



## The Female Entrepreneur's Point of View and the Italian Economy

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During the period from 1950 to 2000, gender-based entrepreneurial associations (above all, AIDDA) have provided a decisive contribution to a new women's entrepreneurial identity in Italy that extends beyond gender stereotypes connected with the family. The gender-based professional networks influenced the traditional social representation of entrepreneurship as an activity generally characterized by features identified with the male gender. Moreover, during the 1980s, media portrayals of a new generation of women entrepreneurs were important. In fact, in harmony with the new Italy of the "personalization of leadership" and of "political show"—as happened in other countries of that same period—they proposed new models of female professional success. The present portrayal of Italian men and women entrepreneurs tends to be oppositional, in part because women entrepreneurs' organizations are behaving increasingly as political players.

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A widespread perception and self-representation of women (abroad as well as in Italy) emphasizes their lesser aptitude for innovation and their tendency to believe less in their own abilities than do their male colleagues.<sup>1</sup> As Candida G. Brush and her colleagues observe, "women's self-expression contributes to their lack of credibility in growing a business."<sup>2</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> In a survey covering thirty-nine countries carried out by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2000 and 2003, young women were found to have a lesser aptitude for innovation, a lesser spirit of enterprise, and less self-confidence compared to their male peers. In the area of problem solving, however, the young women equaled their young male colleagues. Since interviews were the source of these data, the young women's lower aptitude for innovation and lower degree of self-confidence were to a considerable extent the result of their self-perceptions and aspirations.

<sup>2</sup> In the United States the majority women-owned firms made up 30% of all businesses. In 2003, 28% of the firms had women as the majority shareholders; "if women with 50% ownership shares are counted, the total climbs to 46% of all

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women tend to use a language and a style of communication that make them appear less assertive than men. They are more realistic about the difficulties and the unknown factors of the market and they downplay their certainties while men minimize their doubts.

As Pierre Bourdieu explains, in the social world “*le recit de vie*” tends to be as close as possible to the official model of presentation of the self, and it varies according to the social quality of the role that is offered.<sup>3</sup> Yet a quick glance around the world shows us that, in many regions, the number of women heading enterprises has more than doubled from the 1990s until today. In Canada, for example, women control half of the smaller-sized firms. In the United States, from 1997 to 2002, women owners of larger-sized enterprises (those with over one hundred employees) increased by 18.3 percent. In 2004, women were in positions of command in 48 percent of all private U.S. firms (holding at least 50 percent of the controlling stock) and one of eighteen was an entrepreneur.<sup>4</sup>

In Italy, the situation is certainly different from that in the United States.<sup>5</sup> From 1992 to 2005, the number of enterprises owned by women increased by 37.95 percent. Women controlled or owned about 24 percent of the total number of companies, and they were 25.48 percent of the total number of owners.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in 2005, the real novelty of women’s entrepreneurship in Italy was and is that, as in the most advanced countries, women have increasingly begun to invest in male sectors such as construction, transport, communications, public utilities, and services to agriculture and industry.

The data in Table 1 show a changing reality at variance with the image of women outlined in the OECD survey as having little self-confidence and a lesser spirit of enterprise than men have.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, when we consider that in Italy the rate of “feminization” of enterprise is greater in regions with

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privately owned business.” Candida Brush, et al., *Clearing the Hurdles: Women Building High-Growth Business* (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2004), 70.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “L’Illusion Biographique,” *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 62-63 (June 1986): 69-72.

<sup>4</sup> Candida Brush et al., “Women Entrepreneurship in the United States,” in *Growth-Oriented Women Entrepreneurs and Their Businesses: A Global Research Perspective*, ed. Candida Brush et al. (Northampton, Mass., 2006), 185.

<sup>5</sup> As far as women’s work is concerned, Italy is also behind with respect to many partners in the European Union. Women make up 51.44% of the population, and 45.8% of working-age women are employed; men make up 48.5% of the population and 69.9% are employed (*Istat 2006-Istituto Nazionale di Statistica* [National Institute of Statistics]).

<sup>6</sup> There were 877,068 women (+38.1%) among 3,442,392 owners. There was also an increase of 33.97% in women partners with 786,660 women (65.39% of the total number of partners); see Infocamere Data 1992 and 2005 (Infocamere is the Information Network of the Italian Chambers of Commerce).

<sup>7</sup> The OECD survey is quoted and analyzed in *Il Sole 24 ore*, 24 Feb. 2007.

TABLE 1  
% Rate Increase in Number of Main Sector Female Enterprises between  
2003 and 2005

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Rate Increase %</b>
Economic activities overall	3.7
Health services	16.3
Transport and communications	17.6
Public utilities	15.8
Finance services	5.5

Source: *Infocamere* (Italian Chambers of Commerce Information Network).

TABLE 2  
The System of Enterprise in Italy (Industry and Services), 2004  
(size in terms of number of employees)

Size of Enterprise	% of Total No. of Enterprises	% of Employees	% Value Added	% Self- Employed (M and F)	% Self- Employed (F 2003)
Small (<10 employees)	94.9	47.8	31.6	65.7	74.0
Large (>250 employees)	0.07	18.3	29.2		
Medium	5.03	33.9	60.8		
Totals (N=4,200,000)	100.00	100.00	100.0		

Sources: Our elaboration on data from *Istat-Istituto Nazionale di Statistica* [National Institute of Statistics] and *Infocamere*.

lower levels of female employment, such as the south of Italy. Nevertheless, despite this progress, as I show in Table 2, most women-run firms have difficulty implementing their development strategies and remain small.

Many factors may explain these contradictions and changes, including cultural, social, economic, technological, and political. In this paper, I examine the function of women's entrepreneurship networks and the role they play in changing the social perception of the role of women in the business world, and I compare those with self-representation of male entrepreneurship. I focus on AIDDA, the *Associazione imprenditrici e donne dirigenti d'azienda* [Association of Women Entrepreneurs and Women Directors of Industry], which is one of the most important Italian women's professional associations. Indeed, AIDDA has proposed a new culture of

TABLE 3  
Rate of “Feminization” of Economic Activity in Italy, 2003

Region	% Female Firms	% Male (not Female) Firms
Northwest	21.9	78.1
Northeast	20.7	79.3
Central	24.7	75.3
South	26.5	73.5
Islands	24.6	75.4
Average	23.5	76.5

Source: *Infocamere*.

enterprise and a new role for entrepreneurs that are in many ways antagonistic to those generally associated with business. In the twenty-first century AIDDA acts as a political player in the Italian scene and aims to insert women at the top of the country’s political institutions.

The agenda of another women’s (although not trade) network, the *Fondazione Marisa Bellisario*, confirms the importance of these choices. The network, created in Rome in 1989 and named after the well-known Italian telecommunication sector manager, has as its main task promoting and enhancing the professionalism of women in both public and private economic sectors. In the past, *Fondazione* supporters theorized about the utility of creating lobbies to support women’s careers. More recently, they highlight the importance of ethics and transparency as benefits of female entrepreneurship.<sup>8</sup>

### The Theoretical Frame and the Sources

#### *The Theoretical Frame*

In this paper, I place the social and cultural dimension of economic action in a historical perspective, considering gender differences above all. In order to analyze the main issues, I examine the conceptual references and theoretical models that allow us to include gender (Wendy Gamber, Angel Kwolek-Folland, Kathy Peiss, Joan W. Scott) in the analysis of entrepreneurship and family business (Roy Church, Geoffrey Jones, Mary B. Rose, Mark Casson,

<sup>8</sup>That is the result of a study carried out by *Censis Servizi-Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali Servizi* on behalf of *Fondazione Bellisario*, published as *Fondazione Marisa Bellisario, Donne nella comunicazione valore e trasparenza: Le protagoniste 2007* [Women in the Communication Sector Value and Transparency: The Protagonists 2007] (Rome, 2007).

Philip Scranton).<sup>9</sup> Instead, the concepts of representation and self-representation are employed, following the theoretical formulations of economists, psychologists, sociologists, theorists of the cognitive approach to the economy (Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky), and gender-based business studies (Candida G. Brush).<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, scholars taking a cognitive approach to economic phenomena, among whom Hayek was a pioneer, have highlighted the strict relationship between economic images and behavior.<sup>11</sup> Hayek wondered in particular about the process of acquisition and elaboration of information. In his analysis, subjectivity permeates perception, and the relationship between subject and object is dynamic: “the environment is an elastic concept,” which expands and contracts according to its representation in the mind.

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<sup>9</sup> See Wendy Gamber, “A Gendered Enterprise,” *Business History Review* 72 (Summer 1998): 188-217; Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in *Gender and the Politics of History*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (New York, 1988), 28-52; Joan W. Scott, “Conceptualizing Gender in American Business History,” *Business History Review* 72 (Summer 1998): 242-49; Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States* (New York, 1998); Angel Kwolek-Folland, “Gender and Business History,” *Enterprise & Society* 2 (March 2001): 1-10; Candida G. Brush, “Research on Women Business Owners: Past Trends, a New Perspective and Future Directions,” *Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice* 16 (summer, 1992): 5-30; Kathy Peiss, “Vital Industry and Women’s Ventures: Conceptualizing Gender in Twentieth-Century Business History,” *Business History Review* 72 (Summer 1998): 219-41.

The “family business” has not yet been satisfactorily defined by scholars. Some researchers privilege aspects of ownership, others the control of shares and management, still others continuity over generations. Attention has shifted to the existing relations in various countries between national cultures and the organization of the economy; see Andrea Colli, *Capitalismo familiare* [Family Business] (Bologna, 2006), about the difficulty of defining a family business. In this paper, I adopt Mark Casson’s definition focusing on the control of family business; see Mark Casson, *Entrepreneurship and Business Culture* (Studies in the Economics of Trust, vol. 1) (Aldershot, 1995); Mark Casson, “The Economics of the Family Firm,” *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 47 (Winter 1999): 10-23; Geoffrey Jones and Mary B. Rose, “Family Capitalism,” in *Family Capitalism*, ed. Geoffrey Jones and Mary B. Rose (London, 1993), 1-14; Roy Church, “The Family Firm in Industrial Capitalism: International Perspectives on Hypotheses and History,” *Business History* 35 (Oct. 1993): 17-43; Philip Scranton, “Build a Firm, Start Another: The Bromleys and Family Firm Entrepreneurship in the Philadelphia Region,” *Business History* 35 (Oct. 1993): 115-51; Philip Scranton, “Small Business, Family Firms, and Batch Production: Three Axes for Development in American Business History,” *Business and Economic History* 20 (1991): 99-106.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky Kahneman, eds., *Choices, Values, and Frames* (Cambridge, U.K., 2000); Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment under Uncertainty* (Cambridge, U.K., 1982).

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich A. von Hayek, *The Sensory Order: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Theoretical Psychology* (1952; Chicago, 1976).























