

# **Entrepreneuring and Gender in the Finnish New Media Business**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A central issue under debate in the study of gender in entrepreneurship is whether there are gender differences between female and male entrepreneurs and their businesses. Findings are mixed and often contradictory. This article alters the emphasis from examining gender differences per se to analysing how such differences are produced. To this end, gender is conceptualised as an ongoing meaning making, as 'doing gender' rather than a sexual division into women and men. Interview material with co-owners and female entrepreneurs of a Finnish new media company is used to elaborate how gender 'is done' in daily entrepreneurial activities. Textual analysis of the material points out that the meaning making of gender by the two female entrepreneurs challenges dichotomous categorisations of gender. The varying argumentation about gender differences, gender neutrality and gender similarities questions stable notions of 'naturally occurring' differences between women and men. Thus, it is suggested that by studying the processes through which gender is done by entrepreneurial actors gender sensitive research on entrepreneurship would gain more insight into the manifold workings of gender.

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the issues that is under much debate in the study of gender in entrepreneurship today is whether there are gender differences between female and male entrepreneurs and their businesses. The findings are mixed and often contradictory (e.g. Brush 1992). Fischer et al. (1993) identify two theoretical perspectives in gender sensitive entrepreneurship research, i.e. liberal and social feminism. They conclude, first, that research in line with liberal feminist theory assumes women are equally capable of rationality as men (i.e. rationality is seen as a common human essence) and, second, that gender differences observed are explained by reference to discrimination that prevents women from realising their full entrepreneurial potential. Studies consistent with social feminist theory, in turn, work on the assumption that women's and men's different experiences result in fundamentally different world views, which give rise to differences in entrepreneurial behaviours.

Despite their different theoretical underpinnings both liberal feminist and social feminist entrepreneurship studies are concerned with investigating and improving the status of women entrepreneurs in the business world (ibid.). When I did my first interviews with the female founders of Nicefactory Ltd- the company of the study - I too thought in terms of 'disadvantaged women' (cf. Jonson-Ahl 2001). Nicefactory operates in the Finnish new media business which is often referred to as 'a world of young men'. Nicefactory's entrepreneurs are among the few women owners and managers in the business, and in this respect I saw them as exceptions to the 'male' rule. I assumed that their minority position gives rise to pronounced experiences of different treatment, which in turn I thought provided a good case for studying female entrepreneurial behaviour.

The interviewees talked a lot about their visibility as women within the business and mentioned numerous problems arising from their female sex. As such, their activities could be explained by reference to the 'discrimination' suggested by liberal feminism, or classified as 'female' and 'different' on the basis of social feminism. However, these two orientations did not seem to reveal the whole story. The entrepreneurs spoke about the advantages of being visible as women, or about their willingness to break the prejudices against female entrepreneurship, but also discussed growth and risk taking in gender-neutral terms. Finally, I realised that all these interpretations of gender were far more varied than the concept of gender underlying my assumption of 'the disadvantaged woman'.

I therefore turned from examining gender differences per se to analysing how such differences are produced. I also discarded the definition of gender as a division into two biological sexes and decided instead to study gender as a process of meaning making. By employing this approach my aim is to elaborate how gender can be used within gender sensitive research on entrepreneurship. I use the interviews with Nicefactory's entrepreneurs to give examples of the different ways gender is interpreted in an entrepreneurial context.

In order to be able to focus on the multifaceted and embedded meaning making of gender, I adopt a gendering or 'doing gender' viewpoint in which the focus is on how entrepreneurial actors constantly reproduce and reshape gender in everyday business activities in the context of the emerging new media industry (cf. Kinnunen & Korvajärvi 1996). According to Ginsburg and Tsing (1991, 2) gender means 'the ways a culture organises people into male and female categories and the ways meanings are produced around these categories ... gender is not seen as fixed or natural but rather as a category subject to change and specifically to negotiation'. In defining gender as a process of everyday meaning making, I am concerned to explore how gender is constituted at given 'moments' and in certain settings. Following Ginsburg and Tsing, I see gender and gender differences as a dynamic process in which gender is an outcome or product of social processes as opposed to a feature or characteristic that one person may possess, which in turn requires an understanding of gender as a fluid concept with multiple, contextual manifestations.

Women entrepreneurs are often reported to meet gendering that creates constraints in their business activities (e.g. Allen & Truman 1993). Sometimes, gendering is taken for granted, so much that it becomes invisible to actors within their own environments, even though the processes can be observed in more distant settings (Czarniawska & Calás 1997; Korvajärvi 1998). These seemingly contradictory manifestations of gender are also present in my material. The doing gender viewpoint allows for an analytic account of the diversity of these manifestations by maintaining that gender mediates experiences of actors in easily and less easily observable as well as situational ways.

To differentiate between the various manifestations of gender in the material I make the following distinctions in the analysis. The concepts of ‘woman’, ‘man’ and ‘sex’ denote an understanding of gender as a self-evident, biologically determined category. It is used to identify and label bodies, e.g. entrepreneurs, Internet users or customers, as women and men and to see them as separate. Other usage of gendered concepts, e.g. ‘female’ and ‘femaleness’ refer to interpreting gender as a social category. Through the social category it is possible to imagine and classify activities as typical of one sex and to make assumptions about gender appropriate or inappropriate characteristics, behaviour, etc in an entrepreneurial context. Both categories fall into the more easily recognisable ways of doing gender, because as Kessler and McKenna (1978) point out, we begin by dividing humans into two sexes and then describe and classify human behaviour according to this dichotomy.

There are also examples in material of more hidden gendering. To uncover these examples I use the concepts of ‘femininities’ and ‘masculinities’ to indicate an understanding of gender which recognises that the social categories relevant in the entrepreneurial context are in themselves gendered. These concepts encapsulate discursive invocation of a person as a ‘woman’ or a ‘man’ (Alvesson 1998). This in turn is based upon the assumption that the descriptions ‘woman’ and ‘man’ embody the possibility of a diversity of ways of expressing and indicating ‘what it is to be a woman/man’ across time and space (cf. Kerfoot & Whitehead 1998). Here, gendering ‘works’ both within femininities and masculinities and between femininities and masculinities. In some situations, varieties of femininity are constructed in response to, and in relation to, prevailing forms and definitions of masculinity, in others with reference to other versions of femininity/masculinity (Kerfoot & Knights 1993).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The primary material analysed in this article consists of six tape-recorded interviews with the co-owner-entrepreneurs and two employees of Nicefactory Ltd. Four of the interviews were conducted with the entrepreneurs in June/December 1999 and September 2000, and the two remaining interviews with the employees in September 2000. The interviews were open-ended. With the entrepreneurs we talked about such questions as how they established the firm, what their business ideas were, why they focused on content production, what it means to be a female entrepreneur in the new

media business, what kind of background they had, how they shared business responsibilities between themselves and what those responsibilities were, how they saw the future of the business and the future of Nicefactory and what kind of difficulties they had experienced. With the employees, we talked about their education and work history, how had they ‘found’ Nicefactory, why they had remained with the company, what their responsibilities were, how they thought the firm had changed and how those changes had affected their work, how they saw the future of the business and what they themselves expected of the future.

I treat the interviews as texts which incorporate meaning making of entrepreneuring intertwined with gender. I use the concept of ‘entrepreneuring’ to emphasise entrepreneurial activities as ongoing, dynamic everyday practices (e.g. Steyaert 1997) as opposed to ‘entrepreneurship’, which tends to focus on identifying features that characterise, define and predict entrepreneurship (e.g. Gartner 1990). When different issues related to Nicefactory’s business activities are discussed in the interviews, the participants – the interviewee and the interviewer – are engaged in discursive action to negotiate meanings of entrepreneuring that are rational, relevant and comprehensible to the actors in that particular business context, i.e. the emerging new media business and the ICT industry. Hence, business issues are discussed through meaning making which is natural and familiar within the Finnish (and more generally the western) business environment. For example, we do not use meaning making of astrology to discuss business, although in some other cultures it would be perfectly rational to do so. In this sense, the assumption that meaning making of entrepreneuring is discursive action calls attention to the fact that both the texts and the researcher are located within the prevailing cultural frame of reference, and the meanings given to entrepreneuring and gender make sense in relation to the socio-cultural and historical situation in which they are embedded.

Discursive action refers to the discourse-specific nature of meaning making. Discourses provide a framework within which meanings make sense and they both facilitate and limit what can be said by whom, where and when. The aforementioned links my analysis to the Foucaultian concept of discourse which has it that discourses are ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972). As such, discourses are not located inside the particular interviewees and the interviewer, but exist in the community, where being a(n) (female) entrepreneur is meaningful. In my analysis I am concerned with ways in which meanings are reproduced and transformed in the data. The textual analysis is about interpretation taking place between the researcher and the data in the act of reading and rereading the texts. The aim of the reading is to tease out the discourses that are at work when meanings are given to entrepreneuring and gender.

In the analysis, I present extracts from the interviews as examples of how the various concepts of gender are used in particular moments and settings. Interpretation of the texts involves relating the meanings to the relevant discourses. Thus, textual analysis means that I firstly familiarise myself with the data through multiple rounds of reading and secondly, draw on the entrepreneurship literature and feminist theory to

construct interpretations which appreciate the richness of meanings given to entrepreneuring and gender in the data.

## **DOING GENDER IN RELATION TO ‘WOMAN’ ENTREPRENEUR, ‘FEMALE’ ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND ‘FEMALE’ KNOWLEDGE**

The first part of the analysis focuses on the meaning making of the biological and social category of gender through the concepts of ‘woman’, ‘female’ and ‘femaleness’. These concepts allow the entrepreneurs to discuss their experiences of subordination in a male-dominated business as well as empowerment, using them strategically to articulate business competencies and opportunities. I pay attention to how the concepts are negotiated in relation to the entrepreneurial activities by articulating, firstly, inequalities between women and men and, secondly, women’s privileged knowledges.

### **‘You have to carve out your own place’**

Nicefactory’s entrepreneurs recall many situations where their female sex has given rise to ambiguity. The first interviewee tells that the firm has lost business because potential customers have not trusted their competence in building websites with a technical content. Similarly, in the second interview the interviewee remarks that ‘being a woman entrepreneur in the new media industry is challenging because it is a young men’s world where a woman approaching middle age has to carve out her own place and then work hard to defend it’. She also notes how ‘in business talks customers have expected to see a young man take my place when we reach the stage where we begin to talk about the technical details of a web service’.

*These expectations display how technology is regarded as an area of expertise where knowledge of information technology is unproblematically attributed to the male sex. Consequently, when business negotiations turn to technical matters the entrepreneur’s female sex is enough to evoke doubts about the technical competence of the firm she is representing. Doubts implicate social and cultural understandings about women’s expertise of information technology. It is more customary to expect women to be users of information technology, than developers as Nicefactory’s entrepreneurs (cf. Vehviläinen 1997). Credibility problems are bound to surface in the absence of evidence to the contrary.*

*Technical education emerges in the interviews as an indicator of technological competence, contesting the taken-for-granted assumptions. One of the entrepreneurs has a university degree in naval engineering; that, she remarks with an obvious sense of amusement, has helped her ‘silence some doubtful voices’. Her business partner say that ‘I encourage her to go to meetings where most people are engineers’. Formal education thus creates some space for negotiating the ‘deviant’ sex of the entrepreneurs, although, as the partner with a non-technical education puts it, ‘often it hasn’t helped at all’.*

The question of a firm's level of technological sophistication is another credibility issues for the companies in the new media business. The business is a 'new comer' in the ICT industry, which has a strong engineering tradition and where most valued competencies are based on technological know how. One of the interviewees pointed out that 'content production is still regarded as less important and less valued than software production'. Her partner points out that 'the company's content production is based on our own software platforms, which makes all the difference as far as credibility is concerned'. She also states that 'we are not just producing content, but also designing the platforms for that content, that is to say, content production is not just about typing up letters one after another and writing stories to put them on the web'. These accounts illustrate prevailing presumptions about the non-technological character of content production. They reveal, how the assessment of technological sophistication creates a value hierarchy between 'more' technological and 'less' technological business and gives preference to the 'more' technological. This hierarchy must be resisted to secure content production the status of 'more' technological business. To this end, the entrepreneurs explicate the technological characteristics of the company's products and services.

*Besides reservations about women's technological competence, female entrepreneurs also evoke other deep seated meanings about entrepreneuring by women. The interviewees note that it is obvious that women's entrepreneuring is still regarded as 'something we do to keep ourselves occupied': women's entrepreneuring is equated with activities pursued for pleasure and relaxation during leisure time. This frame of reference makes it natural to consider women's entrepreneuring to be of minor value, importance and solidness (cf. Lee-Gosselin & Gris  1990). Consequently, the seriousness of women's business endeavours can be questioned from the outset (cf. Ljunggren & Nilsson 1995). The sceptical mindset is clearly illustrated by an incident from the time when Nicefactory was being started up. One of the founders recalls that when they contacted the governmental new venture-funding agency to present their business plan, 'the business adviser laughed us out (of the office)' because 'that kind of business idea is just a non-starter'. By the time of the interview, the entrepreneurs' 'impossible' business idea had been developed into the first web service for Finnish-speaking women, Nicehouse.net. The cultural prejudice shown on the part of the business adviser is demonstrated by the fact that during the years between the incident and the interview, Nicehouse.net has become a popular and profitable web service.*

One of the most familiar ways of understanding gender is to assume that all human beings are either 'women' or 'men' and that the distinction can be made through biological, embodied, differences. That is, gender is basically a question of sex. Moreover, we learn early on that in many contexts and activities, one sex is more typical than the other and tend to take for granted the more typical sex in its 'natural' environment (West & Zimmerman 1991). Against this notion of gender it is immediately apparent that Nicefactory's entrepreneurs have a contextually unusual sex. Female sex places them in a minority position in the new media business, and they are first and foremost identified as women and also treated as representatives of

that sex (cf. Kessler & McKenna 1978). Treating women mainly as representatives of their sex makes it rational to assume that women in non-traditional areas of activity do not necessarily have the attributes required to perform well in that specific sphere.

*In this field of meaning making, gendered understandings of entrepreneurial activities based on sex make us assume that there are essential differences that divide the sexes and essential similarities that unite same sex people. As a result, we tend to detect and argue for gender differences when addressing the implications of gender in entrepreneuring. In one of the interviews, we touch upon entrepreneurial culture and how everyday business practices are segregated by gender. The interviewee takes up the theme by pointing out how ‘men do have a different way of entrepreneuring: after setting up a company they immediately get themselves company cars, the latest computer models, mobile phones and other equipment. They’re all managers of one kind or another, even if there are just three of them: one will be IT manager, one sales manager and the third one managing director. This is just not the way women do things.’ In another interview we talked about whether a woman entrepreneur needs particular characteristics to be a successful entrepreneur. The interviewee links the issue with the observation that ‘men tend to have a more businesslike way of thinking, starting from the premises of making rapid profits’.*

*Both the questions and the answers renew the idea of essential gender differences in entrepreneurial attitude and behaviour. The sexes are compared without hesitation, indicating how self evident it is to talk about gender by emphasising the differences between the sexes. The following extract links the difference with risk taking. The entrepreneur points out how ‘it has been shown in research that men are more prepared to take bigger risks than women.’ ‘In fact, this study was done in the States’, she continues, ‘and I’m not sure it’s also true in Finland, but if we did have a study to see what sort of loans women and men entrepreneurs have, I would venture to guess that the figures would be much greater for men.’ Here, men entrepreneurs are presented as being more prone to risk taking than women in a similar vein as above where men are considered to take more swift entrepreneurial action. In both cases the argumentation tends to give preference to the male over the female.*

The cultural understandings of female entrepreneuring discussed above renew beliefs that there is an uninterrupted continuity of meaning between the female sex of the entrepreneur and her business activities. When entrepreneuring becomes gendered primarily through the sex of an actor, gender is considered as one of the properties of an individual. This kind of doing gender complies well with the individualistic orientation to entrepreneurship where individuals are seen as the primary sources and actors of entrepreneurial activity (cf. Kovalainen 2000). However, gender is something we cannot choose at will. It is more a category we are put into through our bodies, and we are expected to behave in a manner appropriate to that category in any given situation. In a male dominated, technologically oriented industry, the women entrepreneurs of Nicefactory are placed in a minority position both in relation to technological and entrepreneurial competence. Consequently, deep seated

cultural meanings of femaleness are evoked and reflected upon the entrepreneurs, requiring them to show what kind of women entrepreneurs they are.

*'We just happened to be women''*

One of the interview questions was, 'How was Nicefactory Ltd established?'. The project (i.e developing Nicehouse.fi) started, my interviewee tells me, from the question as to why so few women were using the web. 'We soon realised there was no reason for women to do so; there quite simply weren't the services there that would interest women – they're not interested in second-hand cars, sports, games, i.e. content that traditionally interests men and that dominates the web'. The answer indicates that Nicefactory's business concept was inspired by the founders' observation that women did not use the web because there were not enough interesting content to them. Their reasoning is based on understanding that it is possible to distinguish between contents which appeal to women and contents which appeal to men. Gender is, thus, used to identify women as a group of potential web users that had been ignored by other Internet content producers and to imagine criteria which classify different web services and contents into male and female typical.

How, then, the entrepreneurs can tell what kind of content appeals to women: 'Well, as we happened to be women ourselves, we decided to produce the content ourselves... to give some thought to what kind of content would interest us... in fact it comes quite naturally, knowing what interests women when you are producing content as a woman for other women.' The answer links gender to the experiences of embodied women. Being a woman oneself provides content producers a common ground with potential women web users to have expertise which enables them to know other women interests. This expertise rises from the experiences of living the life of a woman.

However, being a woman is not enough to have the competence to distinguish what kind of content is interesting and how to produce it. Talking about how they can tell what kind of content appeals to women users, the interviewees also refer to their extensive experience in the media field. They say they want to produce 'real' and 'interesting' content which is 'closely connected to users' everyday lives'. 'Natural knowing' of other women's interests is also informed by the entrepreneurs' personal work history: they 'happen to be' women media professionals. Media experience together with being a woman emerges as a source of knowledge that is based on lived experience and that can contribute to an understanding of web users' preferences. This kind of gendered professional knowledge allows for an assessment of what is appealing to different groups and to develop media qualities of the web to the benefit of content production.

Understanding gender as lived, experienced, and embodied, means it is possible to appreciate the female sex as a provider of knowledge that can be put to good use in the business of content production. The insight lends support to the belief that there

are important similarities that most female web users and content producers share in common. Accordingly, women content producers are sensitised to the needs of a female target group. The category of gender emerges as a knowledge provider when it is claimed that women through their experience as women can gain knowledge about other women's needs and preferences. The entrepreneurs take advantage of this privileged knowledge in their product and service development.

## **DOING GENDER IN RELATION TO THE 'MASCULINITIES' OF CLASSIC STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

In the second part of the analysis doing gender is related to strategic issues concerning growth, risk taking and internationalisation. The interviewees talk about their expectations of how the company will develop in the future into a major player in multimedia format production and marketing. In the public rhetoric, Internet content production is regarded as a business with global growth potential, requiring entrepreneurial risk taking and visions -- all attributes familiar from classic strategic management (Whittington 2001). However, new media is still an emerging business and there is much uncertainty as to which business models will prove to be the most viable. The entrepreneurs relate to this uncertainty by 'talking back' to it. They make use of meaning making in line with the classic strategy framework to make sure that the company's business model is developed through rational decision making, accurate analysis and visionary initiative (cf. Johnson & Scholes 1999).

Gender does not seem to play any role in these discussions. Strategic issues apparently invoke gender-neutral meaning making (cf. Hanmer & Hearn 1999, 108-109), which nonetheless is gendered around the implicit assumptions of specific masculinities sustained by classic versions of strategic management. To find out how this gender-neutral discussion below is fused with masculinities, I draw on strategy research which argues that deeply embedded gendered assumptions of classic strategy framework invite actors to reflect upon business actions against certain masculine attributions (Kerfoot & Knights 1993).

### *'Significant content for the digital world'*

Nicefactory's recently updated website tells us that 'it is the company's future goal to be the leading company in content production in the domestic market and a considerable exporter of multiple media formats'. The extract is an example of how strategy framework provides meanings to formulate the future of a business. Here, Nicefactory's future business is formulated according to the idea of strategic positioning introduced by Porter (1980, 1985). When we talk about the company's products, that is media formats, in the interviews, the meaning making of strategy discourse (Knights & Morgan 1991, Knights 1992) in relation to growth, risk taking and opening up new markets emerges in a similar vein.

The entrepreneurs say that 'our first object has been to create our own web services' and that 'our product development is working to create new web services, new

formats that can be sold internationally'. As such, the format extends and develops an idea familiar from TV production to other platforms for digital content. Nicefactory's formats include 'the technological platform with user-based web applications like chat groups, discussion boards and publishing tools', visual design, content descriptions and they are all protected by copyright. Media convergence opens up some interesting and promising prospects for the company: once the content is digitally produced it can be distributed on different technological platforms, whether wired or wireless. Most formats produced at Nicefactory are for the time being conveyed via the Internet, but there are also other emerging technological platforms that will allow for interactivity. From the very outset, the web services have been designed as DTV formats. In the latest interviews, the entrepreneurs refer to mobile networks. Both platforms will provide access to wider user groups (consumers) than is currently the case with the Internet. Once these new technologies are good enough to support high quality interactive web contents (e.g. video), the entrepreneurs say, the company will really come to its own and be able to make the best of its competencies.

*The entrepreneurs stress that by developing their services into formats they will be able in the future 'to sell licences' to parties 'who are interested in localising the service with contents suitable for that country'. One of the questions that naturally needs to be addressed in the strategic framework has to do with the way in which the company intends to capitalise on its investments in product development (e.g. Hitt et al. 2001). In the emerging new media business this question is about how the formats will make a viable business model. As there are no established markets on the Internet, Nicefactory's multiple media formats and revenue generation on the formats is a matter of present investment but future profit. The formats are represented as incorporating the logic of a growth process which will allow the company to capitalise on its investments in format development. The key concept is multiplying: licensing means marketing the formats to new markets where they can be localised in visual image and content. For instance, Nicehouse.net is a house with rooms and can easily be altered to meet different cultural preferences.*

The entrepreneurs consider theirs an ambitious orientation: their aim is to 'produce content of such a high standard that it is interesting to users and customers in itself'. Format development coheres with the founders' firm belief that what is 'novel in our way of doing business in the new media is that we start from the content ... that content has significance in the digital world'. The accounts make reference to the prevailing, technology-oriented focus in the ICT field. Web content production has remained underdeveloped because resources have been geared to developing new technologies. However, it is generally believed that the biggest business opportunities will unfold from content production. By highlighting the novelty of approaching the Internet from the vantage-point of content production, the entrepreneurs are subtly removing technologies from the dominant position in the Internet world.

When the entrepreneurs talk above about the company's web services as a strategically important product, gender does not feature in the discussion at all. The

form of a format makes digital content a product and it allows targeting the content to specific user groups: a format indicates what content, to whom, and how it is provided. Although gender has played an important role in identifying the potential users of two of the formats as well as been a source of the competencies to produce the content, the products as formats are not discussed in relation to gender. As strategic concerns, the formats become apparently gender-neutral issues. The strategic framework provides meaning making to think about and formulate how Nicefactory's multiple media formats are supported by a sound business model. However, the framework does not open up space to discern the gendering processes going on, when the entrepreneurial activity is translated into formulating and conducting strategy. As a result, in strategy making gendering takes the form of gender-neutrality and the linkages between the apparent gender-neutrality and masculinities sustained by it remain unarticulated.

*'No, growth is no bugbear to us!'*

One of the discussions about company growth starts with the interviewer asking how the idea of growth came about in the first place. That, the interviewee replies, 'started out from something quite trivial if considered against the fact that there is a demand for the stuff we are producing, I mean, even though we were involved in developing our own web services, we did realise there was a demand for what we do, that companies need websites, and everyone else, like associations will need their websites'. This reply clearly links pursuing growth with the demand identified by the entrepreneur for digital content production. However, her argumentation also makes reference to the possibility of conflicting interpretations when she points out that their focus on developing web services did not prevent them from recognising the demand.

The hidden reference to conflicting interpretations becomes less subtle when the reply is set in the context of Nicefactory's emerging business environment (the new media industry), where products and services are under constant development. At first Nicefactory 'earned its daily bread' from the production of customised websites; 'everything else' went towards creating and developing their own web services. Many remarks in the interviews indicate that it has not been an easy task to convince stakeholders such as investors and customers that the services will create value added to the business. Even though 'this won't make you rich at least to start with' the company has developed three other web services, and by autumn 2000, Nicefactory was running four different self developed web services.

An argumentation against possible conflicting views reappears as the entrepreneur continues the above answer: 'we soon realised that we need more people, we have to grow, I mean, we have been in this business from the very outset, we really started before people were even talking about it.' Here, the pursuit of growth is linked to the general development of the new media business. The interviewee positions the company among those early pioneers that were involved in the business before it began to grow and expand rapidly, which serves as an explanation for the positive information the entrepreneurs had about the future demand for their services at a time

when there were different views as to which markets, if any, will emerge for the new media services. In addition to insider knowledge, she also draws attention to the competencies residing in the company: ‘So we saw there was a demand for this, and that made us realise that if we want to do everything we have the competencies to do, we will need to have a much bigger company.’ The argumentation for growth here turns to the ‘supply’ side of web content production, and the increasing market demand is used as an indicator that helped the entrepreneurs realise just how much competencies they had to meet the demand.

In the above discussion, the entrepreneur argues for the rationality of pursuing growth by ‘talking back’ to doubts about their ability to see the business potential of new media. The development of new web services means that Nicefactory is dependent on the future as there is no way of knowing in advance whether there will ever be markets for the service (cf. Van der Werf 1992). The decision to go ahead with product development can be interpreted as being based more on high hopes than on rational thinking. The entrepreneur anticipates these doubts in her argumentation and approaches growth by perceiving it as a response to demand and as an application of available competencies. Within this line of reasoning it would in fact be unreasonable not to take advantage of the favourable circumstances to develop the young company. However, when the entrepreneurs who take a pioneering initiative in a new business are women, the rationality of developing one’s own web services can no longer be taken for granted. The symbolic meanings of female nature include irrationality and impulsiveness (cf. Hekman 1990). When the actors are embodied women, these meanings are immediately evoked in the business context, too. Instead of being a rational decision to develop new products and participate in setting up the new media business, the decision becomes easily equated with irrational action when linked to the symbolic meanings of femaleness.

*‘You have to be creative and fast, but also control risks’*

After a few words about how Nicefactory’s business has developed, the discussion above returns to the issue of growth. The interviewee takes objection to the idea that they are reluctant to grow the company, explaining that ‘it’s not that we’re afraid of growth, it’s just that we want to make sure we retain our innovativeness.’ As such, they are in favour of the idea of growth; it is only that the entrepreneur has reservations about the kind of growth that would jeopardise the company’s innovativeness. The value of innovativeness is clarified elsewhere in the material where the entrepreneurs regard the organisation’s innovative atmosphere as one of the major factors contributing to company development. Against this background it is rational to weigh what kind of growth the company should pursue.

From growth and innovativeness, the account turns to risk taking. The entrepreneur points out that ‘we are prepared to take big risks, they’re no big threat to us.’ Her remark makes it clear that the entrepreneurs are well aware of the risks involved in growing and that it is more a matter of taking them into consideration than being afraid of them. Elsewhere in the material the entrepreneurs point out that what they do, i.e. develop new web services, makes the company a pathbreaker in the emerging

new media business. Their discussion shows how well they are aware that in a pioneering position, high risks ‘come with the trade’ as the company pushes into virgin terrain (cf. Van der Werf 1992). Consequently, they refute the assumption that growth is a source of potential trouble or ruin and, in what follows, offer an opposite interpretation.

The interviewee continues: ‘Instead we see growth like, great, now we can go ahead and organise things in ways that will allow us to improve the careers and status of our skilled people who have been loyal to us; we see growth as a great opportunity.’ Here, growth is seen as giving the entrepreneurs a chance to repay the commitment that the personnel has shown to the company. Elsewhere in the material the interviewee explains how ‘people have stayed with us, some since the very beginning, even though we haven’t been able to pay them as much as bigger companies or offer the same sort of benefits’. The main reason why young people like to work with them, she believes, is that the job is creative and gives people the freedom to develop their own ideas. In the future, however, many of them will have a family and in their new life situation they will need to have more money. To this end, growth is understood as providing a way of rewarding the employees with career opportunities and competitive pay, which in turn should increase the company’s prospects of ‘keeping the most innovative, skilled people’.

In these accounts the interviewee talks back to assumptions that the entrepreneurs at Nicefactory are reluctant to grow their business because they are afraid of the (big) risks involved. The entrepreneur explicitly denies the interpretation that fear in any way motivates their decisions about the company’s future. She then connects growing the company with taking calculated risks, enhancing innovativeness and seizing opportunities, which all make highly rational motivations in an entrepreneurial business context. Assumptions about a fear of risk taking highlight the position of individual entrepreneurs as the main contributor to business growth. Entrepreneurial activity becomes a matter of personal characteristics, taking risks becomes unproblematically a propensity of the entrepreneur’s character (cf. Kovalainen 2000). In line with individualistic thinking, assuming fear suggests that distressing emotions are a main motivating force behind women entrepreneurs’ decisions about the company’s future and that there might be a ‘flaw’ in their character, which forms the main obstacle to growing the firm. Linking emotionality, personal characteristics and entrepreneurial action point towards symbolic meanings attached to women and femaleness. In effect, we are given to understand that the women entrepreneurs are guided more by their emotions than by rational, unemotional and instrumental thinking.

#### *‘Playing Don Quixote’*

Growth involves certain difficulties. In the following extract, the interviewee reflects upon the company’s move to branch out to Japan. Having referred to the company’s unlimited business opportunities, the interviewee makes the explicit point that ‘the only problem with growth is funding ...we need qualified professionals who don’t come cheap and we don’t yet have the funding to engage these people’. Her

argument rejects the notion that growth presents a problem to them as persons. She explains how ‘we should now be able to engage people to deal with issues related to internationalisation in order to establish the link’. Here, ‘link’ refers to the connection between the company in Finland and the potential partner(s) in the foreign market. Finding foreign partners is regarded as a logical step to take in the internationalisation process of multiplying formats through licensing. She says they need ‘one for Europe, one for the States and one for Japan, who we already have.’ The account portrays internationalisation as a systematic series of actions and the entrepreneurs as strategically knowledgeable actors who have a clear vision of how the company will enter the international marketplace and what kinds of resources are needed to accomplish it.

Next, public investors are presented as those who have a problem with Nicefactory’s business model of multimedia formats. The interviewee clarifies her point by saying that ‘all these public venture funding agencies, their attitude towards us, you know, is that they don’t really see what our business is all about. I mean really ... They just don’t get it.’ However, as is clear from the following extract, the problem of not understanding has turned into one of credibility, and the attention shifts again from the funding people to the entrepreneurs who have to prove their competence if they want to secure external funding for purposes of going international. The entrepreneur explains that ‘we have taken part in every possible programme for business development, attended all sorts of management training courses, but because we lack that concrete object we will marketing out there, we never qualify for this kind of support.’ As well as working hard to develop their competencies as business managers, the entrepreneurs have tried to make their business concept intelligible by providing product related information. The interviewee continues: ‘It’s the same with the banks, even though we can show how frequently people are visiting our web services like Nicehouse.net and others and how they are generating income, we can’t get the financing we need without personal collateral’. Most of the problems are attributed to the novelty of the idea of format in the new media business: this is something that is extremely difficult for investors to concretely understand.

The interviewee comes back the funding issue and says that ‘we are now having talks with private venture capitalists and we are going to get the financing we need, but if you have to start out in Japan and only then get going in Finland, I’m sure that’s asking too much of most entrepreneurs’. The account reveals that difficulties in the domestic venture capital market have not stopped the entrepreneurs from pushing ahead with internationalisation by contacting foreign investors directly. Getting the financial backing they needed in the ‘wrong’ order requires competent, imaginative strategic action on the part of the entrepreneurs. The interviewee does not emphasise this side of their funding negotiations, but instead points out the down sides of the process which she considers to present to other entrepreneurs an insuperable barrier to internationalisation. However both sides of the story point in the same direction, summed up by the interviewee as follows: ‘In our business, we have to fight all the windmills (laughter); every one of them. You have to play the role of Don Quixote all the time.’

In the discussion about funding, the interviewee talks back to the notion that their strategic business focus on formats will never become a viable business. The entrepreneur's argumentation disconnects risk taking and growing the firm from the entrepreneur's personal characteristics and directs attention to the difficulties of investors to see the growth potential of multimedia formats. Again, the meaning making revolves around what constitutes credible entrepreneurial action. In relation to other business actors, the women entrepreneurs have difficulties convincing stakeholders about the rationality of their action. Internationalisation is a highly strategic issue which evokes such meanings as instrumental, rational action and competitiveness. As embodied women, the entrepreneurs need to pay considerable attention to formulating their business concept to fit within these 'parameters'.

The discussion on growth leaves the listener in no doubt that the entrepreneurs are competent strategic actors who are determined to live up to the challenges emerging from their focus on multimedia, multiplatform format development. Their talk about the future gives a sense of control, direction and growth potential – all characteristics of a well managed and potentially successful company, i.e. of a serious business. In this line of reasoning, gender does not become explicit in any way that could be understood as gender. When the business operations of Nicefactory are conceptualised in line with the strategic framework, there seems to be no real gendered processes to point out but the taken for granted economic facts. Consequently, formulating and conducting strategy demonstrates instrumental-purposeful action that renders entrepreneurial pioneering, risk taking, growth and internationalisation as controllable in the precarious, emergent business environment. It is within gender sensitive studies where researchers have argued that the invisible hand of the economy has a masculine touch (e.g. Kovalainen 1994), which strategy discourse shares by sustaining certain versions of masculinity. In Nicefactory's business environment, masculinities geared towards instrumental pursuit of control, rational action and competitive orientation are the 'Don Quixotes' to which the women entrepreneurs talk back in their daily business.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this article I have analysed two modes of doing gender in the context of the emerging new media business. In the first part of the analysis the focus was on the meanings of being a woman entrepreneur in a male dominated business. The first mode of gendering sustains and reproduces concepts of gender which represent woman and femalenesses as the taken-for-granted gender of entrepreneuring. The effects are twofold.

First, women's entrepreneurial activity is understood as female entrepreneurship, which is consequently regarded as a separate, gendered sphere of entrepreneurial activity, different from men's entrepreneuring. To be identified primarily as a woman and secondarily as an entrepreneur creates an ambivalent situation in which male domination in the form of prejudices and discrimination becomes the main focus of attention. The positive effect is that experiences of unequal treatment can be

identified and attributed to gendering processes, not for example to individual inadequacies. A more complex issue is that this gendering tends to place women entrepreneurs in the position of a victim, and positive action means bracketing out cultural prejudice, which might be a burdensome project for an individual woman. Secondly, being a gendered entrepreneur allows to approach female sex as a lived experience which gives to a woman entrepreneur privileged knowledge about other women's needs. Instead of rendering the female sex constantly 'deviant', lived sex makes it possible to appreciate female typical experiences and to use them strategically, thus empowering women entrepreneurs to detect business competencies and opportunities.

The second mode of doing gender generates masculinities that are typical of classical strategic management. It invites a view of strategically focused entrepreneuring as gender-neutral activity where gendering processes make no distinction, implying that strategic entrepreneuring is by 'people' who are engaged in 'objective' business operations. However, these 'people' are nonetheless expected to show controlling, rational, impersonal, competitive and unemotional behaviours, revealing the masculine underpinnings of the strategic approach. Consequently, there is always something doubtful about the business endeavour of women entrepreneurs. Insinuations about marginal women with marginal products and a marginal business model abound. These notions of invisible masculinity are hard to come by, as the difficulties they create are most typically experienced as individual inadequacies. If some positive effects are to be named, strategic discourse is 'the power talk' of today's business. It may be useful in legitimising one's business propositions to relevant audiences.

The meaning making of gender by Nicefactory's two female entrepreneurs challenges dichotomous categorisations of gender. Their varying argumentation about gender differences, gender neutrality and gender similarities hardly 'fits' into stable notions of 'naturally occurring' categories of 'women' and 'men'. In an extensive review of articles on female entrepreneurship, Jonson-Ahl (2001) analysed how researchers envision the female entrepreneur at the start of their studies. Her analysis shows that 'the conception of women as being less than something is prevalent in the research' and 'that there is an idea of what women are like, and an idea of what entrepreneurs are like, and these ideas are different'. She concludes that 'the idea of these two, opposite and mutually exclusive ways of being and behaving prevails'.

I agree with Jonson-Ahl's (ibid.) recommendation that gender sensitive research on entrepreneurship (-ing) would benefit from a refocusing from investigating differences and similarities to elaborating the concept of gender and using it as an analytical category to open up new avenues of research. My suggestion is that doing gender allows us to observe and analyse the dynamic negotiation of gender that takes place in relation to various entrepreneurial issues and activities. This perspective conceives of gender as a process rather than a permanent division between women and men, and it can be used as a method of analysing those very processes of making gender in particular contexts. Doing gender opens up an alternative way of gender

sensitive entrepreneurship research, which is concerned with how entrepreneurial actors negotiate the categories of gender by adapting to them, and resisting them in situationally rational ways. That is to say, doing gender allows for observing and appreciating complex gendering processes without having to reduce them to categories of gender similarities or differences.

Doing gender can also present new challenges to practitioners. Training courses for women entrepreneurs are often geared to improving women's lesser status in business and to enhancing women's entrepreneurial initiatives. Notwithstanding the good results of this work, this study suggests that it would also be useful to assume that along with domination, women experience gender in multifaceted ways. Jonson-Ahl (ibid.) adds an unexplored facet to gendering and entrepreneuring by reminding us that 'research tends to ignore findings that would confirm a "soft side" in men, as for example the finding that most male entrepreneurs, just as female, have no desire to grow their businesses. Men are supposed to be hardworking career oriented persons, sacrificing family and close relationships with children'. One way in which to open up space for these notions is to develop analytical tools for discerning situational gendering processes and their consequences. Identifying and analysing expectations and demands of gender appropriate behaviour could reveal how they can be resisted, changed and utilised to the benefit of individual entrepreneurs. Often, it is in itself empowering to understand that hidden workings of gender are related to cultural meaning making, not to assumed individual inadequacies.

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*From Idea to Knowledge*