



6. Leadership, entrepreneurship and gender

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This text is part of a series of publications on gender research and gender equality that has been produced by researchers at KTH as part of the efforts at KTH to integrate knowledge about gender equality, diversity and equal conditions in education. The purpose of the series is to disseminate, in an accessible way, knowledge from gender research in various subject areas that are relevant to students, doctoral students and teachers at KTH.

For many years it has been known that different phenomena in the modern economy are *gender-coded*, i.e. that there are cultural assumptions in society that certain things are connected with men or women. For example, construction is viewed as a male industry, while childcare is viewed as a female industry. These assumptions may vary over time and between different places, and they may even change. That which is viewed as masculine in a certain epoch may be deemed to be feminine in another, in addition to which there may also be major differences between different countries. It is thus not a matter of biological gender differences that make women or men more or less suitable for their jobs or duties, but rather such cultural assumptions about gender.

Gender coding means that a phenomenon may be viewed as either feminine or masculine, and that it is not deemed to be completely natural to deviate from this view, not even in countries with a high degree of gender equality. In this way, gender coding becomes apparent in working life when it is perceived to obstruct or facilitate opportunities for the individual – when gender becomes an advantage or a disadvantage in relation to, for example, an individual's choice of occupation, career choices or job-seeking activities, or in the evaluation of an individual's performance. It is deemed to be more "natural" and "suitable" for a woman to work with childcare than in the construction sector, and vice-versa for a man. This is clearly evident, for

example, in Swedish labour market statistics, where different occupations and industries have varying percentages of men and women among their practitioners. To a high degree, men and women tend to have different employers, different occupations and different work duties.

This cultural division also means that individuals carry their gender, and thus also the norms that surround their gender, into their professional activities. This may mean that men are expected to act in a traditionally masculine manner, both as nannies and as construction workers – as strong, tough and active individuals – while women are expected to be more emotional, caring and empathetic. This also occurs in the field of entrepreneurship where women and men create companies in different industries.

Gender coding does not mean that activities which are categorized as feminine or masculine are viewed as equivalent. What is seen as masculine tends to be valued higher in society than what is seen as feminine. In practice, industries where women are in majority are associated with lower status and worse conditions in comparison with industries that are numerically dominated by men. There are also equivalent gender codings and status differences within professions; for example, there are more women among family lawyers than among business lawyers, and there are more women who are geriatricians than women who are neurosurgeons. This may also entail a wider space of actions for men, for example that male applicants are more appreciated in the field of childcare than women who apply for positions in the construction sector. Gender coding of a profession may also change when changes occur to the working conditions and such changes are also related to changes in the gender distribution within the profession.

Leadership and entrepreneurship – gender coding in practice and theory

Leadership and entrepreneurship are two phenomena that are usually subject to male gender coding. The term "leadership" refers to the social role of exercising influence over others in organisations, often based on holding a formal managerial role. "Entrepreneurship" implies driving the development of innovations and building up new organisations. These phenomena often cross paths; entrepreneurs practice leadership in their projects, start-ups and companies, and leaders are often expected to act in an entrepreneurial manner in order to develop and change their business activities.

In both cases there is a clear division between what is considered to be feminine and masculine – the majority of leaders/managers in society are men, and the majority of companies are started and owned by men – which means that leadership and entrepreneurship are classified as masculine arenas that require traditional masculine traits. But in this context there is also a status difference in that leadership and entrepreneurship are highly valued and are assigned positive associations in society, for example that they are often celebrated as key aspects in the achievement of

economic development and prosperity. The opposite of leadership – followership – or the opposite of entrepreneurship – administration, stagnation and the withdrawn life – are things that men are expected to avoid and not wish to be associated with.

Both leadership and entrepreneurship are practical phenomena as well as theoretical fields of research. In this context there is an interaction whereby the positive associations regarding the practical phenomena motivates scholarly research into how they can be supported and made more effective. Consequently, research into leadership and entrepreneurship is conducted all over the world, at many business schools and universities, often with the aim of finding more efficient, effective and profitable ways of leading organisations and entrepreneurial endeavours. This research then forms the basis for educational measures, leadership development programmes, business incubators, advisory organisations, political action programmes, mentoring programmes and best-selling books. It also contributes to individual top leaders and successful entrepreneurs being treated as heroes and celebrities. In many cases, this research has contributed to gender coding – by primarily studying men and emphasising masculine traits as key characteristics – although it has also drawn attention to and criticised the cultural assumptions that surround leaders and entrepreneurs.

Leadership and entrepreneurship research both has historical roots in an interest in the individual – the individual manager or leader, or the individual entrepreneur. When "leadership" or "entrepreneurship" have been studied as phenomena, these phenomena have been defined as something performed by a single individual with particular characteristics often associated with heroes. In both cases this has meant that classic masculine personality traits – such as being dominant, confident, tough, independent, unafraid and prepared to take risks – have been linked to success in leadership or entrepreneurship. More recent research has shown that this does not match actual practice and reality particularly well – both leadership and entrepreneurship entail a great deal of collective work and efforts in groups or teams, as well as networking, relationship building, consideration and empathy. Yet despite this, the image of the independent, strong man still tends to remain in social culture as a normalised expectation of what a leader or entrepreneur should look like, and how they should behave.

Leadership and entrepreneurship research from a gender perspective

In many cases, research that positions leadership and entrepreneurship in relation to women and men has not had a clear gender theory as a basis for its interpretations. It has still been important to focus on "female entrepreneurship" in terms of developing business statistics that are broken down by gender, and in order to find that the group consisting of women as entrepreneurs demonstrates just as much variation as male entrepreneurs in terms of behaviour or personality traits. There is no typical "female entrepreneur" who is radically different to her male colleagues. On the other hand,

this "female entrepreneurship" is often practised in sectors that are gender-coded as feminine, such as retail, care and healthcare – implying a tendency for women's entrepreneurship to be made invisible and less valued than men's entrepreneurship within areas such as industry, technology and IT. Women are rarely visible in entrepreneurship; they tend to work more behind the scenes, with administration and other such duties. For example, research has shown how wives in family companies have played at least as important a role as their husbands in relation to the success of the business, but it is the husband who has often held the visible role of CEO and thus appeared to be a lone and single business leader and entrepreneur.

A gender perspective on entrepreneurship means striving for understanding how norms relating to femininity and masculinity are constructed in relation to entrepreneurship, and how this affects people's social interactions. If entrepreneurship is constructed as being a masculine activity that is practised by individuals with typically masculine characteristics in industries and sectors that are dominated by men, the consequence is that many women do not see themselves as entrepreneurs and therefore choose other paths in life instead. Furthermore, the male gender coding of entrepreneurship implies different conditions for female entrepreneurs than male ones, e.g. in terms of public innovation support or access to venture capital. There are studies that show how male entrepreneurs looking to attract venture capital usually receive positively loaded questions from investors and analysts – questions about their dreams, ambitions and plans for the future. Female entrepreneurs, on the other hand, mostly receive sceptical questions about how the invested funds will be controlled and protected against risks. The consequence is that female entrepreneurs ultimately gain access to significantly less resources in their entrepreneurial endeavours.

Within leadership research there is an equivalent tradition of studying women who are leaders as some sort of divergent group in relation to "normal" (male) leaders. Focus is often placed on gender differences in behaviour – for example, that male leaders act rationally, in accordance with steadfast principles and without sentimentality – and that it can therefore be a good idea to complement these men with female leaders, who are thus expected to take more responsibility for the social interaction at the workplace, and to manage employees with more empathy and consideration. In recent years a number of researchers have claimed that this latter form of leadership is actually more appropriate in modern work life and that women should therefore be better suited to the role of manager/leader than many men. Statistics also show that women tend to dominate particular types of managerial positions, for example within HR and other staff functions, and that female-dominated sectors such as healthcare, education and care are also led by women. On the other hand, it is still unusual for women to hold the role of CEO or Chairman of the Board in large private companies, and the few women who do hold positions at these levels often feel that they are treated differently and are expected to adapt their

behaviour to the men around them. Studies show that women who deviate in these environments – not only due to their gender but also in other respects, such as skin colour – become visible and invisible at the same time. They are visible in that they deviate from the majority of the people (i.e. men) around them, yet they become invisible in the sense that deviants tend to be excluded from organisational leadership work. When individuals belong to a deviant group, they are also expected to act in accordance with stereotypical expectations relating to that group, and to represent the group and not just themselves.

A gender perspective on leadership thus entails an endeavour to search for understanding of how leadership is associated with feminine and masculine traits and behaviours, and what consequences this brings. Leadership as a concept is highly valued in society and is often associated with a certain type of masculinity – the confident and dominant alpha male. In order to be able to question this association, researchers have proposed new views on leadership which emphasise leadership as something that is created through relationships and processes, questioning the benefit of the classic "commander in charge" in relation to the building of trust, engagement and enthusiasm in organisations.

The overall effect of the male gender coding of leadership and entrepreneurship is that women and men have different opportunities and possibilities to build a career and realise their ideas. It also means that women as a group do not have the same opportunities as men to exercise power and influence in organisations or in society.

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