

Career Options and Entrepreneurial Potential among Female Graduates: Motivations, Obstacles and Realities

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DOI: 10.2478/ejme-2023-0012

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to contribute for a better understanding of the perceived motivations, obstacles and self-employment realities in the advanced technology sectors and knowledge intensive-business. In terms of public policies in economic and business, promoting female entrepreneurship emerges as a factor of mobilization of women for active economic life, as well as a strategy to support business initiatives, particularly as factor conducive to the promotion of equality between men and women. However, according to a recent study on the promotion of innovative women and entrepreneurship, one of the main obstacles that explains the lower participation of women in entrepreneurial activities of an innovative nature are related to educational choices pursued in formal education systems and the persistence of traditional stereotypes about women, science and innovation. Also, in comparison to men, women not only possess a lack positive attitudes about their own personal capacities or inclinations for starting businesses, but also have less personal contact with entrepreneurs. Empirical results are based on a case study project centred on a Portuguese University and the potential of entrepreneurship among graduates who have completed their course between 2002 and 2008. Drawing upon information-rich evidence from in-depth interviews, insights are presented in order to highlight an important relationship between the entrepreneurial intention and the social origin, field of education and gender of the graduates.

Keywords: Higher Education; science and innovation, entrepreneurial potential, gender, motivations; obstacles

Introduction

Difficulty entering the labour market reflects the phenomenon of unemployment, which has gradually gained visibility, both in the international and the Portuguese contexts (authors). What distinguishes the current situation from that of past decades

is the high level of unemployment among graduates, a state which is aggravated, on one hand, by the inability of the labour market to provide employment for all young graduates, and, on the other, by the decrease in the correlation between qualifications and the skills with potential for transferability to the workplace, (i. e. , an inadequate relationship between graduate skills and employer requirements).

In order to tackle this worrying unemployment situation, it has become necessary to turn to alternative strategies for entering the world of work, and entrepreneurship may be one such means. This strategy has been the subject of great interest for the heads of several institutions, particularly those working in the fields of education and employment, and research and knowledge transfer. Essentially, taking a wider view of "entrepreneurship" at the societal level (COM, 2006, 2012a), there is a tendency to stress the importance of developing an "entrepreneurial culture". At the same time, entrepreneurship has also been viewed as a "solution", mainly in economic terms, within the narrower context of increasing competitiveness and job creation.

Despite the fact that such views and perspectives have generated controversy and criticism from various disciplinary fields, particularly the social sciences, many countries have, in practice, attempted to promote entrepreneurial activity through various programs and incentive mechanisms, as they recognize the significance of its contribution, particularly in terms of higher education (COM, 2012b). In this context, both the government and HEIs play an important role in creating environments which motivate a generation of young entrepreneurs, and provide them with conditions which enable them to succeed in their efforts to create a new business or enter self-employment (Kautonen, *et al.* (2009).

However, when entrepreneurship, and particularly the creation of businesses/self-employment opportunities within advanced, knowledge-intensive technology sectors, is analysed from the point of view of gender, inequality is found to persist in terms of the number of women working in the field. This is especially significant when we consider the level of feminization of higher education in recent decades, both in terms of access and completion.

According to recent European Commission data (Eurostat, 2013), of the 27 EU countries, Portugal has the highest percentage of doctoral degrees held by women in these fields (women represent 50% of PhDs in engineering). However, despite the high rate of females graduating and completing doctoral degrees, there is still a tendency for women to be underrepresented in scientific fields such as engineering, sciences and information technology.

The findings of the few investigations into gender equality in Portuguese academia therefore appear, as in other cases, to invalidate the assumption that there is a pipeline effect, i. e. that inequality will simply disappear as a result of greater feminization. Furthermore, the difficulties in reconciling work and family life (associated with the persisting representation of women as primarily responsible for housework and the care of others), the prevalence of a meritocratic culture, the

"masculinized" career, and the low level of insight into the mechanisms and forms of gendered discrimination, framed by the absence of clear equality policies, appear to underlie these processes.

With this in mind, the present article focuses on female entrepreneurship, exploring and analysing the main motivations, obstacles and realities experienced by women, especially those who decide to forge an independent career by creating a business, or entering self-employment.

Female entrepreneurship potential: Case study design and objectives

Our aim with the first half of this paper is to describe, by means of brief presentation of a case study, the methodological strategy which underpinned the project "Entrepreneurship potential at UM" (2010-2012). The objectives of this study were to: i) propose a new theoretical and methodological framework for the concept of entrepreneurship, privileging a multidisciplinary approach, particularly encouraging participation from the field of social sciences; ii) describe strategies and learning methodologies within the academic context which can encourage entrepreneurship and the career development of highly qualified graduates; iii) analyse perceptions and representations of the principal obstacles/success factors when implementing a business idea/entering self-employment; and iv) evaluate the integration of key elements of entrepreneurial education into the curriculum and extracurricular activities¹.

The choice to use a case study is justified by the need to explore this subject, which remains little systematized and underdeveloped within the context of social sciences, particularly sociology, as well as the fact that the University of Minho (UM) has put in place relevant entrepreneurship promotion initiatives. Furthermore, this active encouragement of entrepreneurship on the part of UM has been accompanied by the creation of new structures and an academic interface, in particular LIFTOFF, an entrepreneurship office (www.liftoff.aaum.pt) and TecMinho (www.tecminho.uminho.pt).

The methodological design is comprised of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In the first methodological stage, an online survey was sent to 1, 419 graduates from the University of Minho (North of Portugal), who completed their degrees between 2002 and 2008. These graduates are from 43 courses which were grouped into the following six fields of study, in accordance with the Portuguese National Classification of Education and Training Areas (2008): Education, Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, Science and Computing, Engineering, and Health and social care. The results obtained were from a 20% quota sample, a total of 283 valid surveys. In the second methodological stage, in-depth interviews were

¹ For the purposes of this article, only some of these goals in the project were analyzed from a gender studies point-of-view, in particular, the perception of motivations and obstacles encountered when implementing a business idea/entering self-employment.

conducted with graduates (eight in total), who had participated in the first stage of this research, focusing on those with “high entrepreneurial potential”.

On the basis of responses to an online survey completed by two hundred and eighty-three (283) graduates who completed their studies between 2002 and 2008, from different fields of study and of both genders, we will create a social profile of respondents. This will include a presentation of sociographic data regarding these graduates and an analysis of their entrepreneurial intent, taking into account social inequalities, particularly those concerning gender and field of study, as well as other attributes related to social capital.

Respondents' profiles

In our sample¹ we noted a high rate of female participation (60%) in UM courses, with an unequal distribution according to field of study. On some of the engineering courses, there is a more even gender balance (e. g. biological engineering). This is one of the trends already mentioned in other nationwide investigations (see Gonçalves, 2009; Alves, 2008; Marques, 2007, Martins, Mauritti and Costa, 2005). The mean age is around 29, and the majority of respondents are single (66%), with 32% being married or in a civil partnership. To a certain extent, the results support the thesis that it is common for young people beginning their working lives to put off starting their own family.

In terms of access to higher education in the respondents' families, we found that over 40% of the respondents' parents had less than 4 years of formal education, and only 17% of parents and 19% of mothers were educated to degree level. Most parents worked in low-skilled, low-qualified jobs², and they were mainly employees. The trend for there to be a certain degree of social selectivity, as confirmed by other studies, appears have to been mitigated by the widening of students' social backgrounds, with young people from households with a relatively low educational and professional status accessing higher education.

Analysis of the survey results reveals that the majority of respondents (67%) state that they are in full time employment. The remainder inhabit a range of employment statuses, including independent worker and entrepreneur (12. 4%), internship/research grants or student (11%), and part time (1%). 9% of respondents are unemployed. Such figures suggest that the combined factors of vulnerability and instability of contractual relationships have become one of the main explanatory factors for the emergence of professional and social risks (Marques, 2010; Sennett, 2001; Beck, 1992; Felstead, Jewson, 1999). However, it is important to stress the uneven incidence of these vulnerabilities according to field of study; the most precarious working relations are encountered by young graduates from arts and humanities subjects, a higher proportion of whom declare themselves to be self-employed or unemployed. On the contrary, the status of young people from areas such

¹ For a deeper understanding of the information, see. Marques e Moreira (2011a, 2011b).

² They correspond, in general, to training levels I to III within the European Union framework.

as health and social workers (100%), education (72.9%) and engineering tends (71.7%) to be one of dependent employment, while those who graduated in the field of social sciences, business and law are more diverse as far as professional status is concerned (see Table 1).

On the basis of the information gathered, it is also noted that this vulnerability in terms of employment has a greater impact of women. The proportion of male respondents in full time employment, particularly among those who studied courses such as engineering, education, biology/geology teaching, mathematics teaching, public administration and economics is higher than that of females. Female respondents who graduated in fields such as archeology, foreign languages, geography, foreign affairs and journalism are at a particular disadvantage.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by area of training and relationship with employment

Relationship with employment	Study Field (%)						Total
	Educational	Arts & Social	Sciences	Engineering	Health		
Employee a full time	72,9	30,8	63,9	67,2	71,7	100,0	66,8
Independent Worker	10,2	23,1	9,3	3,4	7,5	,0	8,5
Entrepreneur	,0	7,7	6,2	5,2	1,9	,0	3,9
Part-time worker	1,7	,0	1,0	1,7	,0	,0	1,1
Internship	1,7	,0	7,2	,0	5,7	,0	4,4
Research Grant	3,4	,0	2,1	12,1	,0	,0	4,4
Unemployed	5,1	23,1	10,3	3,4	13,2	,0	8,8
Student	5,1	15,4	,0	6,9	,0	,0	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100%	100	100

Source: Survey on entrepreneurial potential at UM (2010)

Motivational structures of potential entrepreneurs

In this section we will analyse only results regarding the respondents who stated themselves to be "potential entrepreneurs", namely those who, at some point in their career, have had the intention/desire to create their own job or business, even if they have not done so. In our analysis, we will consider the motivations or expectations indicated by respondents who have taken the opportunity to follow a professional path which is independent and autonomous in terms of contractual and/or hierarchical relationships, that is to say, one in which the defining feature of the job/work type is the fact that it is based on a relationship of contractual "independence" and freedom from organizational constraints or hierarchical subordination, being subject only to market constraints (Supiot, 2001; Burchel *et al.*, 1999)¹.

¹ Although relevant, we are not going to tackle the question of whether self-employment or creation of a business is a choice or the result of constraints, due to the structure and objectives of this article.

In general terms, the main motivations underlying this entrepreneurial potential consist, on the one hand, of the desire for new challenges (57. 4%), the prospect of earning more money (34%), the desire to be your own boss (23. 9%), and the opportunity to launch new products/services (21. 3%), and, on the other hand, of difficulty finding work in your field of study (22. 3%), avoidance of unemployment or an unsatisfying job (20. 3%), and better reconciliation of professional and personal life (14, 2%).

Other reasons, such as it being the only way to get a job, or family tradition received very low percentages as a proportion of the overall result. In turn, when this information is considered according to gender, we find that difficulty finding a job after finishing a degree (30. 7%), avoidance of unemployment, or leaving an unsatisfying job (21. 1%), and better reconciliation of family and working life (18. 4%), are more prevalent responses among women than men. In contrast, it becomes clear that motivating factors representing instrumental orientation to work were more prevalent among men surveyed than women, in particular the prospect of earning more money (48. 2%).

Finally, the main employment sectors within which self-employment opportunities/business tend to be created are, "education, health and social work" (29. 4%); "culture, tourism, communication, marketing, ICT and biotechnology" (27. 4%), "trade, hotels and restaurants" (17. 3%) and "financial activities, real estate, lettings and business services" (14. 2 %).

Projects for entrepreneurship: discourses and meanings

In this section, our analysis focuses on the attempt to demonstrate the rich variety of ways in which people describe their plans for, and perceptions of, entrepreneurship, according to gender and educational field. These discourses and meanings seemingly capture both the many diverse ways of being entrepreneurial, and the underlying meaning of these (McElwee, 2008), providing very rich descriptive data with regards what people mean when they talk about entrepreneurship.

By analysing discourses concerning plans and motivations for self-employment, it becomes possible to identify important divisions with regards entrepreneurial potential, when considered as the intention to start a venture or enter self-employment. Indeed, field of study and gender emerge as key variables in explaining differences in entrepreneurship behaviour (Marques & Moreira, 2011a). As such, we have observed how becoming self-employed is understood by some of our male interviewees as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. Expressions such as "achievement", "taking risks" or "improving life" appear in their discourses about the plans and motivations that lead them to consider putting their business projects into action. In contrast, the women use arguments such as "difficulty finding a job", "the only option for work" or "fear to take a project forward", phrases which suggest that, in a way, entrepreneurship is seen as a strategy for avoiding unemployment. We will now examine some narratives in which we discovered

differentiated meanings and representations of entrepreneurship according to gender and field of study, *“I can give several reasons to go ahead, but none are a matter of employability. It is really for enjoyment (...) I’m just not able to teach, I can do other things, I have a talent for them (...)”* (John, 28, Education); *“(. . .) Look . . . I’d like, for example, to start-up a FTA Leisure Centre (Free Time Activities), or a kindergarten. At the moment, because I really love children. . . and I think it is increasingly difficult to find employment (. . .) and I am going to have a son and I know it is increasingly difficult to find a kindergarten, for example”* (Mary, 29, Social Sciences).

John clearly views entrepreneurship as a pathway to personal achievement. The interviewee, who has a degree in the field of Education, intends to carry out a role which presents him with new challenges. In the second case, Mary, who holds a degree in the field of social sciences, shows some uncertainty towards her professional future. The decision of the interviewee- to create a kindergarten- is explained not only by her difficulty finding a job in the field she studied, but also by the possibility of taking care of the son she is expecting. It is interesting to note here that we are looking at a choice in which, from a sociological point of view, the variable of gender takes on particular importance. In the distribution of family responsibilities, taking care of the children is regarded by the women as their "natural", accepted obligation. Within the domestic sphere, for example, we often see the continuation, and even reinforcement, of a symbolic order characterized by male domination, which is perpetuated by means of the internalization, by both genders, of values, attitudes and representations transmitted to them throughout the socialization process (Perista, 2010). The blurring of the boundaries between the domestic/family space and the productive/professional space contributes to gender inequalities, and presents itself to women in particular as a constraining factor with regards their social and professional options and projects.

The creation of a self-employment opportunity/company is recognized by interviewees as a winding path, which is not free from risks and uncertainty, although different perceptions of obstacles/constraints appear throughout the process. It is thus plausible to conceptualize risk not only as a socially constructed phenomenon (Beck, 1992), but also as a logic of thinking, in which conditions the existence of individuals as unpredictable, since individuals cannot always be sufficiently certain whether their own choices and decisions have the potential to bring them failure or undesired effects. The choice to enter self-employment or create a business is a good example of this, as demonstrated by the two following testimonials, *“There are issues of funding, attracting new customers, validating our products and differentiating them from the competition, and questions of price, because there is some unfair competition for these technical services. . . essentially. . .”* (Peter, 27, Engineering); *“I think that when a woman presents herself (in the business world) and, in quotation marks, wants to assume leadership like a man . . . people are more receptive to a man than a woman. I think this stereotype is still accepted broadly in society. However, there have been changes, and mentalities will change”* (Helen, 25, Education).

The first quote concerns the situation of a young engineer who is considering the initial phase of business start-up, and considers market competition to be one of the main factors which may condition the success of his business project. The obstacles highlighted relate to the objective conditions within which he is developing and implementing his planned business idea. As the last quote demonstrates, there is inevitable crossover between gender stereotypes and obstacles to entrepreneurship. By pointing out the barriers which woman face in entrepreneurial activity in her testimonial, young education graduate Helen recognizes, from the outset, the prevalence of male, patriarchal domination in the corporate field. Both discourses present empirical evidence suggesting that social representations of the entrepreneurial career path and its obstacles are still based on stereotypical models of the roles played by men and women in the business world. Here too, the variable of gender appears to have an important bearing.

Conclusions

With this paper, we aimed to contribute towards a better understanding of perceived motivations, obstacles and realities. This study is exploratory in nature, and as such, the limitations of our findings must be borne in mind. Nevertheless, our research highlighted two areas for analysis: i) entrepreneurial potential according to field of study/course, gender and social origin; ii) the meanings and discourses of graduates regarding entrepreneurial motivation and plans. The data suggest that males with a greater social capital, having graduated from engineering courses have a greater tendency to choose careers in self-employment and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, it can be noted that within the traditionally feminine fields of social sciences and education, the traditional model of gendered division of labour (Bourdieu, 1999), persists among graduates, with less young women choosing to follow a career in self-employment, as demonstrated. Thus, women remain underrepresented in the technology sector and knowledge-intensive services, despite their high levels of academic qualification.

Likewise, the significance of stereotypes and prejudices associated with social gender roles and the gendered division of domestic work go some way towards explaining the persisting horizontal and vertical gender segregation which characterizes the labour market. In any case, there is a need for ongoing, forward-looking research, in order to further expand upon this exploratory evidence, including a reflection upon the impact of science and innovation policies in place within HEIs and research centres, as well as government policies which aim to foster entrepreneurship among female graduates.

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