

TRAINING YOUNG FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS ON A NATIONAL-SCALE: THE GREEK 'GENESIS' PROJECT CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a model of training for young females in metropolitan as well as semi-urban and rural areas addressing the barriers and skill and competencies needs of a generally disadvantaged social group. The model formed the basis of a large scale intervention implemented through a partnership between the largest in terms of research output and student numbers Greek universities and government. The development, deployment and evaluation process are detailed and conclusions and recommendations on how this project can serve as a blueprint for other countries wishing to address the problem of female employment and economic development through entrepreneurship with an emphasis on new technologies.

“the more women are educated in business and technology, the better they can develop themselves and their businesses thus becoming more competitive and adaptable to changing business environments”

The 'Genesis' Project motto.

INTRODUCTION

Women worldwide have always been part of the entrepreneurial world not only as members or supporters of a family business acting as providers of capital (through the dowry system), knowledge and skills (as unpaid workers or personnel managers and administrators), contacts and social networks but also in the capacity of sole business proprietors alongside their male counterparts. After WWII, women also entered the managerial class blooming mainly in Europe. At roughly the same time, the period mass female entrepreneurship coincides with the development of the middle classes all over the world, and their effort to craft a distinct class identity marked by the separation of home and work. In Greece, the history and contemporary picture of female entrepreneurship is very similar to the rest of the Western world. According to Eurostat, one in every two women participates in the country's work force and 21.3 per cent are self-employed.

For all these roles, women traditionally adopted a self-education approach forced upon them by their limited access to formal training and traditional business education. This approach involved unconscious activities such as taking in laundry to supplement the dwindling income of the males in the family in times of economic hardship and thus

gradually becoming a business owner by expanding a traditionally female, home-making activity. In such cases they learnt through their peers, or by experience. This was supported by instinct, as was the case with home-bakers who were totally oblivious to marketing theory and thus unaware of the importance of atmospherics but still found the way to attract customers by the smell of their products. Women have always been, and still are found in research projects, to be innovative entrepreneurs although they might be unaware of what innovativeness is and very likely to gain a competitive edge over their male competitors by just adopting a uniquely female perspective of business activity. Self-expression, observational skills, social skills and an ability to naturally generate and manage WOM and the institutionalization of everyday home or neighbourhood practises into business reality are also tools of female business development. Gradually, female entrepreneurs developed a variety of associations and unions that helped them improve and grow their businesses but still their access to formal entrepreneurship training and education is limited despite improved access to education in general, social pressure and legislative changes.

A MODEL FOR TRAINING FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

There is, however, a close relationship between learning - or management training as it is called today - and entrepreneurial achievement. Learning is the dynamic process enabling entrepreneurial behaviour to be enacted. Learning is the provision of expertise entrepreneurs require in order to develop and grow. Entrepreneurs many times accrue failure because of poor training, or lack of any training. Much as one can achieve through socialisation and observation, there usually comes a time when entrepreneurs, especially SME owners, come to realise that poor business performance results are reflections of their limited entrepreneurial or planning skills have been done throughout learning or training. As training is strongly associated with business success and lack of it with failure – as business owners have repeatedly asserted researchers interviewing them – there appear to be three major issues that entrepreneurship training needs to address: (a) identification of competencies and the skills associated with successful entrepreneurs and imparting them in order to secure that training delivery covers mainly the need for controlling the business environment entrepreneurs are operating in; (b) the most appropriate training approach to ensure that future entrepreneurs maintain their feeling of (i) security of achievement, (ii) locus of control, (iii) need for independence and (iv) fostering innovation and (c) the role of the trainer in entrepreneur development.

EQUALITY IN BUSINESS

To achieve equity and social justice, societies need to guarantee success both for men and women for which the equality women need to have in terms of accessing business opportunities and meet business challenges is a prerequisite. The existing social environment of Greece, especially in rural and semi-rural areas gives women an inferior role in all social activities and for this it is important that equality doesn't remain just a social claim, but it becomes a reality in all everyday practises. There is a strong necessity to adopt this philosophy of equality not only theoretically, but practically and make equality a very powerful structure for contemporary societies. The first step to this new reality is the breaking of negative female stereotypes as well as the change of mentality

towards a segregation of businesses into 'appropriate for men/women only' through strategic training.

SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

To give budding or aspiring female entrepreneurs as good a chance at succeeding as possible, training needs to include topics that help develop the main skills and competences functional managers in formally structured companies use, that is, strategy, marketing, management and finance. Moreover, studies conducted by different professional and academic bodies and business unions, showed that the success of small business relies mainly on the owners' ability to focus on strategic business aspects and separate them from the day to day routine business activity. These skills and the resulting competencies are mainly acquired through mentoring and the grooming process in pre and early adulthood which ties in with the role of the family, and the educational system.

RESOLUTION OF SOCIAL ROLE CONFLICTS

In most of the cases young women aren't divorced from their social duties mainly the ones linked with their role in the family. Contemporary societies could claim that the role of reproduction is so much of a side issue for women to be seen as pure entrepreneurs. The sociocultural context that women run their business in and their being expected to be family oriented could be perceived as a barrier against female entrepreneurship. Failure at the business arena may be explained by the main female characteristics linked to their psychology and their social role from their early childhood. Women are still facing difficulties to access the resources necessary not only to set up but mainly to run their business, even though in some cases these resources are made available by the state.

NON TRADITIONAL INDUSTRIES

Women most often encounter difficulties in accessing financial resources and are thus forced to choose activities that require low capital investments, such as traditional the service sector business models such as fashion retail and personal grooming services. New technologies, however, have transformed start up development and growth into a speedier one, more approachable, and better focused irrespective of social conditions. For entrepreneurs it is necessary to have been trained in these technologies. For young women it is of paramount importance as they are not naturally curious about technology, unlike boys who are more into gadgets and IT and thus better prepared for high-tech businesses.

TYPES OF FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

Efforts have been made to create typologies of the profiles of women entrepreneurs in order to provide personalised training and mentoring. The most common ones are summarily presented below:

- The ones who become entrepreneurs to avoid or escape unemployment
- Young women for whom entrepreneurship is a career choice of a long term nature
- The strongly success-oriented for whom entrepreneurial activity is part of their overall fulfilment.
- Flexible women who try to combine family obligations and a career path.

- Women who left their jobs in the past and later they want to create a personal space for self-fulfilment outside the family boundaries
- The traditional business owners with a longstanding tradition of entrepreneurial activity
- The radicals whose primary motivation is to be the sources of entrepreneurial ideas concepts and business practises.

The above considerations are diagrammatically presented in Figure 1 below.

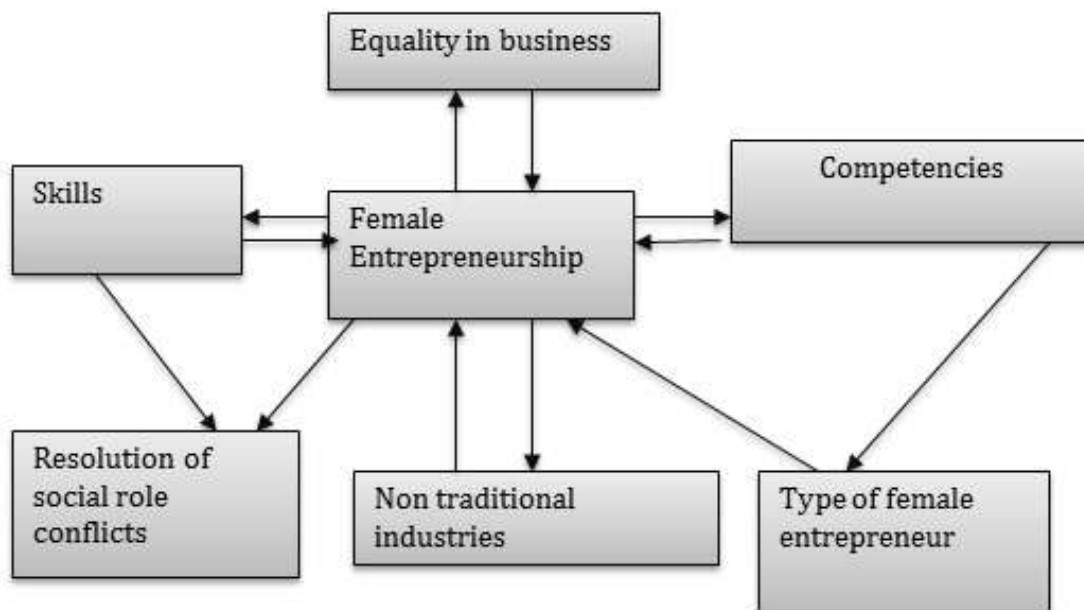


Figure 1: A model of the structure of entrepreneurship training for young females

THE GENESIS PROJECT

The project's target group were female students in technical schools all over Greece. The main goal of the project, which was based on the model above, was to foster diversity and increase the employability of disadvantaged social groups by familiarising young females with the first and necessary steps of entrepreneurship.

The philosophy behind this was that the project could serve as a tool to bring women to an equal entrepreneurial level with men as well as act as a pilot and, eventually, a blueprint for other countries wishing to implement large-scale interventions for the advancement of female entrepreneurship. Research carried out by the partner institutions that developed the GENESIS project was conducted in order to create a portfolio of activities that best met the project objective of systematically addressing all of the concepts comprising the model of entrepreneurship training for young women.

Additionally, the project aimed to bring young females into a business environment where there were no gender differences. This structured environment was designed to provide business opportunities even if women don't recognise them or still believe that

they are meant to be only available to men. The project development, deployment and evaluation are presented in the following sections.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES, DESIGN PARAMETERS AND PREPARATION FOR THE INTERVENTION

The project objectives were elaborated as follows:

- To improve Greek businesses competitiveness by developing enthusiastic young women entrepreneurs as well as the female personnel of the firms that were expected to be developed through the project.
- To address social inequalities and increase diversity of the business arena.
- To introduce innovative production approaches and new technologies.
- To increase adoption of new techniques and management methods.
- To create a business culture emphasising equal opportunities.
- To promote female entrepreneurship in metropolitan as well as semi-urban and rural areas.

The successes of the project were dependent on the careful handling of three major issues: (a) geographic coverage of the whole of Greece; (b) the widest possible module content and (c) innovative and individualised project design.

Module content and training approaches were designed after extensive desktop research covering international best practice as well as primary interview, archival and statistical data gathered from a variety of sources such as local chambers of commerce, education departments in different prefectures and city councils and business educators in Greece and abroad.

The participants were trained in principles of entrepreneurship, new technologies, IT skills and virtual communications through real time projects and life-long learning as stipulated in the Lisbon Treaty. Overall the content and format of the training was intended to

- change women's beliefs on education and training as distinct, static and time-delimited processes;
- introduce life-long learning into their professional and personal lives;
- provide a support network to young women entrepreneurs mainly through new technologies;
- foster flexibility, independence, responsibility and above all confidence;
- familiarise participants with IT – based management practices;
- develop the main characteristics that women need to have when they operate as business owners or entrepreneurs such an orientation towards efficiency, effectiveness and achievement, adaptability to social, technological and economic changes, research and information management and utilisation skills, innovativeness and creativity;
- show young girls how they can cope with complexity and diversity and how to meet challenges successfully.

Finally, the curriculum and training techniques took into account the vast differences in the participants' backgrounds, predisposition towards business and knowledge base as well as infrastructure and mentor and instructor availability.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Project 'Genesis' run throughout Greece from March- April 2006 and lasted for approximately one academic term. Appropriate schools were identified by the partners with the assistance of the local education bureaus and the Ministry of Education. These authorities also assisted with the promotion of the project to the schools from which volunteer participants were recruited. Participating students were chosen by the facilitators who interviewed them in order to assess their interest in the project, willingness to commit to pursuing the project tasks, and their potential for dealing with the business environment.

After a short induction by their teachers, students were given access to an electronic platform created specifically for that purpose, and started attending online tutorials produced by the Athens University of Economics and Business, the top business university in Greece. Facilitators, who were trained for the project by experts accredited in vocational training, answered students' questions every fortnight. Students could claim travel expenses if they lived in remote areas and facilitators were compensated for overtime as an incentive to participate. At the end of the project, the students submitted a full business plan for their chosen enterprise addressing company mission and objectives, service/product portfolio description, environmental analysis, marketing, and operations plans and risk analysis.

The business plans were mainly linked to the profile of Mediterranean women no matter in which area city or place they live or work and revolved around their school training (e.g. hairdressing, catering and other technical school disciplines). When the business plan was finished, competitions were organised by the local education authorities in collaboration with the participating schools and awards were given to the students who came up with the most innovative ideas. Many local companies offered internships to students.

Each one of the partner institutions was involved in one or two of the project stages (preparation, implementation, evaluation) and were allocated the resources needed to complete their allocated tasks. These are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Project activities

Partner Institution	Stage	Action	Activities involved
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens	Preparation	Development of educational material	Appropriate material was designed and developed based on the model described above.
Technical Institute of Kavala		Development of educational material	A cd/dvd with all the educational material for each participant was produced
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens		Identification of Facilitators	For every geographical region of Greece one facilitator-trainer was assigned. The facilitators attended 50 hours of training before being assigned to a region.
General Secretariat for Gender Equality		Project support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to books and other material on gender issues and female entrepreneurship for all participating institutions • On-line networking of school libraries with the GSGE digital library • Promotional and dissemination activities related to the project • Know-how and project consulting
Democritean University of Thrace		Provision of scholarships	2000 scholarships of €1105 each were awarded
Democritean University of Thrace		Situation analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of male/female employability • Identification of issues related to female entrepreneurship • Technical student profiling • School curricula analysis and data base compilation
Athens University of Economics and Business		Coaching	1000 students from disadvantaged regions were coached to cultivate innovativeness, understand the dual role of the Greek female as a homemaker and entrepreneur, map their future career path. Emphasis was given to empowerment and autonomy.
Democritean University of Thrace		Practicums in schools	3000 students from 764 school units were invited to participate in 2006-2007. Students received an allowance of € 335.50.
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens	Implementation	Training	2.600 students were taught entrepreneurship, new technologies, and innovative applications for entrepreneurship in classrooms or utilising a distance learning approach
Athens University of Economics and Business		Training	1000 students from disadvantaged regions were taught entrepreneurship and scenario-based business planning.
Technical Institute of Kavala		Training	4400 students participated in this 11 week-long action which involved (a) training on equity issues with the main objective of breaking down gender stereotypes (b) a 50 hour (30 hours in class and 20 hours of distance learning) p/c literacy course on which they were examined and (c) presentation skills.

Partner Institution		Stage	Action	Activities involved
Aristotle Thessaloniki	University of	Evaluation	External Evaluation of the project	<p>The project was evaluated on a custom-made hybrid model including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the training of teachers – facilitators • delivery of online or offline classes to female students all over Greece • educational material developed from different partners based on the projects aims and objectives • delivery of students practicum and workplace based training • scholarship allocation • partner communication and project data dissemination to all partner institutions

PROJECT EVALUATION PROCESS AND RESULTS

The evaluation methodology was developed for the needs of the project. The critical design parameters were the time limits and the unprecedented scale of the project. The evaluation system utilised primary data as well as data collected by the partners for their own evaluations. Both formative and summative on-going and ex post evaluation was performed for the project as a whole as well as for individual actions. The main measures provided by the evaluation were the following:

- achievement of the objectives for each of the separate actions;
- degree to which the educational, business and social objectives were met;
- pre- and post- intervention belief structure of participants and degree of change especially in respect to
 - strength and content of gender stereotypes
 - the degree to which female students could see themselves as potential entrepreneurs, having unique characteristics but being as competent as their male counterparts;
 - attitude towards business ownership
- satisfaction of participants;
- fulfilment of the expectations of both teachers–facilitators and participating students
- overall quality assessed on the following dimensions:
 - fitness of the objectives for every action in regard with the needs of the business environment,
 - the context and the structure of the actions,
 - educational material quality, sufficiency and utility;
- long term adaptability of the program to similar cases or to other European countries.

Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches were used. From a total of 8,340 people who participated in the project 1135 participated in the evaluative part. The sample taken was stratified and representative of the whole of Greece.

Participants' opinions and views regarding gender equity issues had not changed significantly. Participants mentioned that inequalities are very common in the educational environment and that they would like to have more opportunities in the business environment as there are no significant differences in educational achievement between females and males.

Participant satisfaction varied by participating institution with the Athens University of Economics and Business being the one with the highest ratings. Students from remote rural areas appreciated their having been approached by educational bodies delivering programmes related to entrepreneurship. These students were particularly satisfied with the infrastructure and the opportunity they got to receive applied and out of the box education.

Facilitators were positively evaluated from all the participants and the usefulness of the programme was acknowledged by all of them. Finally, the benefits they got out of the program were readily identified.

A total of 167 facilitators participated in the evaluation process. It has to be made clear that facilitators were volunteer teachers at the participating schools. The respondents had a profile very much linked to the projects philosophy. They all recognised the necessity for similar projects at the secondary education level; they very clearly stated that they needed more training as they thought that the programme was mainly linked with helping students acquiring entrepreneurial skills. They confirmed the students' belief that their opinions didn't change regarding equity issues as the project timelines were too short for a real change of mentality to be achieved. They expressed their strong beliefs that in the future some potential entrepreneurs could be identified from similar projects and they suggested that companies should be involved in similar projects in the future.

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