ENTREPRENEURSHIP, GENDER AND STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION

- Women’s experience of entrepreneurship
- Media and place-branding
The Ruhr Area

For many years, the Ruhr Area (Ruhrgebiet) has been Germany's industrial heartland. The area is situated in North-Rhine Westphalia and is bounded by the Rhine River in the east, the Ruhr River in the south and the Lippe River in the north. Industrial development in this area grew massively in the second half of the 19th century and it was a symbol of the miraculous economic recovery following World War II.

These days, the region is characterized by the consequences of a long lasting industrial decline. In the 1980’s, coalmines and steel mills started to shut down and thousands of miners were made redundant. The after-effects of this are still felt today and unemployment rates in the region remain very high. In particular, the northern part of the Ruhrgebiet, the Emscher-Lippe Area, continues to suffer economic decline. However, here, the chemical industry has grown to be a significant chemical and plastics cluster that is alleged to be the third largest integrated industrial site in Germany (www.chemsite.de).

There is very little tradition of self-employment in this region due to the emphasis on coal and steel production. In addition, during the 1960’s, there was a shortage of workers and, as a result, labour was extensively recruited from outside Germany. Under these positive economic conditions, it is understandable that self-employment played only a minor role for local people, particularly given that standards of educational attainment were relatively low. More recently, however, starting in the 1970’s, educational levels have improved as working-class children increasingly took A-Levels and started to go to university. However, the former centres of coal mining continue to show a low rate of academics living there (Bogumil, 2012, p.51) as well as a low rate of self-employment.

Stereotypes

The image of an entrepreneur and the everyday discourses in this old industrial region reads as follows: Firstly, an entrepreneur is a powerful businessman. The entrepreneur is male, his goal is successful business growth; moreover, he is fearless and a risk taker. These beliefs characterize the stereotypes held by people in the region, not only councillors, but also the regional development units, politicians etc. appear to have internalized this stereotype. Thus, women may be disadvantaged with regard to accessing financial support for their business ideas, as they are seen not to conform to the stereotype and are considered to be unlikely to start up a high-growing business.

These beliefs are closely related to stereotypes of the social roles of men and women and the gendered division of labour. Clearly, this does not apply to all people but it appears that the stereotype is particularly influential amongst those from educationally disadvantaged and traditional backgrounds. In the Ruhr Area, men have been seen as full-time workers and ‘bread winners’ whilst women are housewives and caregivers. These stereotypes are part of the cultural identity in the former heavy industry areas. The picture below of male workers in coalmines or steel mills thus represents the dirty male industry of the past. These dirty industries have now given way to clean ones; the ‘clean’ or white chemical industry is now promoted as a metaphor for work in the Ruhr Valley, but gender attitudes seem to have lagged behind.

**Germany and the Ruhr Area**

**Coal Miner in Walsum, 1962**

**Mother having lunch with her children, 1948**
Promoting Entrepreneurship

Currently in Germany, a good deal of policy is aimed at promoting entrepreneurship and especially starting up a business in innovative and knowledge-based industries. That is why young scientists are a target group for public funding of entrepreneurial activities. Although today, only 5% of all start-ups in Germany could be characterized as innovative and knowledge-based (Bogumil, 2012, p.64). Around 70% of all start-ups in Germany are neither innovative nor knowledge-based businesses; this is particularly true for the Ruhr Valley. Explanations for this situation are multifactorial and deeply institutionalized in the society or, better to say, in the culture of the specific region. Policy makers face a huge challenge trying to break down cultural stereotypes and change attitudes towards entrepreneurship and scientific careers.

Studies of entrepreneurial aspirations show that many German people 44% (Brix y et al., 2011, p. 16) fear not succeeding in starting up a business. According to the National Report Germany of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2010, less than one quarter of Germans believe that their home region does not supply good support to start up a business (Bogumil, 2012, p. 62). The rates for the Ruhr Area are amongst the worst in the country. Although research shows that the climate for start-ups did improve in the last decade, many studies conclude that young scientists in Germany are rather reluctant to enter entrepreneurship. A kind of ‘security mentality’ appears to exist. The studies mentioned above and our own research have shown that there are cultural barriers that hinder the rise of entrepreneurial activities, suggesting that cultural and socio-psychological factors are the key factors in the Ruhr Area to explain the low start-up rate. For a long period, only a few men in the region were academics. This meant it was difficult to develop an empirically based picture about what it means to be a scientist; scientists were not part of everyday life in the Ruhr Area.

Recommendation:

Gendered perspective on self-employment

A recent study conducted by our research group at the University of Duisburg-Essen focused on self-employed female chemists (www.exichem.de). The research (based on a literature review and several empirical sub-studies) has shown that the chemical industry as a traditional economic sector is a very masculinized sector (Pascher et al., 2012). It is influenced by male norms, particularly in management and operations. We argue that this male culture could push female chemists to turn to self-employment.

However, although rates of female entrepreneurship are growing, most of them are based in typical female areas. Rates of self-employment are influenced by the person’s qualification, profession and by the economic sector. Currently, the number of self-employed chemists in Germany is very low. Instead, the prevailing image of being a ‘real’ chemist means studying hard, completing a PhD, becoming a researcher or pursuing a career in a large organization. Our biographical analysis of self-employed female chemists has shown that they do not fit this social image. They enter entrepreneurship mainly because of the ‘glass ceiling’. This is a metaphor for the invisible barriers women are faced with in their professional career. However, our research suggests a paradox: if organizational conditions were improved in order to raise the rates of female scientists in industry, women might not feel they have to escape the glass ceiling. Then the rate of self-employed chemists would shrink and one would observe a new gender gap in entrepreneurship. However, if more women chemists continue to leave the industry, the sector will remain predominately male, with a consequent lack of diversity. On the other hand, if women chemists set up successful businesses, they will challenge the traditional image of entrepreneurs; thus entrepreneurially active chemists could be role models for the region.

Conclusions

Our research suggests that it is worth examining entrepreneurially active women and their role in social and economic transformation. If we look back to the 1980’s, we can observe a transformation of labour in industrial economies: Tayloristic work organization and Fordist forms of labour diminish, the erosion of ‘(male) normal employment’ and by some means a reassessment of entrepreneurship and self-employment. The male breadwinner gets a competitor, the qualified woman and mother, whose activities are more and more external to family and household. The Ruhrgebiet first developed traditional heavy industry, and then moved increasingly into service industries and more future oriented industries like renewable energy. Today, there is an industrial core (remaining chemistry and steel production) and the service sector. With regard to entrepreneurial activities, gender matters and regional differences matter as well! We suggest that transformation offers the opportunity for achieving more gender equality in the labour market. If we look at the structural transformation in the Ruhr Area, one can still observe the long-lasting effect on the mindset and the working culture of the people living there.

Endnote

1. We are conscious of the fact that the low number of women in industry is only one indicator among others to show conservative organizations.

References


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The Regional Survey in this issue reflects the research papers presented and projects discussed at the first RSA Research Network workshop on Entrepreneurship, Gender and Structural Transformation, which addressed the theme of ‘Women’s experiences of entrepreneurship’ with a particular focus on Europe. The network seeks to build a sustainable group of European and other key international experts (young scientists as well as established researchers and practitioners) from different disciplines and methodological perspectives with the objective of identifying gaps in research in the areas of gender, entrepreneurship and structural transformation. The interdisciplinary and international composition of the network coordinators and participants whose work is presented here are indicative of current collaborative research initiatives that aim to develop new and innovative research designs to find solutions for the problem that the entrepreneurial discourse is still gendered and is still ignoring regional and structural barriers and conditions. The collection of articles are presented by our Guest Editors (Marylyn Carrigan, Coventry University and Jo Duberley, University of Birmingham) and form contributions to the debate on entrepreneurship, SMEs and innovation in Europe and worldwide.

Our In Depth article (Paul Hickman and Peter Wells) examines a UK case study of the role of television in place branding and rural regeneration.

The RSA’s involvement in the European Week of Regions and Cities (Open Days) in October this year is featured in the Association News.