

Women and economic entrepreneurship in Toronto, Canada

Contesting local ideas of gender

Jannicke Hjelmervik – Universitetet i Bergen

In this article I want to bring attention to the subject of women and work in Canada, with focus on their engagement in self-employment. This discussion is based on the economic and political history of women in Canada and is related to what Henrietta Moore (1994) refers to as gender ideologies. Although some women continue to perpetuate the gender ideology of what is traditionally regarded as women's work, such as in the case of a secretary I met, there are increasingly many who today choose self-employment as an innovative approach to work. My study of 50 women economic entrepreneurs in Toronto, Ontario, substantiates that there is a change in women's participation in the Canadian public economy. These self-employed women, as well as a few who have been employed, have relayed to me what has traditionally been perceived as the gender of business in Canada. This traditional idea has to a great degree prevented women from entering the public work force, first and foremost as employees, but even more so as self-employed. The numbers of women engaged in economic entrepreneurship indicates a change in this area. In 1990 and 1995, Statistics Canada revealed that women are increasing in number among the self-employed in the employed workforce. Their growth rate is faster than what it is for men, and thus one third of self-employed Canadians are women (Canadian women entrepreneurs in growth sectors: a survey 1997:12).

Real choices?

Women's road to economic power however, appears to be full of potholes when considering the various stories I have heard and read. To give a description of the situation, I have chosen a passage from Melanie who owns and runs her own school-bus company with almost one hundred employees. She describes the thoughts and feelings of the majority of women in my

research. Melanie is also a spokeswoman for women entrepreneurs, and has been featured in books on this topic and has given speeches about her challenges at various meetings for businesswomen. In this interview she relates to me her ideas concerning women and traditional gender expectations:

I guess in my own mind, I thought the guys I went to school with were tremendous. We worked as a team, but in the end life moved on and you fall into the roles, and you realize the enormous pressure on women, and I don't see a lot of change at all. [...] And how should you be expected to build a business, work 12 hours a day and then still be home and make supper for your husband and do his laundry and do the shopping and pick up your child from day-care. You know, you can't do it all. So you got to have a total change in the relationship between men and women. And I don't see that happen. I think there are very many women who are doing more and more for themselves.

Men are never asked, a man, in his mind, has no choices about having children or a career, or in many cases of having a wife or a career. Because you can be perceived as being very threatening to a man, and they don't want that. They want someone to look after them, they want someone that's a support role, a cheerleader [saying]; you're wonderful, you're great. They don't necessarily want someone that's an equal. And I think that's the issue. They don't want it, so women do what they need to do to get the man, then they have children, and then there's no time, and twenty years go by and then it perpetuates itself, 'cause their children are in the same dilemma. And I grew up in the country and I didn't even know that I had choices to make. I was right out in left field. I was lucky though, cause no one told me that I might not have a husband and children if I went to business school, that I might be perceived as aggressive and a bitch and that no one would like me, female or male. I didn't know, and I didn't have a statement [...].

But no man makes that choice. They don't even in their wildest dreams, they've never been asked, you know, are you planning on having any children, when they apply for a job. But it's not even the person, the reality is that's the culture, and it's perpetuated by women and men, and I don't know how to break it. [...] I think in Canada, women have a chance to do something for themselves on their own, and a lot of them are doing that. And it's very freeing, and it's very self-fulfilling. And once they're out, they're not going back, and they tend to be very difficult, like I'm more difficult than I was when I was younger, but I'm happier. Women are concerned

about making changes so that the next generation of women will have a smoother ride. Women want to have it all, and not having to make choices. They recognize the difficulties that lie in this, but also the rewards. To women it is not fulfilling to only stay at home and tend to the domestic life. However the restrictions that are forced on them make some choices harder to make than others. [...] But in the end it doesn't matter, what are you going to do? Say oh gees, poor me, I'm discriminated against. In the end, for me, I said well I'll just go do it. It was hard, – I've never worked so hard. People say how did you do it, I say I didn't have a choice. I have a mortgage, no money, and I take borders (tenants) in my house. Start a business on a credit card with two jobs for five years, and people say oh, you're kind of tough, and I say, "Yeah".

Melanie strongly emphasizes how the Canadian ideology of women and work effects women in general and herself in particular when they seek to move into the public sphere of both employment and self-employment. According to her, women were traditionally perceived as having their function in the domestic sphere, as I found evidence for in a debate from 1895 in the Canadian House of Commons. The statement "[...] I believe that a woman's proper sphere is the home. [...]" (October 2000: <http://wwlia.org/cahi1895.htm>) still has bearing today according to a majority of my informants. Dividing labour into a public male sphere and a private female sphere is something many men seem to continue to take for granted. Women are therefore often faced with a double work load, which entails that a woman working outside the home still has to do the traditional "woman's work" when she returns home in the evening. In Melanie's opinion, men do not necessarily seek an equal partner in their wife, but rather a person who can be supportive and take care of them when they come home after a tough day at work – someone to cook, clean and raise children. Therefore, if wives work outside the home, they cannot keep up with the expectations of service their husbands are looking for in the home. Melanie claims that unfortunately both women and men recreate these perceptions of women's work, as it is part of the culture. Other Canadian researchers, such as Armstrong and Armstrong (1986 [1984]), have also addressed this idea of "perpetuating the culture" put forth by Melanie.

Social constraints

In *The double ghetto, Canadian women and their segregated work* I found an interesting presentation made in connection with the Canadian stereotypes addressing the dominant gender ideology and the effect of such ideology on

women:

The stereotype of the ideal woman has its effect upon Canadian women. It appears that many women have accepted as truths the social constraints and the mental images that society has prescribed, and have made these constraints and images part of themselves as guides for living (Armstrong and Armstrong 1986:136).

This is one of the conclusions they draw from their discussion of the Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada from 1970. This appears at first sight to be a natural conclusion, but if I take a closer look at what this implies, I know from my own data that many women choose economic and social entrepreneurship as a means of breaking with the traditional perceptions of gender and employment in Canada. However, what might be an issue is that although the number of women starting their own business is increasing, as the numbers from Statistics Canada indicate, women are still effected by the cultural ideas that business is a “man’s world” with male values and ideas. Armstrong and Armstrong argue that the report fails to understand from where the societal understandings come, and suggest that women themselves are to blame for the predicament they find themselves in:

However, to produce evidence that these ideas are the dominant ones presented and rewarded in these institutions is neither to explain why they are dominant nor to show that they cause the segregation. The cultural framework legitimates the division of labour by sex and may prevent the realization of the inequalities of this segregation, but it does not create the segregation (Armstrong and Armstrong 1986:137).

According to some of my informants, women who choose to abide by the dominant codes continue to perpetuate the inequalities found between men and women in business. Thus it might be possible to assume that if more women started their own business, they would help elevate the traditional boundaries between what is traditionally perceived as women’s work and men’s work in this society. However, this does not appear to be as easy as it sounds. In a later interview, Melanie emphasized another important issue that in her opinion has bearing on why so few women are entrepreneurs:

Few women know how to be an entrepreneur. It must be in one’s frame of reference in order to see it. In order to see the possibility to be an entrepreneur, one must know about the possibility. Most women don’t think about it, nor do it. It is not something they know can be done by them. It is unfair. It makes me furious when women are so limited.

Melanie's statement that women do not know that the business establishing may be done by them, is close to what Armstrong and Armstrong refer to as women being "constrained by mental images" (1986:136). Melanie argues that the reason women do not know this, is because they have no reference to other women who have done such things. Their "mental image" of a business establisher is a man, and not a woman. Furthermore, she underlines the importance of mentors for women, and that when it comes to economic entrepreneurship, there have been close to none. The lack of mentors has kept most women at bay, and thus few have ventured into this unknown territory. This is particularly detectable in Melanie's peer-group, where women have grown up with the idea that they should stay at home after marriage and childbirth. Although Melanie knows a great number of women who do not limit themselves in this capacity, she is nevertheless aware of other women who do not consider themselves capable of starting a business. What had directly brought on Melanie's outburst concerning women's "mental limitations" concerning business, was an episode I had shared with her.

A few days earlier I had spoken with a secretary at the University of Toronto, who had inquired about my field of study. When I told her that I was studying women entrepreneurs, she asked me if that was a real option women had. She was very surprised at the large number of members in the organizations I was in contact with, and she told me that it had not occurred to her that she could start her own business, and asked me how to go about it. Perhaps, as Melanie said, she did not know how to be an economic entrepreneur. This is a reason why Melanie today does volunteer work as a mentor. Her goal is to "enlighten" other women about the possibility, and encourage them to go ahead.

Substantiated by statements from my informants and by the history of women and work in Canada, it is reasonable to believe that women, such as the secretary mentioned above, are still under influence by a dominant gender ideology. My informants have elaborated to me their experiences of male gender dominance in issues concerning politics and economy. In the general relationship between Canadian women and men, women have been relegated to the private sphere, while men have worked in the public sphere. Women have traditionally cared for their families through nurture and care, while men have brought home the pay-cheque. The problem does not necessarily lie in the division of labour, but more so in the difference of prestige between the private and public sphere. As economic entrepreneurship is very much part of the public sphere, it has hitherto been men who have dominated the floor. When it comes to economic entrepreneurship, women have not had the same opportunities as men, as they, according to

tradition, should be occupied with homemaking. When Canadian women today want to engage in such entrepreneurship, they find their paths obstructed by these traditional ideas. Henrietta Moore pays attention to such gender ideology, and further explains that:

Power is an aspect of gender relations. Conjugal arrangements, residence rights, inheritance laws – all of which are relevant to household analysis – not only describe sets of social and economic relations, but also encode ideas about gender ideologies, and about the different natures, tasks and roles of women and men in society. A lack of comprehension about and analytical attention to gender ideologies is a feature of many anthropological and economic approaches to the household, especially those concerned with policy implementation. It is often implied in such research that gender ideologies are just ideas, cultural beliefs and notions that are somehow attached to economic and political processes, but are not constitutive of them. This kind of argument ignores the extent to which economic processes, such as the differentiation of tasks by gender, negotiations between husbands and wives over income distribution and discussions with daughters and sons about educational provision and residence requirements, are actually a set of practical activities which operationalize gender ideologies. They are, therefore, in some sense the outcome of local ideas about the appropriate behaviour of women and men. Gender ideologies and other forms of difference, such as race and class, which draw on social identities, are crucial to understanding social reproduction, both at the level of the household and at the level of the state. This point can be most clearly made by examining how social identities that are based on ideologies or ‘naturalized’ cultural conventions are implicated in power structures and in the structuring of inequalities (Moore 1994:92).

The issue concerning the differentiation of work and economy between women and men that Moore emphasizes is clearly seen in the case of Melanie. Since she came from a family where girls were not supposed to run businesses, it was her brother who took over the father’s company. The fact that the father handed the family company over to his son and not his daughter may be seen as an operationalization of the Canadian gender ideology applying to economic endeavours. Furthermore, when she wanted to start her own business, her father did not lend her a dime because he believed she should not be starting a business due to the fact that she was a woman. Establishing and running a business was in his view a male task, and as Melanie said “my father believes that in the bus business, women are

only supposed to either drive or clean the busses”. Her mother is a homemaker and will never publicly praise her daughter’s work, not even in front of any family member, which strongly indicates that she holds, and reproduces, the same gender ideology as her husband. Melanie’s unwillingness to reproduce these beliefs, was one of the challenges she was aware of taking on when she went to business school as a young woman. She was not interested in falling into, and thus, perpetuating, the traditional idea about what was appropriate behaviour for women. Melanie pointed out that most women are not aware of the possibility of being an entrepreneur, in the sense that they have not got a frame of reference that enables them to see that option. This lack of reference in business establishing for women is part of the gender ideology in Canada, which is still preventing women from engaging in certain economic endeavours such as entrepreneurship.

Ascribed roles

As discussed by Moore, the local ideas of gender are reproduced in women’s and men’s everyday lives. The power structures implicit in such gender ideologies are important in my discussion of women entrepreneurs. Within a Canadian context, women should maintain their role as caretakers and tend to their home, husband and children. Women wanting to start their own business recognize these local ideas of gender, and some try to circumvent them by using strategies such as not marrying, and/or not having children. Both choices appear to be part of a strategy that makes it “easier” to be a businesswoman, since marriage and children are part of the dominant gender ideology holding women back from the business world. Sometimes one is not aware of the exact outcome of one’s actions. Melanie explained that “No one told me that I might not have a husband and children if I went to business school.” By choosing to go to business school in the beginning of the 1980’s, she challenged the dominant ideology of what it entails to be a woman in Canada. She crossed the line for what was considered the ideal behaviour for a woman. According to Melanie, when she chose to go to business school she was not aware of the consequence it would have for other areas of her life, such as marriage and children. Among those of my informants who established businesses prior to having children, there is a tendency that they do not have children later in life either. Many women in my study, including Melanie, also experience difficulties with their husbands who do not seem too willing to accept that their wives have their own business. There are certainly many personal reasons for this, but I maintain that the dominant idea about women and work has a strong influence in this respect, as I found expressed in statistical surveys such as the one referred to below.

During my fieldwork I participated in several group discussions at the Centre for Research in Women's Health. These discussions were valuable as they made me aware of women's historical and present situation in Toronto and Canada in matters relating to work, economy and health. During one of these meetings, a woman in the group presented statistics from the 1970's concerning women and work, which showed that women in a certain age group were not willing to admit to being working mothers. Women in the age group 55-59 would vehemently deny that they were working, even though they did at times, and the woman who presented the material underlined that this showed how it was a stigma for a family to have a working mother. Many of my informants are in their forties and fifties, and thus I maintain that they have been subject to this perception of women and work when they established businesses as far back as twentyfive years ago. Those of my informants who are in their twenties and thirties today experience a slightly different attitude, as it has become more accepted for women to be engaged in paid labour.

However, certain political groups in Canada, such as REAL women,¹ maintain that women should stay at home while men should be the economical providers. It is not possible to gain an understanding of women's efforts and accomplishments today without some knowledge of other barriers and challenges women in general have met earlier, as well as how they have managed to move beyond them. In her latest book, Sylvia Bashevkin, a professor of political science, gives a valuable insight to the topic of living through conservative times in Britain, USA, and Canada. She states that, "women's groups were forced to reassess, to re-evaluate, to deal with what Susan Faludi termed the politics of 'backlash' " (Bashevkin 1998:5). The issue of the "backlash" was a recurring theme during conversations with some of my informants, and therefore I feel it has a natural place in connection with this discussion on women and work in Canada.

The backlash and its toll on women

During one of my early breakfast meetings with Melanie, she asked me if I had read Susan Faludi's book on the issues of the "backlash" phenomenon (Faludi 1991). I said I had not heard of it, and she offered to lend me her copy, saying it would enlighten me with regard to my thesis. She had brought it with her and told me I could borrow it until our next meeting. She would like to discuss it with me as it had provided her with valuable insight to the horrors of what can happen to women if they are not prepared to take their stand in society. Faludi addresses many of the problems women in North America have been faced with over the last decade, and she writes about how the dominant gender ideology in America is experienced by women in

different areas of their lives. She argues that the problems North American women face, are a result of the power of anti-feminists and conservatives in areas of economy, politics and social norms in America. Faludi furthermore underlines that this damaging rhetoric is found in magazines, newspaper articles, television programs, as well as changes in legislation, which aid the subordination of women. Her argument is that women who make non-traditional choices, such as making a business career, are portrayed negatively in such forums as those mentioned above. Those concerned with upholding the traditional view of women infiltrate the media with “facts” that are supposed to stop women from wanting to move away from their “traditional” arenas, as well as bring women in paid jobs “back to the kitchen”. An example of this method is presented in Faludi’s book *Backlash. The undeclared war against American women* (1991):

The campaign for women’s rights was, once more, identified as the culprit; liberation had depressed single women. “Loveless, Manless: The High Cost of Independence,” read one women’s magazine headline. [...] ABC’s 1986 special, “After the Sexual revolution”, also told single women to hold feminism responsible for their marital status. Women’s success has come “at the cost of relationships,” co-host Richard Threlkeld said. Even married women are in danger, he advised: “The more women achieve in their careers, the higher the chances for divorce” (ibid.:97).

This excerpt reveals a traditional way of thinking about women in North America, claiming that women should be married and not attempt to pursue a career. Being independent may lead to divorce, according to the ABC. This radio host expresses what according to Henrietta Moore is a dominant gender ideology. The power of the media should not be underestimated. The ABC, American Broadcasting Corporation, is the national radio station in the United States, reaching out to millions of listeners daily. Consequently, many of these listeners’ perception of gender will be confirmed, perpetuating the dominant gender ideology. According to Faludi this presentation can be seen as part of the ongoing backlash that has been, and still is, taking place in North America. Anti-feminist oriented women and men blame women’s status as single on the fact that many women achieve careers outside the home. Their argument is put forth in a way which attempts to convince other’s that one thing causes the other, without regarding the influence of other factors. How do we see this manifested in women’s actions?

Melanie is engaged in a mentoring program at a business school, and experienced that one of the young women she mentored told her that she was dropping out of business school because she was getting married. When

Melanie told me this, she expressed frustration and returned to the issue of backlash, claiming that this was a result of their “propaganda”. Furthermore, she informed that there are women who go to University for the purpose of finding a husband, and once he is found, they quit the classes they are going to. The student she had been mentoring was perhaps an example of that.

The backlash is perhaps also exemplified by the media’s praise of women who are “stay at home moms”, and by the economic cuts the government makes in public kindergartens, enforcing an arrangement where mothers stay home to take care of their children. The examples are perceived, by several of my informants, as part of the ongoing backlash in Canada. According to Susan Faludi (1991), those supporting the backlash “movement” argue that women are robbed of their femininity by trying to become equal to men. In cases where women leave their education or job due to marriage or childbirth, one might consider the possibility that these women are being influenced by such traditional thoughts about women as promoted by REAL women.

Several of my informants underlined that a marriage could end up in divorce if the husband was not favourable to the wife’s business plan. Either this had happened to them – such as in Joanne’s case, or they knew about someone. However, some of my informants had needed to start their own business *because* their husband left them and the children. This is another central issue in the discussion of what challenges and barriers women encounter in relation to starting a business. The campaign by REAL women and the backlash movement see the case from one side only. It might appear as if women who pursue a career do not marry or have children. However, it is important to remember that there are men as well who do not marry due to a demanding career. The overview of my informants shows that there are fifteen women who are married, five who are single without children, and ten who are single mothers with dependent children. I perceive, based on my interviews, a woman’s life situation as being an extreme motivational factor for starting a business. My data challenges the idea that a career excludes marriage. Rather it appears that those who are not married form the smallest category of my informants. With fifteen of my informants being married women, with or without children, it seems feasible to combine the two. A few of my informants in this category have been divorced. Their explanation for this was that they married a man who was too traditional in his perception of women and work. When marrying for the second time they very often already had a business, such as in Melanie’s case.

The backlash problems described in Faludi’s book, thus brings to our attention the difficulties women face when the political arena is dominated by

people who aim at keeping women in “their place”. The traditional ideology which I have previously discussed considers the domestic sphere to be the “women’s place”. Women who want to study or have a job outside the home contest these ideas. Through this contesting, they meet several challenges such as being bypassed at work, not given promotions, and fired during pregnancy. Such actions may be taken as evidence of traditional thinking of what is “women’s place” in Canadian society. In her most recent book, *Men and women of the corporation*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a distinguished Professor of Business Administration, reveals common attitudes in the Canadian corporate society that give emphasis to the many statements on this issue provided by my informants.

They [the women] were also told in other circumstances that married women cannot be given important jobs because of their family responsibilities: their children, if they are working mothers; their unborn children and the danger they will leave with pregnancy, if currently childless. [...] A male manager in the distribution function who supervised many women confirmed the women’s reports. He said that he never even considered asking a married woman to do anything that involved travel, even if this was in the interest of her career development, and therefore he could not see how he could recommend a woman for promotion into management (Kanter 1993:67).

These attitudes expressed above, contribute to making it difficult for women to have a paid job outside the home, and consequently hinder women from accumulating work experience which is of vital importance for women to get a well-paid job, or a promotion. The important issue in relation to promotions in particular and work in general, is that Western women are seen as belonging to the domestic unit and closely tied to children and family. Thus the chances of gaining equal pay and opportunity in the labour force seem to be small, which is one of the reasons some of my informants started their own business. As an extreme example of what sort of arguments a working woman may encounter, I have chosen this passage from Bashevkin’s book:

Probably the most memorable decision on work during these years was the 1978 Bliss vs. Attorney-General of Canada ruling. This case was widely viewed as the last straw, the judgement that exhausted the patience of women’s groups in the pre-CCRF period.² Stella Bliss worked in Vancouver, lost her job while she was pregnant, and could not find other work after the baby was born. She then applied for unemployment benefits. Bliss was refused on the

grounds that she was pregnant when she lost her job and had not worked long enough to qualify for maternity benefits. The Supreme Court upheld the denial of benefits, arguing that Bliss had been refused because she was pregnant and not because she was a woman. The ability of women and not of men to conceive, according to the justices, resulted from nature rather than law (Bashevkin 1998:84).

This is an example of how women could experience being treated at a workplace when pregnant. It is clear that also those who are supposed to enforce equality and justice are perpetuating the traditional thoughts about women. In this latter case, my impression is that according to traditional thinking, Stella Bliss did not need to win the case in court. As a woman with a child she only needs to be at home while her husband earns money. This was an argument I often heard expressed by my informants, both those with and without a spouse or children. The local ideas of proper behaviour for women, as stated by Moore, are therefore arguably found not only in people's minds but in legislation as well. Thus divorce may be regarded as a strategy employed by some women to signalise a severance with the gender ideology. With one third of my informants being single mothers, it underlines that a large category of women are interested in taking control of their economic and personal lives, such as in the play by the nineteenth century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. He was one of few Norwegian men who wrote about women being captives in their own homes, in their own marriage. In order to (re-)gain their freedom they had to cut themselves loose from the bonds of marriage. Nora, in the play "A dolls house" tries to break loose from these bonds, and in the end succeeds, by leaving her husband. The play was not well accepted at its premier, as it presented middle-class women as subject to men. This is an issue that Simone de Beauvoir (1970) discusses in her works. As a feminist writer she is very keen on showing us how women are born into captivity:

This is what happens to the little girl when she learns to know the world around her and discovers that in this world she is a woman. This sphere in which she belongs, is overall surrounded, restrained and dominated by the man's universe. No matter how good her achievements or how far she dares to go, she will always meet a roof over her head and her path will be blocked by walls (de Beauvoir 1970:7, my translation).

These differences between the sexes and the barriers imposed on women whom Simone de Beauvoir speaks about in *The second sex*, are present in the lives of Canadian women. De Beauvoir's description of the girl's realization

of their ambitions towards womanhood is interesting in this respect. As a girl grows up she understands that she is surrounded and dominated by a male universe that she will butt against no matter where she turns. To some women therefore, it might almost be a blessing not knowing about what difficulties they might meet in their effort to try to budge and break the “glass ceiling”.

Moore’s discussion of the dominant gender ideology and its effects on women and work, was substantiated by Melanie in the beginning of this article. It also relates to Armstrong and Armstrong’s discussion of how it is the cultural framework that legitimizes segregation, but that it is people who create it by perpetuating these ideas (1986:137). Melanie’s statement, where she claims that she has not been able to change the culture, is interesting in this respect, as it contrasts with her actions and activities. She believes she cannot change the culture, and seems to regard culture as something set apart from people’s actions. Nevertheless, she claims that women entrepreneurs can help the next generation of women by starting businesses. She regards women and men as perpetuating the dominant ideology by how they act and through their expectations towards the other sex. However, she is not part of this herself, as she has done many things that differ from the dominant perception of women. I agree with Armstrong and Armstrong that it is people who create segregation by perpetuating the dominant ideology. I therefore maintain that through self-employment, Melanie is contributing to create change in the dominant gender ideology in Canada.

Notes

¹REAL women is an antifeminist group in Canada. REAL stands for real, equal, active, life.

²CCRF stands for Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom. The Charter was established in the early 1970s.

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