

## BEING WOMAN, DOING BUSINESS. FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS AS INNOVATORS

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*Abstract:* This paper presents some facts and results of a research made among Hungarian women from a rural region, named Szeklerland (Harghita and Covasna county, Romania), women who are running their own micro, small or medium sized business. The empirical background is provided by interviews and a survey made among more than five hundred female entrepreneurs. According to the collected data there will be presented the socio-demographic profile of this women, and also the type of the business activity – which are mostly related to the traditional female roles' work area. By presenting the main motivating factors behind business starting we will understand better the "entrepreneurial" attitude among this population, where the entrepreneurial identity is encountered as expletive to women, mother, wife, "family responsible" identities.

*Keywords:* entrepreneurship, female entrepreneur, small business, rural women, female self employment

### 1. Introduction

After the change of regime in 1989, the macro social structural fluctuation induced several social variations having the effect of degradation of the state public sector in the former communist countries. The merge from the state to private sectors, the rise of the private sectors started slowly and it is still a slow process in Romania. The economic and labor market changes enabled the development of business sector. The everyday experience shows that in early 2000 there was already a significant number of small and medium-sized firms even in the rural areas, this was increasing in the last 5 years and this process will continue. As women around the world are becoming increasingly active participants in the business sector, so in our region is also visible this phenomenon, even if among the entrepreneurs, women are represented on a very low level.

The paper presents the results of a sociological research made among Hungarian women from a rural region in Romania (Harghita and Covasna counties), focused on women who are running their own micro, small or medium sized business. The empirical background is provided by interviews and a survey made among more than five hundred female entrepreneurs. The main purpose is to present the group of women who are managing a small business by drawing a detailed picture about these female entrepreneurs socio-demographic profile, introducing the type of business activity – which is mostly related to the traditional female roles' work area. By presenting the main motivating factors behind launching a business we will easily understand the "entrepreneurial" attitude among these women, where the entrepreneurial identity is encountered as complementary to women, mother, wife, "family responsible" identities.

The female characters that appear among entrepreneurs could be responsible for the introducing of an emphatic, complex innovation practice. This might generate significant changes at a

societal level. The social innovative role of this group of female entrepreneur's occurs as a challenge not only in the terms of economic activity (such as profit-raise or regional, territorial development promoting), but in addition, these women entrepreneurs could be leaders in the restructuring process of the female social roles' system.

The emergence of entrepreneurs and small businesses around the world play an important role in boosting up the economical situation. According to international researches, female entrepreneurs can also play an important role in this area (Maxfield 2005). For low-income countries with development deficiencies (like Romania) the power of the small and medium sized entrepreneurs (including women entrepreneurs) can be a pivotal issue (Ashwin 2000). Both entrepreneur management problems and successes have an impact on a macro-social level (Firestone 2010). Nevertheless the development of the business sector may be an indicator of a predictable legal structure and a prosperous economy.

The female characters that appear among entrepreneurs could be responsible for the introducing of an emphatic, complex innovation practice, which might generate significant changes at a societal level. This change suggests the splitting with age-long practices. The cognition of the issue presumes the understanding of a very complex, elusive, multi-factorial process. The problem is organized around two key-concepts: the *inheritance* and the *innovation*. Bequeath and reproduction of the traditional social roles appears next to a form of modernity launched (as well as) by socialism (Bodó 1996). We are speaking about a traditional society where the social definition of gender roles follows a longstanding system of norms valid for centuries. However, all this had been radically modified by the forced urbanization and modernity brought by the socialism. These norms, regarding to gender roles were not eliminated, but were expanded (Magyari-Vincze 2004, Geambasu 2004). The women's business practice – in post-socialist transition countries – should be interpreted in a different social context than in case of men (Welter-Kolb 2006: 8). The Soviet socio-ethical norms introduced and left a paradox situation for women: besides the uptake and the expression of gender equality (women's education, work), it also left the former model like "housewife" role and motherhood as a part of the female role in society (Ashwin 2000). Thus, after the 1960's, the women had to engage to endure double or multiple burdens (Ashwin 2000, Welter-Kolb 2006, Magyari-Vincze 2004). The four decades of the socialist era has provided for women living in Romania the opportunity, the desire and the aspiration for self-realization, in turn, it did not gave a model for achieving all these. After the beginning of the post-socialist era, the gates of consumer society elements, material and post material values were opened. Direct and indirect methods opened the possibility to explore Western model – the most frequent practice was the work-migration (Bodó 2008). Hereby, people (in our case: the women) from this region had to confront again with a new challenge. Although the participation in this immigration process was less characteristic to female gender roles (Kiss-Csata 2004: 112), as in the long-term and seasonal work-migration were involved mainly young, married men (Bodó 1996: 74). This also means that sometimes women had to carry alone the burden of the whole family and also means that compared to men, women accumulated a significant disadvantage in terms of human capital and labor market perspectives (eg. experience).

The social relevance and importance of the issue is also due to the fact that women had the opportunity to actually shape their own careers only after 1990, in the "new world". Even though the women's roles and responsibilities have become increasingly complex, the inhabitants of this region had the opportunity to experience these changes for the first time in their history. It was

the first time when a woman could operate independently, respect to the economical, financial terms of organization and task divisions.

After 1989, the country (Romania) suffers from multiple disadvantages. For an area without industry, without a major driving force, this is even more accentuated. The women have to pass through an unfavorable labor market situation: they have only few and low paid employment opportunities. Women could not have „high level” networks from Soviet times and as some researches demonstrate, women entrepreneurs lack the level of social capital and contact like men had or could have. This was and (still is) disadvantaging them in the early stages of transition in getting started (Welter–Kolb 2006: 8). Research also shows that the entrepreneurial success depended in many post-socialist regions (Welter-Kolb 2006) and in Szeklerland as well (Kiss 2004) on the convertibility of this social capital. And this puts the question of woman entrepreneurs in a highly interesting light: from this kind of social situation, how does someone become a risk taking innovator? Who becomes such person? Why exactly do they become entrepreneurs? How, in what way is it possible the harmonization of these wide range – external and internal – expectations?

The social relevance of the question is also important, because on one hand the understanding of business practice could bring significant social benefits from a regional developmental point of view. The successful practices and solutions might generate further positive processes. And this kind of sociological approach – highlighting these questions in the media, conducting research programs and projects regarding to this issues, presenting positive, successful stories in books, magazines, journals – could have a role in the shaping and strengthening of female entrepreneur identity. Nevertheless, the importance of professional analytical work consist not only in coloring a „white patch” but it also brings a specific example of a „catching-up” exercise in wider post-socialist regional and European context.

## **2. Female actors in business sector**

The everyday experience shows that more and more female owned small and medium sized firms appear. This number is expected to grow rapidly and as a result a female role-growth can be expected (Epstein 1993). However - according to cultural anthropology researches - this area still operates with a lot of traditional cultural models, which still have very strong impact on the social gender roles, on social identity and self-determination (Magyari-Vincze 2004). The division of male and female social roles, the beliefs about women's place and role still follow – in many aspects – the traditions of previous decades (Magyari-Vincze 2004), the raising of children and household activities remained – almost exclusively – in the female role-package (Welter – Kolb 2006), as the traditional "order" is followed as well.

In this context is worthwhile examining how women succeed in establishing and running efficiently substantially different roles from the traditional patterns and beliefs. The female role-construction appears as a kind of challenge: for women entrepreneurs but for their social environment as well.

The entrepreneur is a key actor of the market economy (Lampl 2008: 235). A strong entrepreneurial class is an essential element not only for an economic development, but an independent business sector is also necessary for the edification of democracy (Lampl 2008). In fact the entrepreneurial culture and its level of development is the key-factor of economy. It is crucial how one country, region, area can motivate the entrepreneurs to develop their firms and people to start a business (Startiene-Remeikiene 2008). It is therefore not surprising that the

entrepreneurship appears in the focus of the social research, it is understandable that in recent decades the sociology is increasingly turning to the entrepreneurs, to the entrepreneurial practices (Thornton 1999).

Over the past few decades women around the world become increasingly active participants of the business sector (Boon 2005: 161). The authors acknowledge this with normality, because – according to them – a private firm is the only option for avoiding gender gap (Firestone 2010), serious personal and professional fulfillment can be achieved, career-building obstacles, like direct or indirect discrimination or the glass ceiling phenomenon can be eliminated (Arenius-Kovalainen 2006: 31). In addition, of course, the entrepreneurship is also a way of attaining financial income, personal autonomy (Arenius-Kovalainen 2006: 32), but having an own business – as many empirical studies claim – creates the opportunity for the harmonization of business and family activities and duties in such way the employee's status does not permit (Arenius-Kovalainen 2006: 32). Not surprisingly, therefore, that in the last 20-30 years the proportion of women who became entrepreneurs increased worldwide. According to some authors, even so the number of women entering a business is still far short compared to the number of male entrepreneurs (Arenius-Kovalainen 2006).

The transition period, experienced by the post-communist countries, induced a number of socio-economic changes. After 1989 Romania also passed through a very significant institutional transformation, one of the most important is the private, non-state sector-led economic build-up, operation and development. In the establishment of the private sector the emergence of companies and firms had a leading role and in the development of the economy besides large companies the small and medium sized firms have an increasingly larger role as well. The increasing number of private firms in the post-soviet countries – where the private sector did not exist for decades – has become one of the main topics of the socio-economic analysis regarding Central and Eastern Europe. However, in contrast with the economical analysis – approach, for which this process is exciting in terms of profit and loss – the focus of a sociological research is rather the social conditions of establishing and managing a small and medium-sized firm (Scase 2003, Aidisa et. al. 2007, Csata 2006). We also might presume that the entrepreneurial spirit should be pursuit primarily not in individual aptitudes, but in socio-environmental conditions (Sandu 1999b). In an emerging market economy the entrepreneurial behavior means – according to Sandu – a social innovation and social role-learning process, the learning procedure of a whole new way of thinking compared to the earlier models of socialization practices in "a negative social-economic-political environment" ( Sandu 1999b: 117). This is a big challenge for entrepreneurs in the rural sector.

### **3. Methodology**

The research investigates along what characteristics can be described the typical woman, who is starting a business? How can be compatible an entrepreneurial life with the "traditional" female roles? For what kind of purpose the women in this region are becoming entrepreneurs? Which primary motivations could be attributed to one female entrepreneurship start? Which could be the secondary motivations for women to start a business? Does the lack of job-opportunity leading women to become force-entrepreneurs or more positive incentives affect this decision? What kind of narratives are behind their professional and personal lives? How appears the business and what kind of meaning have in their narratives? How is in their professional and personal story interpreted the existence of entrepreneurship? How, in what way do they integrate

the entrepreneurial role in their personal life stories? How do they define the relationship between business and family?

A survey was conducted in 2010 and more than three dozen of interviews were taken as well. We considered to be an entrepreneur the person who owns and runs an officially registered company. We have created a database from electronically accessible data regarding companies registered in Harghita and Covasna counties. There were selected those companies which included female names as owners (managers). Thus the base of the sampling was constituted by this name list including 8504 people (female). Starting from these lists we made a random sampling, taking into consideration the size of the town or area in order to narrow to 20-30-40 the list of people selected for direct interviews. This is how the final sampling was established: 240 questionnaires in Covasna County and 360 questionnaires in Harghita.

The qualitative research began in late 2008 and ended in May 2010. During this time 38 in-depth interviews were conducted with women who have an individual business or operate a business as a partner and this is mostly practiced as full time "job". The starting point in selecting these persons for interviews was the local network of friends and then by the snowball method more persons were included in the research. At the selection of the interviewed we paid attention to selecting people from both counties, living in urban and rural areas as well and we have also tried to keep the equity regarding the age of the interviewed.

#### **4. Findings**

We could say that the typical female entrepreneur is middle-aged, has secondary education, is married and she is mother of two children (Walker-Webster 2006). The women entrepreneurs have slightly higher levels of education than the women from Szeklerland in average, are more willing to study, to participate in vocational-training, they have better communicative competence in Romanian language, and many of them speaks English as well. The level of social commitment to the traditional female roles is very high, which determines the attitude toward business as well. For the majority of woman the entrepreneurial activity must be absolutely compatible with family life and mostly everything is in the second place: individual self-fulfillment, professional success and career development. The age is an important determinant for the character of entrepreneurship, for the entrepreneurial attitude, for the entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial type. Older and younger women entrepreneurs manifest different style, attitude in a series of behavior-related issues. However, this can be attributed to individual life situations (family, children, age), to labor market experience, and no squarely to the socialist working culture before 1989. But it is a fact that older women are less risk-taking entrepreneurs, rather organizational ones. Younger women are those who are willing to take on considerable financial risks, they are more flexible, more courageous, are opened to other kinds of "territories" in terms of entrepreneurship, they are much more dynamic.

##### **4.1. Entrepreneurial culture**

We found an emerging, but atomized entrepreneurial strata, which will be characterized by a low level of entrepreneurial culture. We have seen that the entrepreneurial identity is encountered as expletive to women, mother, wife, "family responsible" identities. The entrepreneurial ideals are less incorporated. The culturally embedded, the mild community prejudice and "collective suspicion" against entrepreneurs generate a constant sub-dimensioning of entrepreneurial activity and evokes continuous self-explanation attitude among women. At the

same time almost exclusively small individual stories, ideas, plans dominate the women's ideas about entrepreneurship. Women, or women's entrepreneurial associations are less or do not exist at all. Or if there are, they exist mostly formally. The associational work, the common fundraising, the collective interests are just experimental and isolated experiences.

#### **4.2. Gender roles**

Mostly these women run small businesses and these enterprises are related to the traditionally female roles' work area. The most frequent are groceries and mixed shops, firms in beauty industry (hairdresser, manicure, pedicure), flower or gift shops, firms specialized in nutrition (bakery and pastry shop, restaurant, cafe, catering company operating), in textile industry and clothing (new and used clothing and footwear store operation, dressmaking), services (bride clothing rent, cake preparation, gymnastics). The number of financial services (accounting, financial advisory services) and other kind of business services (translation, tender advice) are few and vanishing. It is also clear that there can be find mainly merchant-type businesses (Sandu 1999b). However is common the service activity within firms, but those who have a productive activity are very low in number.

#### **4.3. Motivations**

Indeed we found a group of women entrepreneurs who can be described as model follower. The most common situation is that the husband is entrepreneur, the second most common that the father, rarely the brothers or a female member of the family is an entrepreneur (eg. aunt), but this only in very few cases. In these cases is more identifiable a courageous and a more significant risk-taking attitude and the entrepreneurial identity is more solid. These women are the ones who consider themselves and their businesses prosperous and have stronger, bolder plans.

For the influence of the pushing factors (Boon 2005) as dominant factor in the entrepreneurial decision sufficient evidence could not be found, it seems that exists a group that we could consider forced entrepreneurs, but not so large in number as we previously assumed. The pushing factors are much less dominant factors – in the light of the research results.

Mostly instrumental-entrepreneurs (Lamp1 2008) can be found in our population, the ones who mainly choose to start a business as an instrument for achieving a better living, a more relaxed family life and a comfortable everyday life. Only a small number of women can be called intentional-entrepreneurs: they are the ones with the old dream, and the desire of creating an individually imagined job, a special working environment. Independence occurs as a very important motivating effect: in those cases, for the non-forced entrepreneurs the most important motivating effect was independence, income and flexible working hours.

#### **4.4. Entrepreneurial types**

We draw four group of ideal types of female entrepreneur along four criteria: (1) according to the type of work/task, we established *trader*, *supplier* and *producer* entrepreneur types; (2) according to the bound between the business and personal life we can talk about *quasi-random*, *instrumental* and *intentional entrepreneur* women; (3) from the perspective of the entrepreneur ideals we can say that within the studied population can be found a *technocrat* entrepreneur, but also *profit-seeking* entrepreneurs and *carrier-building entrepreneurs*; (4) regarding motivation we believe that there can be identified four types: *model-follower*, *job-creators*, *ambitious* and *check desirers* (Gergely 2010: 148-149, Gergely 2013: 74-75).

## **5. Conclusions**

Along the research results we can clearly make a series of statements regarding the female entrepreneurs from Szeklerland. First of all we can say that there are only a small number of groups who are having and leading a firm as a full time job. This is especially characteristic to the region due to a lower level of entrepreneurial culture and due to the deeply embedded traditional role patterns. The lack of mutual trust can also be the cause for the fact that entrepreneur spirit is still low. However, advocacy, professional associations, lack of consent contributes to the fact that very few dare to run a business.

Second we have also seen that thanks to the economic transition, the changed labor market offers a very limited number of work opportunities, especially for women. In order to compensate this, women launch small and medium sized businesses. To remediate the labor market deficiencies or to avoid the inadequate job-offers they have decided along the entrepreneurial status. Or maybe only in this way can they harmonize the work with the family and childcare. That is why micro and small enterprises are mostly owned by women (Epstein 1993), with small capital, few number of employees and the firms usually remain at this level. Only a small number of entrepreneurship can step out from this starting position. But the youngest are interpreted as important economic agents, because are generators of workplaces even if only for themselves.

Third we can convince ourselves about the human resource provisions of the area, seeing that the female entrepreneurs have higher education, are more opened and flexible, more receptive to learning and to adult training, dispose of more urban habits and lifestyle and at more points can be considered innovators (Sandu 1999b): they launch a business in an area where major distrust can be felt over against entrepreneurs and where the traditional female roles are not associated with the perceived independence and material success.

Nevertheless it should be noted that this firms have their activity in a rural region, not in a consumption-oriented one. The women open a shop, provide in beauty industry etc, carry out such activities that mainly can be called market generator and customer behavior-shaping, rather than focusing on demand services. However, there are some persons who started very new things in the region. So - if not in the classic, Schumpeterian sense (Oláh 2006) - these women can be viewed and called innovators (Sandu 1999b). Women often can be successful only in certain sectors, supposing that in these sectors the male entrepreneurs are less interested (eg. beauty, clothing). Only few of them have the courage to start a business in some other areas.

It should be also mentioned that women initiated and developed their business mostly in those areas where the family and household tasks are more compatible (eg. close to home, or the "work place" is at home: hostel, home bakery, close shops etc, or is more kind of "women work": catering, cake-service, aerobic training, private nursery schools etc.). However, the age did not prove to be a dividing line in the area of self-realization. It is important to all of them to "work", to work for a certain degree of self-fulfillment and of course - at some level and form – success as well. And they do all this by not neglecting the household tasks and family roles. This is true to all age categories and for all kind of entrepreneurships. So it is important, undeniable their supply to the family income, but the importance of the personal (female) individualization can be state as well. In this manner, their success floats at a more modest scale: if the firm is not in loss, they estimate it as a success, they never boast and they rarely engage to objective assessment of the financial situation of the firm. The desire to obtain profit almost never appears in the narratives. For them, the “real” success means the harmonization of the role of wife, mother with the role of the women entrepreneur.

The social innovative role of this group of female entrepreneur's occurs as a challenge not only in the terms of economic activity (such as profit-raise or regional, territorial development promoting). In addition, these women entrepreneurs could be leaders in the restructure process of the female social roles' system. Both tasks are cumbersome tasks, the second one even more since the elements of role structure heritage have the same impact as the newly-ins. So the fact is that this group may be a multi-innovative one at community level. They seemed to be *reckless* because the financial risk-taking is not part of the traditional mentality. At the same time *courageous*, because they start an activity with self-confidence, an activity for which they got no model. In addition, they have to be *innovative*, because they invent for themselves a brand new or a not so typical activity. And they manage to create a market for their products, their services. They are also *crisis-managers*, because they find the way to resolve difficult situations and to supplement the family income. And of course, they do all this without neglecting the family and the children, remaining loyal to the traditional roles. Last but not least, this women managed to develop an effective method to avoid the unemployment, seeking to redress the deficit of the labor market.

Why could we say women are filling a gap by running a firm? Is there a gap? Yes, we can say in the region (but in the all country as well) the female population is in a less favorable labor-market situation as men are, for example by discrimination is job hiring, And yes again: gap in gender roles, with a strong traditional mentality which puts women in very hard situation, in a constant strong family-work duality. Also thanks to the traditional character of gender roles a lot of women have no self confidence and low self-esteem. An important disadvantage can be attributed to the unfavorable social policy as well. In this kind of social and mental environment an entrepreneurship for a women – small and medium sized business running even from low financial base – means a job, even in rural areas. Nevertheless: running a small business means a possible way to combine the traditional and “modern” gender roles and expectations. And we have to mention another important factor: this female entrepreneurs – in order to be succesfull in their “small world” – are also forced to find, to create or to answer to special local needs and lacks. This means that this women (might) have an important role in local development and business sustainability.

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