erez and Erdeling, 1991), I will cautiously consider it as being representative of the population of Israeli entrepreneurs. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the entrepreneurs and differences between male and female entrepreneurs.

Results

No significant differences between women and men entrepreneurs appear as to age, number of children, years of formal education, or occupation before venturing. The cause for the significant difference in the field of education lies in three subdivisions representing classical cases of gender segregation: women dominate in humanities ($f = 21\%$ versus $m = 9\%$) and in educational, nursing and vocational training ($f = 15\%$ versus $m = 5\%$), whereas male entrepreneurs clearly dominate the professional fields of computer science, engineering and technical work ($m = 22\%$ versus $f = 10\%$). A significant difference exists in the marital status of the entrepreneurs, with more unmarried women than men. Few entrepreneurs seem to suffer from serious

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the entrepreneurs (women and men).

Demographic characteristics	Women = 145	Men = 317	Significance
<i>Formal education:</i>			
1. Up to 12 years	26	38	
2. 12–15 years	32	24	
3. BA or MA +	42	38	
Total	100%	100%	NS
<i>Field of education:</i>			
1. Social sciences	24	21	
2. Humanities	21	10	
3. Natural & computer sciences and engineering	10	22	
4. Technician	6	9	
5. Other (*)	15	5	
6. Only 12 years of education	24	34	
Total	100%	100%	P < 0.000
<i>Marital status:</i>			
1. Single/divorced/widowed	27	24	
2. Married	73	76	
Total	100%	100%	NS
<i>Occupation before starting the venture:</i>			
1. Wage earner	72	72	
2. Self-employed	11	10	
3. Other	17	18	
Total	100%	100%	NS
<i>Self-reported socioeconomic status:</i>			
1. Above average	31	46	
2. Average	62	50	
3. Below average	7	4	
Total	100%	100%	P = 0.005
<i>Mean age of entrepreneurs:</i>	41.3	40.2	NS
<i>Mean of number of children:</i>	2.6	2.2	NS

(*) includes education, nursing, vocational training, etc.

economic problems: 62% of women entrepreneurs define their socioeconomic status as average, and 31% as above average; whereas 46% of male entrepreneurs define themselves as average, and the same number as of above average socioeconomic status.

Business types include eight categories (Samuel and Heilbrunn, 2001). The industrial production type deals with new product development. Agricultural ventures mainly nourish plants and animals. Workshops produce arts and crafts such as pottery and jewellery. The fourth type refers to tourism businesses such as restaurants. Types five, six and seven include professional, personal and maintenance services such as marketing services, hairdressing and carpentry, while the last type includes all the 'others'. As can be observed in Table 2, again a rather classical gender-based segregation appears, with

Table 2. Type of business (women and men).

Type of business	Women = 139	Men = 300	Significance
1. Industrial production	1	8	
2. Agricultural production		3	
3. Workshops	4	7	
4. Tourism	33	34	
5. Professional services	23	25	
6. Personal services	33	11	
7. Maintenance services	1	6	
8. Others	5	6	
Total	100%	100%	P < 0.000

Table 3. Size of business in terms of employees (women and men).

Number of employees	Women = 124	Men = 296	Significance
1-5	79	63	
6-15	15	26	
16-25	3	5	
26-50	3	6	
Total	100%	100%	P < 0.021

women underrepresented in production-oriented types (categories 1, 2 and 3) and dominating in personal service ventures. Many of the professional businesses established by women represent educational counselling and graphic studios, whereas financial and legal offices represent the typical male professional service business.

The data presented in Table 3 complete the picture and show that nearly 80% of businesses created by women employ fewer than five workers. The rather small size of the majority of businesses reported by the respondents to my questionnaire matches data provided by the Israeli Enterprise Authority (2004).

Respondents were asked to rate the difficulties they met in the earlier stages of venturing. Based on the literature, categories to be rated by the entrepreneurs included items such as lack of social support, problems in obtaining adequate information, problems in raising money, problems in recruiting workers, etc. Table 4 shows the frequencies and distribution of difficulties faced by the respondents during the process of venturing.

Nearly half of the women entrepreneurs reported a lack of management and business experience. For women, this item constitutes the main difficulty, followed by problems in raising money, marketing problems and difficulties in recruiting workers. Fifteen per cent of all women entrepreneurs also perceived the issue of obtaining permits as a major constraint. In

contrast, 59% of the men entrepreneurs reported problems in raising financial resources (the highest-ranking difficulty among men); they also had problems with marketing and management, as well as with obtaining permits and recruiting workers. In order to rule out the possibility that the type of business influences the difference between male and female entrepreneurs as to reported difficulties, the same statistical procedure was run while controlling for the most prevalent types of businesses, such as those in the area of tourism and professional and personal services. The results showed that within the same business type category, for women entrepreneurs the lack of business and management experience established the major problem; while for their male counterparts, raising money remained the major difficulty.

Concluding remarks

The entrepreneurs and their businesses that made up this study represent a rather classical case of gender segregation. In accordance with Loscocco (1991) this investigation shows that gender differences are expressed in the characteristics of women-owned businesses: a relatively high percentage located in less competitive industries such as the service and retail sectors, smaller in size, and growing more slowly, if at all. Since these businesses demand much lower rates of investment, it is not surprising that significantly fewer women entrepreneurs perceived the raising of capital as a major difficulty. While men are often specialists in their particular field, and are quite competent in a number of business skills (their experience often comes from manufacturing, finance or technical areas), women have more administrative experience in service-related areas such as education, secretarial work, retail and sales. The result of this difference is smaller female-owned businesses with lower net earnings (Coughlin and Thomas, 2002).

The findings of this study also reinforce Hisrich's (1989) advice to women entrepreneurs to invest in the resources that are necessary in order to succeed in the business world, such as management experience and financial education. The women entrepreneurs in this study perceive their lack of management experience and business skills as a major constraint. Due to the so-called experience gap, women tend to bring less management-related experience into their businesses. While there is no significant difference in formal education (with women outdoing men in higher degrees), women do have fewer marketing, management and financial skills. Therefore we can state that the business-specific resource of education needed in order to start a business is obviously less available for female

Table 4. Difficulties reported by entrepreneurs (women and men).

Descending percentage of entrepreneurs reporting difficulties of various types (*)	Women = 145	Men = 317	Chi-square	Significance
1. Lack of management and business experience	47	34	8.47	0.006
2. Problems raising money	40	59	7.95	0.01
3. Marketing problems	37	34		NS
4. Problems in obtaining permits	15	27	9.22	0.002
5. Problems in recruiting workers	21	22		NS
6. Language problems (**)	11	6	5.6	0.018
7. Lack of support and legitimacy	8	6		NS
8. Problem in obtaining land (**)	4	6		NS
9. Problems in gathering relevant information	5	7		NS
10. Facing governmental restrictions	2	8	5.86	0.015

(*) The complementary value of each cell value constitutes the number of respondents that reported having no difficulty with the specific item. Thus, 59% of women entrepreneurs had no difficulties in raising money.

(**) These items were included because new immigrants as well as Israeli Arabs responded to the questionnaire.

entrepreneurs. This can of course be connected to the glass ceiling statement, with women being concentrated in the lower levels of most organizations, where there are less opportunities to gather experiences relevant to starting a business. With the average age of all entrepreneurs above 40 years, and taking into consideration that over 70% were wage earners before starting their business (see Table 1), the type of experience gathered does make a major difference and can be understood as an explanatory factor as to gender differences in failure rates. The difference in experience between male and female entrepreneurs also takes into account the fact that men spend more years managing employees, have more experience in firms similar to their own start-up companies, and have helped others to start businesses (Fischer, Reuber and Dyke, 1993).

A closer look at the difficulties reported by all the entrepreneurs reveals another interesting fact: it seems that external, environment-dependent factors, such as governmental restrictions and lack of support and legitimacy, were of little importance to any of the entrepreneurs taking part in this investigation. This may of course be due to the fact that the sample of businesses presented here includes mostly small businesses with a relatively small need for investment. The relationship of small business owners to their institutional environment is not investigated within the framework of this paper, but should be looked at in the future. In the context of Israeli society, further research should try to capture the particularity of Jewish and Arab women in the traditional religious sector. Cultural constraints influencing mobility and patterns of interaction may establish major difficulties in this section of society.

Taking into consideration that about 90% of failures

in start-ups are due to lack of business and managerial skills and considering this alongside the results of this study, a possible explanation for the fact that women entrepreneurs are less successful than their male counterparts may be evident. A more extensive investigation of the subject should not only specify relevant resources, but should also deal with the additional structural barriers, namely family responsibility and deficits in social capital in terms of networks. Gender differences in network creation may provide an additional explanation for the findings of this study.

National and international institutions fostering the creation of new ventures by supporting and encouraging entrepreneurs should consider investing much thought and resources in concentrating efforts on dealing with those factors that are perceived by entrepreneurs as problematic during the start-up process. Considering my findings, gender-segregated support systems and tools may actually result in a less gender-segregated map of new ventures.

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Notes

¹ The sample for this study does not include men and women of the Jewish religious community or of the Israeli Arab population. The contextual framework for such a study should deal with the impact of cultural differences upon entrepreneurship.

² Since the students used the collected data for a number of seminar papers (not all of them concerning the issue of gender), the sample includes a large number of male entrepreneurs.

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