Women’s entrepreneurship is a particularly elusive subject of study:

1) First of all at the theoretical level because, as a vast literature has demonstrated, it is not easy to define who the entrepreneur is;
2) For economic and social history, because women’s entrepreneurship is a peculiar phenomenon which disappears and re-emerges in the course of time in relation to the changes that take place in the economy (innovation, technology, production, work organization), in law, in the family, in culture;
3) For the history of enterprise, because scholars have long neglected the study of small enterprises, focusing attention on the large organizations (and it is well known that women’s enterprises are historically above all small in size, connected to a family organization of work and conducted with relatively meagre investments).

Who is the woman entrepreneur?

At the theoretical level, the most recent studies on entrepreneurship and the analysis of the motivations behind the entrepreneurial action have opened new
perspectives for investigation for business history. In particular, the theoretical formulation by Mark Casson allows us to incorporate into studies on entrepreneurship also the tiny economic activities managed by women (such as those of commerce and traditional services) which have been wholly neglected both by mainstream and by Chandlerian academics.¹

Moreover Casson’s category of the “ethical man”, who acts in other words when he is stimulated by a personal and social system of values, allows us to overcome the rigidity of the paradigm of the “economic man” who is motivated only by the quest for pecuniary satisfaction, which was the ideal reference of the rationality of the market in neoclassical economics. Thus, setting aside the Schumpeterian hero who is the builder of a personal realm, or the arbiter of the market of the Austrian school, from the theoretical work conducted by Casson emerges the “everyday entrepreneur”. The latter’s function is substantially linked to judgemental decisions which take into account more the uncertainty (which is perhaps limited to the goods in the storeroom, rather than to investments in important innovations) than the risks of business. And precisely these characteristics enable us to incorporate the many tiny economic activities managed by women into the analysis on entrepreneurship².

On the other hand, in Italy various historical studies of social history have demonstrated how women elude the traditional definitions and categories of entrepreneurship. Indeed women often exercise entrepreneurship in an informal way (for example in charity associations or in family enterprises), crossing over those boundaries between the public and private sphere codified by the interpretation of the 1800s.³

Is women’s entrepreneurship a phenomenon of contemporary society?

Women’s entrepreneurship is in fact a peculiar phenomenon which disappears and re-emerges in the different historical phases in relation to technological, organizational and cultural transformations. In particular between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the spread and affirmation of the first industrial revolution in England, the identification of women with the domestic and moral sphere meant that they would become active economic actors only when forced by necessity (as in the case of being widowed or unmarried without income deriving from family property). The more the concept of employment became a constituting element of male identity, the more every position for women that was not in relation to men appeared anomalous. Thus, while the nineteenth century

progressed, the idea became consolidated in the middle class that a businesswoman was a woman without a man to maintain her. This concept of the female role in modern society took a long time to develop. To destroy many women’s entrepreneurial activities, in the manufacturing division as in the countryside, was certainly the increasing divide between large and small scale enterprises, and the consequent ousting of the activities of smaller size by the larger ones.⁴

Thus the study of women’s entrepreneurial activity, which still today takes place to a large extent within small or very small sized enterprises that are family owned and run, cannot be set aside from the historical context and from the effects of the roles of gender within the family, on the system of values, on the provisions of the law.

Enterprise and family

Among scholars there is not complete agreement about what a “family enterprise” is. Some favour the aspects of ownership, others shareholding and management, and others continuity down the generations. In effect, the conceptual definitions take into account each time the cultural, economic and institutional characteristics of the various countries and of their changes over time.⁵

However, the often informal role carried out in the family enterprise by women mirrors the complexity of gender and power relationships within the family. According to some scholars, such relationships constitute in fact a constant interaction between two parties, neither of which is simply passive or without influence with respect to the way in which the relationships themselves are manifested (affective, economic, of power, of complicity, etc.).⁶

In our case, we cannot forget that the formal control of the money and property of the enterprise, in the end, constitute the keystone of the hierarchical power within the family. And as the family is the place where the system of values is transmitted and the work is distributed on the basis of the roles and identities that the family itself contributes towards building, to understand the formation process of women’s enterprise there is the cultural option (Galambos)⁷ or the option of basic research. In effect culture, excluded from the neoclassical economic models, but in its time fully recognised by scholars such as Weber and Pareto, returns to being a

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⁶ Cf. M. Palazzi, Storia delle donne e storia di genere in Italia, in S. Bellassai, M.Malatesta ( a cura di ), Genere e mascolinità. Uno sguardo storico, Bulzoni, 2000, pp.80-81.

variable of great importance for economic history. In this paper will be used the
definition of culture proposed by Kenneth Lipartito as that system of values, ideas
and convictions that forms the mental apparatus with which one grasps reality.\textsuperscript{8}

This essay examines some aspects of the self-representation of a sample of about 360
women entrepreneurs of North West Italy, belonging to different generations, active
since the Second World War until now, to a large extent owners and partners of small
or very small firms of individual and family ownership. I generally define “family
firm” by ownership, generational continuity (from father to son/daughter) and
control.

How the sample has been constructed

As with other sectors of women’s work, several obstacles to research are posed by
the difficulties of defining women’s entrepreneurship as an autonomous subject of
study. As Angel Kwolek-Folland has observed, if scholars have argued that power is
rooted in difference and the way we attribute hierarchical values to forms of
difference, to incorporate “otherness” and women into business history we can begin
rethinking our definition of the subject.\textsuperscript{9} And like Kwolek-Folland, this paper uses a
broader definition of business, “one that is as value neutral as possible. It defines
business as engaging in economic activity in a market to seek profit and assuming the
financial responsibility for that activity”. And we interpret the terms of this definition
as expansively as possible.\textsuperscript{10}

Thus the first peculiarity of this investigation is that it has regarded not only the
experiences of women who are to all effects owners of enterprise, but also those who,
even though they have achieved roles of responsibility in the family business, have
no ownership. And that is because of the fact that, as we have observed, women often
exercise the entrepreneurial role in an informal way. And when this role is
formalised, they may cover several posts in the company at the same time without
necessarily becoming the owners.\textsuperscript{11}

The second peculiarity is the use of prosopographic methodology, which is now
fully accepted by scholars of entrepreneurship (for instance, Cassis\textsuperscript{12}). Therefore I
have considered here not only, or not so much, the exceptional stories, but I have

\textsuperscript{8} K. Lipartito, \textit{Culture and the Practice of Business History}, in “Business and economic history”, 24 (Winter 1995),
pp.1-40
\textsuperscript{10} A.Kwoleck Folland , \textit{Incorporating Women. A History of Women and Business in the United States}, Twayne
\textsuperscript{11} This characteristic has been confirmed by other research, like the one conducted by the Bocconi University of Milan

\textsuperscript{12} Cf. \textit{Business Elites}, edited by Youssef Cassis , 1994.; \textit{Entrepreneurship In Theory And History} , edited
by Youssef Cassis and Ioanna Pepelasis Minoglou, 2005.
tried to gather and construct numerous biographies so as to have material for comparison. And this in order to highlight the training process of entrepreneurship, starting with the assumption that the market is not an abstract place in which anonymous individuals interact who are endowed with geometrical rationality without “blood and feelings”, as theorised by the mainstream, but rather the product of individual social and political choices.13

Finally, the third peculiarity is that the sample was built with criteria that are not statistically descriptive but instead qualitative. Thus, entrepreneurs are included in the sample who operate in the various divisions of Italian economic activity (agriculture 26.02%, industry 37.05%, services 36.75%) and not only in the sectors that are traditionally considered the prerogative of women’s initiatives and where the presence of women is higher (such as retail trade, or activities connected with the fashion sector, or services to people). Particular attention has also been devoted to the traditional sectors where the presence of women is increasing (for example, wine growing) and to the manufacturing divisions that historically have had greater specific importance for the economy of the North West (for example the engineering industry). (Tab. 1).

Finally, the sources. The lack of written sources and documents constitutes a constant difficulty for studies on women. In general, researchers have tried to overcome these gaps by resorting to oral narration, even though they are well aware of the “traps of the memory” and of the peculiar “implications of power balance” that characterise the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. In any case, scholars have now accepted and recognised the importance of the subjective dimension expressed through oral narration and the representation of the self. Thus, also for my research on the women entrepreneurs I present here, I have resorted to the voices of the protagonists themselves.14 In order to gather the testimony of the women entrepreneurs we have mainly used the qualitative interview, whose objective consists of acceding to the perspective of the subject studied, capturing her mental categories, her interpretations, her perceptions and her feelings, the reasons for her actions. The interviewer has in any case followed a precise path, so as to be able to fill in the sections of a computer based questionnaire. The main sections regard: the family, education, professional training, the entrepreneurial choice, the enterprise, relations with professional associations, banks, and political organizations.

Self representation


How do women entrepreneurs represent themselves? Do they feel like Schumpeter-style heroines? Or Baumol-type leaders? Or “economic women”? Or like Casson’s concept of “ethical” women?

As Casson himself observed, culture can reinforce the natural feelings of obligation (to be honest and loyal, to work hard) of individuals and improve interpersonal coordination within a group, whether it is the local community or an enterprise. Even though we have insisted a lot on the individualism of the entrepreneur, in particular during the nineteen eighties, in effect the entrepreneurial action requires the cooperation and contribution of others. Thus honesty, loyalty, trust become values that are necessary and functional to entrepreneurial behaviour which is more inclined towards association than towards individualism. Entrepreneurs are in effect actors who know how to grasp the motivations that drive them to undertake an activity for which sometimes they do not even have the resources within the social group in which they move and operate.

In the women entrepreneurs’ representation and narration of themselves (Tab. 2) the feelings of obligation (honesty, work, respect) are in the first place among the values that they say that they have received from their family education. While the behaviour that drives them to enterprise such as competitiveness, the quest for independence and economic security, the aspiration to improve their social condition are described as scarcely important in the system of values that they received from their families.

In Italy, however, after the Second World War the experience and the emancipation of women had alternate phases which are reconstructed by the women entrepreneurs’ memory and in their representations. In table 3 the differences in the representation of values according to age range of the women entrepreneurs are highlighted. We can thus see that the family is an important value only for the generation which grew up after the Second World War, while it was in the last place in the generation born in the years of youth rebellion (around 1968). Indeed for Italian women the 1950s were characterised by disappointment (we should remember that the law which allowed married women to be sacked remained in force until 1962). And the Sixties decade corresponded to a “generational change” which saw mothers push their daughters to emancipate themselves through studying and access to the professions.

On the other hand, in Italian society the weight of tradition, the values of the Roman Catholic culture and the symbolic function (besides the real one) of the family are a constant. Indeed women, after the parenthesis of the war which saw them engaged in the work place in substitution of the men, had to leave the offices and

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15 M. Casson, Entrepreneurship cit., p. 132
factories and return to the home. But, as these women tell us, even though they lost visibility for the statistics, in the case of thousands of tiny and very tiny enterprises created in the years of the Golden age, they became to all effects colleagues, administrators and businesswomen in the family firms, whose construction was facilitated by the widespread competences in administrative questions that women had acquired in the first half of the century as employees and in office work. And in effect, as is highlighted by what the Italian women entrepreneurs tell us, the role of women was determinant for the growth of family capitalism and for the diffusion of systems of small enterprise.

Why does a woman become an entrepreneur?

According to Granovetter and Swedberg, economic action cannot only be explained by referring to individuals and their motivations as atomized actors, but it is also rooted in the system of personal relations and it has to be interpreted with reference to the social context. We shall therefore see the motivations which, in the self representation of the women, induced them to choose the entrepreneurial path. In table 4, for example, in first place among the motivations behind the entrepreneurial choice there is the quest for independence at work. And that for two reasons: to be able to look after the family with more flexibility of time, and to realise oneself. In the second place there are obligation and the circumstances of necessity, while pecuniary reasons are placed after all the others.

To represent the entrepreneurial choice as an obligation to safeguard the status of the family are in particular the entrepreneurs of the agricultural sector and of the manufacturing industry belonging to the generation which trained in the 1950s, precisely the time that in Italy women returned to the home.

In the cases where the enterprise was built together with the husband (for example, in many small companies of the engineering sector), the women’s role was represented as a support in various forms of the creative and productive activity of the husband.

In effect, the diffusion of women’s work in the offices of the first half of the twentieth century contributed towards justifying for many years the representation of women working in the firm doing office work. In reality family enterprise, as a social and economic group, was born from the division of labour and of cooperation among the different components of the family. And the decisions, as the theoretical studies on enterprise also demonstrate, are mainly the outcome of discussions and group confrontation.¹⁸ As the women entrepreneurs themselves tell us, “the decisions are made together”. Behind the complexity of family relations there thus emerges the role of women in the management of the family business also when they are not formally the owners.¹⁹

¹⁹ Cf. M. Palazzi, Storia delle donne e storia di genere in Italia, in S. Bellassai, M. Malatesta (a cura di), Genere e mascolinità. Uno sguardo storico, Bulzoni, 2000, pp.80-81.
Representation of the entrepreneur

The vast majority of the women entrepreneurs attribute a high social responsibility to their entrepreneurial role, identifying this in the capacity to “tackle and manage problems” with “autonomy of judgement” and with values such as “reliability, honesty, loyalty”. And among the factors that facilitate the building of an enterprise they put in the first place what they generally call “entrepreneurial vocation” (tab. 5) and technical competence, followed by knowledge of the market, while little importance is attributed to the quest for economic gain.

And yet, even though business is not the fruit of mere choices of economic rationality for the purposes of maximum profit, it is however misleading to ignore its pecuniary aspects and to forget that enterprise is first of all an organization that has to produce wealth.

On the other hand, as Lipartito observes, the study of the concept of entrepreneurship must take into account not only the economic profile of the entrepreneur, but also the social picture constructed by the media, by popular culture, by politics.

In effect, in the course of the twentieth century women entrepreneurs competed for a long time with an image of entrepreneurship that was moulded on the men’s model, in particular in areas like the North West of Italy, where until the nineteen seventies industry had been built with a strong Fordist organization of production and of work. It is also necessary to take into account the fact that economic equality within the Italian family was sanctioned only midway through that decade, which influenced both the condition and the perception that women had of themselves as actors not fully qualified to be considered and to consider themselves entrepreneurs, but instead as wives, mothers, daughters, widows of entrepreneurs.

Indeed, the generations born and brought up before the nineteen sixties narrate their entrepreneurial history as determined by family circumstances. Even when in reality they are the authentic protagonists of the success of the family enterprise (one name for all: Wanda Ferragamo, who when she became a widow put the company back on its feet again and re-launched the great trademark at the international level). Instead the younger entrepreneurial generations, which were trained in the historical phase marked by the crisis of Fordism and by a widespread individualistic culture like that

\[20\] For instance, Franca Audisio Rangoni, past president of Aidda Delegazione Piemonte and managing director of Dual Sanitaly stated: “The role of the entrepreneur is a social, necessary role: it gives jobs, it creates wealth. A firm must produce wealth and this is not an offence because if wealth creates wealth it satisfies more than one person”. “Il Sole 24 Ore Nord Ovest”, 2 luglio 2001


of the nineteen eighties, indicate the pursuit of economic gain (not similarly achievable with work as an employee) as one of the main reasons for their entrepreneurial choice.

Conclusions:

We can put forward some concluding hypotheses: In Italy the weight of tradition, the reference to the values of the Roman Catholic culture, the symbolic function of the family have influenced the way in which women entrepreneurs have represented themselves and how they are represented in society. Indeed the culture transmitted by the family has reinforced the self-representation of a system of values where the feelings of obligation predominate. And also the pursuit of goals of personal realisation or of individual well-being are to a great extent placed in connection with the family. This system of values coincides for many aspects with that of the values of obligation of the ethical man identified by Casson as a paradigm of the entrepreneur who makes judgemental decisions.

In Italy the delay in the legal recognition of the equality of rights between husband and wife within the family and between women and men at the workplace has contributed towards perpetuating the representation of hierarchical relationships of gender outside the family. The women entrepreneurs have themselves interiorised and preserved this image, favouring in their representation to the outside world the role of wives, daughters and mothers rather than that of businesswoman. The breaking of this cliché takes place with the generations born after the 1960s, when there is a change in the references of law, the paradigms of the economy and some cultural elements of gender which are displayed in the different awareness and freedom of choice of the new generations of entrepreneurs.
**Tab. 1  ENTREPRENEURIAL SECTORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGRICULTURE</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDUSTRY</td>
<td>37.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SERVICES</td>
<td>36.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tab. 2  SYSTEM OF FAMILY VALUES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HONESTY</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INITIATIVE</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORK</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESPECT OF ENVIRONMENT</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SENSE OF DUTY</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDEPENDENCE</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESPECT FOR OTHERS</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECURITY</td>
<td>0.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAMILY</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MERITOCRACY</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELIGIOUS VALUES</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPETITIVENESS</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELIABILITY</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO IMPROVE OWN SOCIAL STATUS</td>
<td>0.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESPECT OF TRADITIONS</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tab. 3  SYSTEM OF PRINCIPAL VALUES ACCORDING TO YEAR OF BIRTH OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth Range</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Honesty</th>
<th>Respect</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920-1945</td>
<td>13.72%</td>
<td>21.56%</td>
<td>25.49%</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
<td>7.84%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946-1962</td>
<td>19.51%</td>
<td>17.88%</td>
<td>26.01%</td>
<td>10.56%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963-1973</td>
<td>10.34%</td>
<td>15.51%</td>
<td>39.65%</td>
<td>18.96%</td>
<td>10.34%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974-1989</td>
<td>11.42%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>31.02%</td>
<td>16.37%</td>
<td>8.28%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

23 Percentage calculated out of total responses and per each value.
24 Percentage calculated within each age range.
### Tab. 4 PRINCIPAL REASONS FAVOURING CHOICE TO BECOME ENTREPRENEURS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AGRICULTURE</th>
<th>INDUSTRY</th>
<th>SERVICES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INDEPENDENCE AT WORK</td>
<td>51.72%</td>
<td>32.71%</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECESSITY/FINANCIAL OR FAMILY DIFFICULTIES</td>
<td>25.29%</td>
<td>27.02%</td>
<td>18.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETTER INCOME</td>
<td>17.24%</td>
<td>12.27%</td>
<td>12.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER or UNKNOWN</td>
<td>5.75%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>18.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Tab. 5 PRINCIPAL FACTORS FAVOURING THE BUILDING OF AN ENTERPRISE.

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25 Percentage calculated within each sector
26 Percentage calculated within each sector
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGRICULTURE</td>
<td>11.49%</td>
<td>11.49%</td>
<td>36.78%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDUSTRY</td>
<td>17.07%</td>
<td>23.57%</td>
<td>17.88%</td>
<td>41.85%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SERVICES</td>
<td>27.04%</td>
<td>31.14%</td>
<td>31.14%</td>
<td>10.68%</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>