

Are Women Owner-Managers Challenging Our Definitions of Entrepreneurship?

An In-Depth Survey

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ABSTRACT. In the Quebec city area, 400 women owner-managers of business in the three industrial sectors answered a detailed questionnaire, and 75 of these subsequently underwent in-depth interviews. The main dimensions explored were the characteristics of the entrepreneurs and their firms, the experience of starting a business, the success criteria used, and their vision for the future of their firms. The results suggest the importance, to these women, of a model of "small and stable business". This is not a transitory phase for their firm: most choose and value such a scale of business, and they seek recognition for what they do. This model seems to represent an innovative adaptation to their professional, social, family and personal demands and challenges our definitions of entrepreneurship and of "serious business".

Introduction

Many studies have been conducted on women entrepreneurs since the beginning of the 1980's. They allow us to draw a rather detailed portrait of the personal characteristics of women entrepreneurs and of their firms.¹ Some studies have also explored how women entrepreneurs manage their firms² as well as the complexities of a life which combines the roles of entrepreneur, parent and spouse/partner.³ Recent

studies explore the vision these women have for the future of their firms. The results of these last studies are more tentative than those on the characteristics of the entrepreneur and her firm, and more research is needed to improve our understanding of the various aspects of the women entrepreneurs phenomenon.

The work which is the subject of this article has focussed on all these aspects of women entrepreneurs. We collected detailed questionnaire data from 400 women owner-managers in the wider Quebec city area, identified at random among owner-managers recorded in the central business register of the Quebec ministry of financial institutions. The firms operate in the three industrial sectors, and we slightly over-sampled businesses from primary and secondary industrial sectors to insure a sufficient number of respondents for certain comparative analyses. We have reported elsewhere the characteristics of the 400 respondents and their enterprises.⁴

To complete that work and to improve our understanding of the experience of these women, we conducted in-depth interviews with 75 women entrepreneurs. They were selected among the questionnaire respondents, and we chose those whose business were larger and who worked longer hours. In so doing, we attempted to insure that the entrepreneurs selected for the interview had a strong commitment to their business.⁵ Almost every entrepreneur contacted agreed to meet with us.

But who did we consider as entrepreneur? Our studies were concerned with women owners and managers of their company, independently of the way the ownership came about (founding, purchase or inheritance). Therefore, the criteria for selection were: to own at least 1% of the shares of the company, to be responsible for at least one major management function (marketing, accounting, per-

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sonnel, . . .), and to work in the company. Therefore, our definition of entrepreneur is broader than the one used, for example, by Toulouse who considered that, to be an entrepreneur, one should have started (founded) the company.⁶ We considered a broader definition to be necessary given that, in our society, there are relatively few women owner-managers. Moreover, one of the key characteristics associated with the entrepreneurial stereotype – innovation – is effectively a *prerequisite* for those women who do become owner-managers. These women innovate by choosing a professional activity untypical for women when they create (alone or with others), buy, or inherit and keep a company.⁷ Other criteria, such as self-determination, self confidence and determination, are also used to characterize entrepreneurial behaviour, and our data throw some light on how women view these criteria.

We compared the personal, family and business characteristics of the 400 entrepreneurs who responded to the questionnaire, and the subset of 75 interviewees. Both groups were similar in terms of their distribution across business sectors, origin and percentage of ownership, participation of the family in the business, age of the business, and the family and personal characteristics of the entrepreneur. They were, however, different in terms of gross income⁸ and number of employees, because we selected the larger firms.

In the section which follows, we briefly summarize the profile of women entrepreneurs revealed by our respondents. The major part of the paper is a discussion of the insights which have arisen from the analysis of the in-depth interviews and the new questions they raise.

Typical profile of Quebec women entrepreneurs

The following characteristics are those of the 400 respondents to the questionnaire, but the proportions are similar for the subset of 75 we interviewed, and are useful background to the results we shall discuss.

Personal circumstances. The age of women entrepreneurs varies greatly, but more than half of them are between 31 and 45 years old. They have an average of 12 years of schooling which is slightly more than

the average Quebec woman. In terms of family responsibilities, many more women entrepreneurs (74%) than Quebec women (58%) have a spouse/partner, and they also have more children (on average 2.4 children per entrepreneur compared to 1.5 for adult Quebec women); generally, women entrepreneurs have the primary responsibility for childcare and for household maintenance. They come from larger families (on average 7.4 children) and they tend to be among the eldest. Like their male counterparts, half of our women entrepreneurs had at least one close family member in business.

Work experience. More than three quarters of the entrepreneurs acquired work experience before they started their business but some never worked before. They feel confident about their talents and skills in most managerial functions (specially in management of daily operations), and they consider satisfactory their management experience. They started and stay in business mostly to accomplish themselves, but they gradually discover the “intrinsic pleasure to do business”.

Half of the entrepreneurs were majority owners, but in fact most of the majority owners were *sole* owners (44% of the entire sample). More than half (56%) created their businesses and two out of three entrepreneurs are responsible for all management functions. The sole or majority owners mostly have small businesses and they do everything, whereas the minority owners have larger companies and they are responsible for certain managerial functions such as accounting or marketing.

Even though two thirds of the entrepreneurs are satisfied with their business revenues, we observed that these revenues were modest, especially considering the time and effort they put in the business; in fact 79% of the entrepreneurs responded that they would not accept similar income for the contribution they make if they were working for someone else. There are women entrepreneurs in every sector of economic activity even though they are mostly in commerce and services. However those in the manufacturing sector are the most satisfied with their business success; their business revenues are also the highest. It is also in the manufacturing sector that we find the oldest and the largest companies (in terms of gross revenues and number of employees) owned and managed, in part or in total, by women entrepreneurs. Of course, these results are related.

Globally, businesses owned by women are rather young (40% are 5 years old or less) and they tend to have slow growth. In most cases, it is the first and the only business of the women entrepreneurs. They started their business with a modest capital investment (44% invested less than \$5 000) mostly from personal and family savings (43%). Many employ their spouse (one spouse out of two) and their children. They attribute their success in business to their desire to succeed, their determination, their self-confidence and their personal discipline.

Interview results

With the interviews, we wanted to better understand the various manifestations of the entrepreneurial challenge for these women. Interviews of an average of two hours took place in the woman's business, mostly during working hours.⁹ We will now discuss the results of these interviews, in the light of which we will introduce some questions which should be addressed more fully.

Company start-up: a choice and sometimes a necessity

For more than half of our respondents (54%), the idea to start a business originated almost exclusively from the woman. It was either an old dream (11%), a desire to actualize oneself and use one's talents, or to be recognized by others (11%), a logical continuity to training or work experience (18%), or again, a need to control one's life (2%). Many also recognized and seized an opportunity (21%), whereas the others were influenced by people close to them (parents, partner or friend). Most of these motives express an entrepreneurial characteristic: *self-determination*.

Generally, women had at least two motivations to start in business. However, beyond the usual motives of self-actualization, use of one's talents, need to create and response to economic needs, they also had other motives. Some women started in business to have something they can call their own (10%), something they control and through which they can express themselves. Others (8%) wanted to create jobs for members of their family (mostly the partner or children): their role of entrepreneur was therefore an extension of their roles of partner or parent, and it was instrumental to the realization of these dominant roles in their socialization. Finally, others (3%)

were looking for a better quality of life because their previous work was too demanding and limiting for their other roles, mostly the parent role.

These less usual motives are very interesting. They underline the interdependency between the various roles these women play, and they show that starting a business may be an adaptive response to the demands of the parent and spouse/partner roles, which are very important to them. They also speak of the lack of control many women experience in their lives, and the many demands they respond to. Starting a business can therefore be a way to state one's own identity and gain control over something and/or someone's life. Note here that half of our respondents were majority or sole owners and one third employed their spouse/partner.

Starting a business may therefore constitute, for some, an adaptation of the professional role to respond to the demands of the parent or spouse/partner role, either to gain flexibility of work place and schedule, or to respond to a lack of opportunities for interesting work (for her or family members) in the area where the family lives. It may also be a means to control part of her life, to make a statement about who she is, and to state her worth. Therefore, some women start a business not so much by choice but to adapt to the demands of the parent and spouse/partner roles while also responding to their needs for identity and status. It can be viewed as an innovative response to some sociological constraints.

Entrepreneurs' attitudes at the start-up

Many women (43%) reported not having experienced fears when they started in business. Others feared bankruptcy or loss of their financial investment (20%), market limitations (14%), conflicts with employees or associates (10%), failure (7%) and only few (4%) mentioned lack of ability to adapt. Therefore, relatively few women entrepreneurs had self-doubts and when they worried, it was about their environment, not themselves. Such findings support the results of other studies indicating that an important attitude of entrepreneurs is *self-confidence*.

We explored with the respondents the reactions of their social environment (parents, parents-in-law, spouse/partner, children, friends) when they communicated to them their intention to start in busi-

ness. It is interesting to note that only 28% reported having received “only positive” reactions such as encouragements, enthusiasm, confidence, pride and admiration. If we add those who received “mostly positive” reactions from their social environment (24%), we observe that barely half of women entrepreneurs experienced support from their environment. Among the others, several (15%) reported having to face lots of worries, skepticism and conflicts from their social environment; this did not deter them, however. This lack of support from the immediate social environment of women entrepreneurs is worth noting given that it may constitute one more hurdle to overcome. It also reveals one more attribute of entrepreneurs: *determination*.

Such resistances from the social environment are not surprising given that it is only recently that the status of entrepreneurs has been valued and attractive in our society. We do not have data on the level of social support – or lack of – that male entrepreneurs get from their environment when they start in business. We know however that male entrepreneurs get more practical support in terms of being relieved from child care and household maintenance tasks, as well as getting the spouse to take on some business activities without pay,¹⁰ whereas women entrepreneurs do get “help” in the business, but they are still mostly fully responsible for family and child care at the start of the company as well as later.

Attitudes about the future of the company were positive given that 70% considered their chances for success between good and excellent. This finding was expected given that those who involve themselves in a project without hopes to succeed are rare. However, it was surprising to discover that only 6% of the entrepreneurs we interviewed had foreseen slow and difficult beginnings, even though such is the experience of most new companies. Even more surprising was the fact that 6% of the interviewees said that they did not think about their chances to succeed; they wanted to start a business and they pushed aside any thought which could have made them change their minds. This lack of realism is striking. For some women, it has to do with the enthusiasm of the beginners whose candour hides ignorance of the real circumstances in which the entrepreneur puts herself. For others, it is a strong desire to limit the risks of abandoning the project by not looking too much at the difficulties. This is not

“ostrich” behaviour but rather an indicator of how important starting a business was for some women entrepreneurs, as a means not only to actualize themselves but also, to “take their place”, to become “somebody”. Starting a business had strong psychological meaning.

What would have been helpful at the beginning?

When asked about what could have helped them (personal or technical help, information, etc. . . .) when they started the business, one third of the interviewees answered “technical help” and “coaching” from somebody already in business. Some entrepreneurs said they lacked knowledge of their environment (10%), technical and production knowledge (10%). Only 6% said that they would have liked to receive help from the government. Some (10%) considered that they would have needed help from professionals (bankers, attorney, accountants) and only a few said that they would have benefited from somebody cooling their enthusiasm. Note that none of our interviewees indicated that they would have needed financial assistance, which is surprising given the well documented problem of start-up capital. Finally, it was interesting that one quarter of the respondents said that they did not need any particular help; they were satisfied with their first years.

In sum, more than half of these owner-managers considered that they would have benefited from technical help, better understanding of the environment and of the production process. Such help would be specially helpful if it came from other entrepreneurs. Credibility and relevance of the advice and help would then be increased. Networks of business people and of entrepreneurs, and mentorship programs seemed most appropriate to answer these needs. The knowledge, personal experience, contacts and credibility of established entrepreneurs would be most helpful to future and recent entrepreneurs.

We asked our respondents to think about the help and information that would have been most helpful during the first two years of the firm. More than a third responded that they did not need help or more information, compared to a quarter of them at the beginning of the business. Once again, more than a third (38%) would have appreciated the coaching of

entrepreneurs; slightly more than at the launching (15% vs 10%) would have appreciated expert help and fewer than before (3% vs 7%) would have appreciated government assistance. Some would have appreciated financial help (3%) and some would have needed more qualified personnel (3%).

It is worth noting that among these women entrepreneurs who have such diverse personal and business circumstances, there is such strong desire for coaching from other entrepreneurs and that this need increases in the years following the launching of the business. It is also striking to note that financial help and government help through its experts would be desired by very few entrepreneurs (less than 5%). Therefore, it seems that government help to women entrepreneurs would be better aimed through support for the setting up of networks of entrepreneurs who will then provide their members with information and help, rather than through the intervention of the government's own experts on small business.

Obstacles encountered

We also explored the obstacles encountered by these women when they started in business and later on. The most frequent obstacles encountered at the launching of the business were: lack of confidence shown by banks, suppliers and clients (33%), lack of start-up capital (15%) and the family (15%). This profile changes slightly after the launching of the business, even though 19% still face credibility problems with the banks and the suppliers, none reported financing problems, which is surprising, and fewer said that their spouse/partner constituted an obstacle (6%). New obstacles arose however: marketing problems (25%), problems with associates (19%) and difficulties to recruit and train competent personnel (13%). The business activities generate particular difficulties, but they do not seem peculiar to women entrepreneurs.

Even though most women entrepreneurs earned rather quickly the confidence of their suppliers, clients and bankers, it is somewhat worrying that so many (19%) keep facing this obstacle after some years in business. Many of them (38%) think that these obstacles are related to their gender. However, even more of them considered that their gender consti-

tuted an advantage in business. We tried to find out under which circumstances it was an advantage to be a woman entrepreneur. The answers were vague and unsatisfactory. It would therefore be interesting to examine this question with a representative sample of women entrepreneurs across business sectors and business stages, and to compare these experiences according to whether they are or not in traditionally male business sectors.

The other obstacles encountered — marketing, associates and competent personnel — are frequent within small businesses. In fact, we were rather surprised that so few women entrepreneurs reported having personnel problems. This could be explained by the relatively small size of their firm and their limited personnel needs.

Attitudes toward success

Given that it is only recently that women entrepreneurs reached significant numbers in the population and that their socialization often prepared them for other roles than owning and managing a business, we explored with our interviewees the criteria they were using to assess their own success as entrepreneur. We asked them: "What does it mean for you to be successful in your business". The range of responses was:¹¹

- 18% increased revenues
- 14% increased profits
- 14% the company provides her with adequate income to live well
- 14% harmony in employees, customers and suppliers relationships
- 11% people have confidence in the company
- 6% company stay open, does not go bankrupt
- 5% keep control
- 5% be visible and known in the community
- 4% reach one's objectives
- 3% integrate family life and business
- 1% increase market share

These responses were interesting on several accounts. Firstly, the three criteria for success most often mentioned are financial: increased revenues and profits and getting good income from the company. Such criteria were expected; they show the integration of our respondents into the business community and their adoption of its standards. So do most of the

other criteria which are also business related. However, some more personal criteria were also used, although by relatively few respondents (7%); they were to “achieve one’s objectives”, and to “integrate family life and business”. This is specially interesting given that half of the respondents talked about staying in business because they find opportunities to create and actualize themselves, which are very personal motives. Note that these respondents, many of whom have only recently joined the business milieu, apparently do not feel free to express success criteria in terms of the personal motivations that dominated their going into business, possibly fearing being marginalised or not taken seriously as business people.

Other entrepreneurs infer their success from the reactions in their environment: people have confidence in the company (11%) or the entrepreneur is visible and known in the community (5%). Finally, few women associate their success in business with controlling their business (5%) or their market (1%). The small number of women who mentioned these criteria is interesting: could it be that women entrepreneurs see that control of their company as an instrument or an element of the process rather than a criterion for the outcome, a sign of success? This question should be explored further.

In sum, women entrepreneurs define their company’s success firstly in financial terms, then as a function of their environment, and finally in relation to themselves. The infrequent mention of personal criteria is somewhat surprising given that most of these companies are small, and that one of the reasons for their existence is that they allow the entrepreneur to work at something she enjoys. Moreover, a majority of interviewees told us that they were concerned to preserve their quality of life, and to achieve that, they wanted to keep their company rather small. We suspect, therefore, that our respondents hesitated to “tell it all” to researchers associated with a business school, in order to protect their credibility as pioneer women in business.

We asked our interviewees to what they attributed their company success. They told us:

23% the entrepreneur’s determination and hard work

21% service to the customer
 14% confidence of our customers
 11% originality and quality of products
 11% the entrepreneur’s personal qualities (concern with details, self-confidence, . . .)
 10% quality of personnel
 4% belonging to a good network of people
 3% good management

Therefore, more than half (46%) of their explanations for the success of their business had to do with the “customer-product” dimension (customer service, customer confidence, originality and quality of product). The second group of factors represent one third of the answers and they are related to the entrepreneur herself (determination, hard work, concern with details, self confidence, . . .). Personnel is a factor mentioned by few respondents (10%) which is not surprising given, as we mentioned earlier, that they have few employees. The importance of customers in the success of the business is well recognized by our interviewees. They are attentive to customer needs and are very concerned with quality of the product or service they deliver. The comments of one of them summarize well those of many others: “. . . I have two bosses: firstly, my customers and secondly, my employees. My success rests on them”. They also attribute to themselves a large responsibility in the success of their company, which is reasonable given that often, they *are* the business.¹²

They were also asked to rate the level of success of their company and their personal success; the great majority consider that their company (96%) and themselves (94%) are successful. It is worth noting here that even though half of the success criteria mentioned by the interviewees were of a financial nature, we noticed that the financial performance of their firms was typically modest. Their almost unanimous feeling that they have successful companies leads us to think that they have modest financial expectations. Indeed, they are satisfied with a slow growth of their gross revenues (average growth of 10% a year during 3 years, between 1983–1985 and similar expectations for the near future¹³), and a salary that they would not accept if they were working for somebody else. At one extreme, staying in business is for them a sign of success.

Satisfactions and frustrations from being in business

We asked women entrepreneurs about their major satisfactions and frustrations in business. The diversity of their answers is interesting. The satisfactions are:

- 22% feelings of self accomplishment
- 21% autonomy, independence, be one's own boss
- 12% create a product or service that pleases the customer, that succeeds
- 11% satisfied with the results
- 10% financial security
- 7% social visibility
- 6% flexibility of schedule
- 3% manage and control
- 3% human contact
- 2% combine work and pleasure
- 2% harmony with employees
- 1% take on challenges
- 1% increase my credibility

These satisfactions are mostly intrinsic: autonomy, esteem, self actualization, control and they correspond to their main motivations. The small number of women who report financial satisfaction can be partly explained by the fact that a small portion of them get company revenues that more than satisfied their own and family needs (29%). Another interesting result is that very few women (5%) mentioned human contact as a source of satisfactions, which is contrary to traditional stereotypes according to which women seek and are very sensitive to human relations. Finally, some extrinsic satisfactions are also mentioned, and they have to do with social visibility and scheduling flexibility, which echo constraints women experienced in their other roles of partner/spouse and parent. Altogether, more than half of the reported satisfactions are intrinsic.

The frustrations experienced are also very interesting in regard to their type and their diversity:

- 27% lack of time for oneself
- 14% difficulty to please customers
- 9% loss of employees to competitors
- 9% lack of confidence of others in her and her business
- 8% lack of financial liquidity

- 6% feeling vulnerable, exploited
- 5% presence of third parties who try to control (associates or unions)
- 4% lack of reliable and competent personnel
- 4% problems with suppliers
- 4% problems linked to the entrepreneur herself, her personality and her limits
- 4% lack of motivation, enthusiasm and productivity of personnel
- 4% no frustrations

These frustrations are very diverse, they come from a wide range of sources and they are very common given that only 4% reported not experiencing frustrations. It is interesting that the frustration reported most often is lack of time for oneself. People in business often complain of lack of time, but they generally mean time to pursue a new business lead or project, or time to improve some company processes; they would want more time to devote to the company. More than a quarter of our interviewees seek something else; they want more time for themselves. Probed on the motives behind this frustration, they shared their desire for balance in their lives, between professional, family and personal demands on themselves. They feel that they respond to professional and family demands at the cost of not paying enough attention to their own personal needs. They are and want to be multi-dimensional, but they want balance between the development of each dimension.

The entrepreneurs report significant frustrations related to themselves (19% – lack of credibility, to feel vulnerable – exploited, personality problems) as well as many frustrations with resources (25% – employees motivation and loyalty, liquidity), clients (14%) and suppliers (4%). These diverse and numerous frustrations are certainly linked to the fact that only 57% of the interviewees said that they would not like to work for somebody else; among the others, 13% definitively would like to work for somebody else and 30% think that they could like it. Entrepreneurial life has its highs and its lows.

Asked about their qualities as business people, our respondents' responses correspond to qualities generally attributed to successful entrepreneurs. However, it is surprising to note the small number of women who considered themselves creative and

imaginative (5%) and ambitious (3%). The other qualities mentioned are:

- 17% determination, tenacity
- 15% energy, dynamism, hard work
- 12% diplomacy, interpersonal relations
- 9% discipline
- 9% patience
- 8% faith in one's product
- 7% business sense, analytical abilities and decisiveness
- 6% honesty, sincerity, truthfulness and simplicity
- 6% stable humor and efforts
- 6% perfectionist, concerned with details, minutiae, demanding

These qualities are all functional to the entrepreneurial role and they paint a very positive self-image of these women.

However, this self-image changed since the launching of the business. We discovered that before they started in business, only 65% had a positive image of themselves (18% *very* positive and 47% positive), 16% were rather critical of themselves and 19% had a neutral self-image. It is surprising that more than a third of these women did not have a positive self-image before they started in business; this can however be explained by their low level of schooling and low status professional activities. The entrepreneurial experience improved the self-image of many of these women given that 72% report having now a more positive image of themselves, 23% maintained a similar image and only 1% saw a deterioration of their self-image.

Most of these entrepreneurs (71%) consider themselves as business women. However the fact that more than a quarter of them do not consider themselves as such intrigued us. This result is especially surprising given that among this last group, we find women who own and manage businesses of all sizes and ages. We tried to identify the components of the *image* that our entrepreneurs have for a business woman:

- 25% a business woman does big business
- 17% she assumes the risks of her decisions
- 15% she knows how to make profits with her projects
- 10% she negotiates and concludes deals

- 8% she touches everything
- 7% she is visible in the community
- 6% she is interested in finance and accounting
- 5% she is sole or part owner of other businesses,
- 4% she sacrifices everything to her business

Among this list of answers, most refer to the management process; the business woman is defined through her activities. However, we note that the characteristic mentioned the most defines the businesses as *big* businesses. The image of the business woman is therefore rather impressive. It is a "social status", distant from the experience of the women whose small and medium size company provide good living for their owners and employees, but whose growth and future is modest, often by the owner's choice. The lack of familiar models, the social isolation of some women entrepreneurs and the myths developed around some entrepreneurs (the Lemaire brothers, Lise Wattier, Robert Campeau) may have contributed to develop for these women, greater-than-life pictures of these new "heros" in our society.

It is also worth noting that a few of the responses underlined the high level of demands of the entrepreneurial role by saying that a business woman sacrifices everything to her business. This is the only negative component of the image of the business woman and it points to some of the difficulties of reconciling the entrepreneurial role with the other dimensions of their lives.

Relationships between entrepreneurial life and other roles

Overall, what are the relationships between entrepreneurial life and the other roles of these women (personal, family and social life, their leisure and friendships)? They have very divergent opinions on these questions. For example, whereas 32% of the interviewees consider that their life as an entrepreneur enriched their personal life, as many said that it damaged it. The lack of time to take care of oneself, to reflect, or to treat oneself, as well as the feeling of being totally absorbed by the business, were expressed by many. The following table presents, for each role, the global effect of entrepreneurial life, i.e. whether it has no effect, enriches it, damages it, or modifies it (i.e. a mixture of positive and negative

effects). Note that "damage", in some cases, amounted to the wholesale destruction of other roles, notably leisure or social life.

Influence	personal life	family life	social life	leisure	friendships
none	14%	19%	33%	24%	35%
enrich	32%	16%	27%	8%	10%
damage	32%	28%	31%	58%	31%
modify	21%	33%	9%	11%	23%

It seems therefore that the most positive influence is on personal life, which is enriched for a third of the respondents. The social life of many benefits also from the role of entrepreneur (27%). There are in fact similar proportions of women who reported that their entrepreneur role enriches or damages their personal or their social life. However, the other roles (family life, friendships and leisure) do not benefit much from the entrepreneur role. On the contrary, many entrepreneurs reported a negative effect of the entrepreneur role on their other roles (specially their leisure, for half of them, and every other role for almost a third of them). This negative effect is clearly stronger than the positive, neutral or mixed effects. In fact, we must conclude that the entrepreneurial role has positive and negative effects on every other dimensions of these women life, and finding a balance that will provide these women with global life satisfaction is certainly a complex and delicate task. How they achieve it is a subject needing more study, and it should also take into consideration the relative importance women entrepreneurs give to these other dimensions of their life.

Conclusion

We have seen that the majority of women entrepreneurs face high family demands, and that their business is a means through which they develop and actualize themselves, as well as make a place for themselves in their environment. Their self-image has improved with being in business. At the start of the business they faced much resistance and lack of

support from their environment. This slowly improved. Most women entrepreneurs have small businesses and their objectives for growth are modest. Therefore, it seems that for many of these women, to start a business is a way to create their own employment, an instrument for personal development, and a flexible response to their economic and professional needs, while adapting to their family responsibilities. We also observed that for some women entrepreneurs, being an owner-manager is an extension of her parent and spouse/partner roles, and it is instrumental to these dominant roles in her socialization. Therefore, our entrepreneurs seem to differ from the image of their male counterparts which emerges from earlier research.¹⁴ They are multidimensional; they choose and they value their personal investment in several roles.

Another finding was not only that women business owners have slow and modest beginnings, but that they also seem to have modest expectations about the future of their company. No women entrepreneurs mentioned that financial help would have helped the start-up, nor that such help would have been appreciated at the time of the interview. They started in business with very little (money, managerial experience, personnel, . . .) and they are used to that situation. Their expectations for growth over the following 3 years were an average of 10% a year, which corresponds to their recent experience. Moreover, they had prime responsibility for child care when they started the business, and they still carry it. Personal objectives, family care and a personal requirement for balance in their lives between professional and family roles contribute to shape modest expectations for the company's future. Finally, many women entrepreneurs do not have familiar alternative role models that would support more ambitious growth objectives for the company, as well as the reshaping of their personal situation (family responsibilities). Therefore, the entrepreneur's adaptation to little support and little resources they experienced in business, their demanding family life and their lack of alternative role models result in expectations of slow growth for their company.

Such a situation could change if they were getting the help they wish they had, which is coaching and support from experienced entrepreneurs, male and female. It could also change if mentalities evolved so

that their environment was more supportive of their project, and if household responsibilities were better shared among family members. This would require a more cooperative response from bankers and business professionals, and a renegotiation of family responsibilities or the use of outside help.

Some may be tempted not to take seriously the enterprise of these women, considering that they are not "true" businesses because of their slow growth, of their strong dependency on the owner-manager, their small scale, and the fact that they might not survive if the entrepreneur were to retreat from the organization. Therefore, which are the criteria that determine that a business is a "true" business? We believe that new criteria should be considered, which would better reflect a growing number of businesses that are small and stay small, that respond to both economic and personal motives of the entrepreneur, that have few employees, a long term perspective, and a strong orientation toward customer satisfaction, all of which seem typical of women-owned businesses.

Finally, we consider that the definition of what is an "entrepreneur", and the models it suggests, are likely to evolve given the particular ways in which women play that role. In fact, many of our respondents told us that they chose to keep their company small to preserve their own quality of life, to keep close contact with their employees and clients, and mostly, to stay close to the operations, given that it is the operations which give them much pleasure. It must be recognized that our sample reflects current realities, namely that most women owner-managers are either sole or majority owners of small, recent enterprises, or minority owners of larger, older firms. It will be some years before we can find out which entrepreneurship ideals become dominant for women. Meanwhile, their oft-cited view of the small company as a "desirable and stable" state — rather than a transitory phase — is a challenge for our definitions of what it is to be in business, which are the "legitimate" businesses, and who is entitled to be called an entrepreneur.

Women entrepreneurs are not the only ones who choose a "small business" over an "expanding company", or who choose balance in their lives between personal and professional roles over a dominant professional role. However, they are a group who unashamedly call for recognition of the legitimacy of

their views. The vision women entrepreneurs have of their business and the factors which influence it will have to be studied more closely, across industrial sectors. They may bring a refreshing alternative to the "greater than life" models of entrepreneurship which are widely diffused in the popular press and so foreign to many women entrepreneurs, even among those who have businesses grossing several millions of dollars a year.

Therefore, the peculiarities of women entrepreneurs challenge our definitions of what is an *enterprise* and an *entrepreneur*. Our research has convinced us that the dominant model and vision of "small and stable businesses" these women have for their business is not a transitory phase. Small and very small stable business is "good and real business" for them. Some of course, pursue growth, but most value the loose organization, the proximity to employees, customers and suppliers and the "hands on" experience that is allowed by a small organization. Will "what they do" and the models they represent be recognized by our models and theories? Will our definitions and models recognize and include these particularities? Perhaps it is here that we must now most urgently turn our attention.

Notes

¹ Lavoie, D.: 1988, 'Women Entrepreneurs: Building a Stronger Canadian Economy', *Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women* (February).

² Hisrich, R. D., and Brush, C.: 1984, 'The Women Entrepreneur: Managerial Skills and Business Problems', *Journal of Small Business Management*.

³ Goffee and Scase: 1985, *Women in Charge: The Experience of Female Entrepreneurs* (Allen and Irwin, London) see also Belcourt, M.: 1987, 'Sociological Correlate of Female Entrepreneurship', *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship* 4 no 3, winter; Longsreth, M., Stafford, K., Mauldin, T.: 1987, 'Self Employed Women and Their Families: Time Use and Socio-Economic Characteristics', *Journal of Small Business Management* 25 no 3, July.

⁴ Grise, J., Lee-Gosselin, H.: 1987/1988, *Les femmes propriétaires-dirigeantes: Mythes et réalités*, first part, *PMO*, vol 3 no 1; second part, *PMO*, vol 3 no 2.

⁵ More than half (56%) of the respondents to the questionnaire worked more than 50 hours per week.

⁶ Toulouse, Jean-Marie: 1979, *L'entrepreneurship au Québec* collection publiée par le Centre de recherche en histoire économique du Canada Français.

⁷ Among our 400 respondents, more than half created their company (56.1%), one third bought it and some (6.4%) inherited it.

⁸ 49% of the in-depth interviewees had business grossing more than \$250 000 per year, whereas they were only 27% among those who answered the questionnaire.

⁹ We were available to meet the entrepreneurs at the time and place of their choice. After business hours was impossible for most because of family responsibilities.

¹⁰ See Goffee and Scase, *op. cit.*

¹¹ We recorded every criterion and did not take into account the number of criteria nor the order in which they were given.

¹² 40% of the interviewees have 1 or 2 employees.

¹³ It is necessary to recall that Quebec experienced a severe recession during the first part of the 1980's and that recovery was slow. In such an economic context, 10% annual growth could be considered as good performance.

¹⁴ See for example, Scase R., Goffee R.: 1987, *The Real World of Small Business Owner* 2nd ed. (Croom Helm, London), p. 170.

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